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Jakarta Terrorist Attacks: The Threat From The Islamic State

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

The Jakarta terrorist attacks signal the extension of Islamic State operations to Southeast Asia. The threat of an IS province in the region is likely to continue for over a decade.

Commentary

Jakarta was rocked by two bomb explosions in Jakarta's business and shopping district on Thursday 14 January, accompanied by an attack on a police post and a Starbucks outlet using improvised grenades and home-made handguns. Four attackers were killed as well as four civilians and more than 20 persons were injured. The Indonesian police as well as the propaganda machinery of the Islamic State (IS) have claimed that followers of IS were responsible. Although the intention was to cause mass casualties like the Paris attacks in November 2015, the lack of training and inadequate weapons resulted in minimal damage.

One significant lesson which could be drawn is the importance of developing societal resilience. Ordinary people as well as celebrities and politicians in Jakarta sharply criticized the attacks. Unlike previous attacks from 2002 to 2009, they broadcast messages on social media condemning the attacks, drawing attention to the incompetence of the perpetrators, and stressing their solidarity with the victims. If the intention was to cause ordinary people to cower in fear, the attackers failed.

Islamic State responsibility

The Islamic State (also known as ISIS or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) claimed responsibility for the attacks. The Indonesian police chief said that the attacks were

planned by the Islamic State in Syria through Bahrun Naim, an Indonesian national. Bahrun is now in Syria but spent a year in an Indonesian jail in 2011 for illegal possession of weapons. In follow-up raids, 12 people were detained in West Java, East Java and East Kalimantan. Weapons and ammunition were seized. For Southeast Asians, the IS claims of responsibility are significant.

A recent RSIS study discussed the establishment of Khatibah Nusantara, a dedicated Southeast Asia military unit within IS which used Malay/Indonesian for communications and formed a separate fighting unit in Syria. Khatibah Nusantara captured five Kurd-held territories in April 2015. Led by an Amir, identified as Abu Ibrahim al-Indunisiy, the unit appears to be led mainly by Indonesians but Malaysians are active within the group. This development highlights IS' intention of building a regional network intended to support the establishment of a province (*wilayah*) of IS in Southeast Asia. The emergence of IS and its claims to have established a caliphate have therefore had an impact on Southeast Asia. The threat will continue over the next decade. Hence, it is important to understand how IS rose to prominence.

How IS rose to prominence

The American anti-Baathist policy following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 resulted in the removal of civil servants who had served Saddam's administration as well as the exclusion of military and intelligence officers from the new administration set up in Iraq. This decision is critical in understanding the effectiveness of IS in Iraq. Today, former military officers and bureaucrats from Saddam's Iraq are the core of IS in Iraq, which controls vast swathes of territory in northern and western Iraq.

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad financed, armed and trained al-Qaeda activists who crossed the border to attack the Americans from 2005 until the American withdrawal from Iraq. Growing numbers of al-Qaeda supporters pledged allegiance to IS following the proclamation of a caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the establishment of the Islamic State on 1 Ramadan (29 June 2014). IS now controls significant territory in eastern Syria. American officials claim that Bashar's forces attack moderate Muslim oppositionist forces and avoid confronting IS. The reality is that IS represents the alternative to Bashar's cruel regime but Bashar's forces concentrate on the weaker of the forces opposing his regime. An escalating Sunni/Shia civil war is taking place and no easy options exist.

Even if concerted action by Western powers and their allies results in the re-taking of IS-held territories in Iraq and Syria, the idea of the Islamic State has captured the imaginations of sympathisers seeking a return to an imagined pristine way of life in the seventh century. Libya, which has emerged an arms supermarket for North and West Africa, could easily morph into the new centre for the caliphate.

Impact on Southeast Asia

Three conclusions may be drawn regarding the impact of these developments on Southeast Asia. First, trends in the Middle East have exerted a growing influence in recent years. Competition between an al-Qaeda offshoot, the al-Nusra Front and IS,

has been replicated in the region. Singaporeans have joined the growing numbers of Southeast Asians who have journeyed to Syria and Iraq to participate in the conflict.

The claim of the IS-proclaimed caliphate to have oversight over Muslims around the world has strong emotional appeal and resonates with many Muslims, even in Southeast Asia. While the number of such adherents is small, the willingness to engage in armed attacks and cause mayhem on the streets results in regional governments paying close attention to those influenced by the effective propaganda of IS spread on social media.

While Muslims are a minority in Singapore, for IS, Singapore is seen as the heart of the archipelago. When the al-Qaeda affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah earlier developed a network to establish an Islamic state (Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara) linking Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Philippines and southern Thailand, it included Singapore. With the rise of the Islamic State, a more potent threat will exist in the decade ahead.

Secondly, the challenge to Muslim religious leaders in the region arising from more radical versions of Islam emerging in response to conditions in the Middle East has been a recurrent theme in Southeast Asian history. In 1803, Wahhabi-inspired returned Minangkabau pilgrims from West Sumatra launched the *padri* revolts against the traditional elite (*uleebalang*) and Sufi-inspired leaders in the matriarchal society of West Sumatra. Questioning the more traditional Sufi practices in the region scholars and religious teachers returning from Arabia sought a return to the practices of Islam in the seventh century.

Thirdly, acts of terrorism and political violence in the region will occur. Governments are now more alert but it will be difficult to eliminate all threats by IS followers in the region operating in clandestine cells. Attacks in the region have been by organised groups so far. If regular attacks occur, there will be a sense of insecurity and a threat to public order. Members of the public will have to get used to a larger police presence, precautionary measures such as baggage checks and searches of vehicles and the closer monitoring of contacts with religious militants. However, such movements will not overthrow governments. The risk is that governments in Muslim majority states may adopt policies intended to win over those who view the religious agenda of IS positively, even if they disagree with its methods, resulting in increasing religious intolerance in the region.

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