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“Daesh-isation” of Southeast Asia’s Jihadists

By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

Synopsis

Militant Muslim groups in Southeast Asia have adopted the ideology of ISIL/ Daesh in preparing for a jihadi war in Southern Philippines and Eastern Indonesia. They have internationalised their operations across boundaries, rejecting existing state identities and allegiances and duplicating ISIL’s persecution of out-groups like the Shias.

Commentary

ISIS, ALSO known as Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) or Daesh (in Arabic), has embarked on a global campaign to establish an Islamic caliphate across Asia. To fulfill the vision of its self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, even affiliated militant groups in Southeast Asia have been injected with their jihadi doctrines, turning them into a unified force. The manner in which ISIL conducts itself has been translated onto Southeast Asia, resulting in the “Daesh-isation” of the region.

ISIL is not merely a terrorist outfit fighting an asymmetrical war as is often claimed. Instead it behaves like a conventional army – albeit devoid of morality. Instead of small cells, it has tens of thousands of fighters organized in battalions and brigades, equipped with weapons and doctrinal manuals, and have been conducting war by conquering and occupying territory. With the Daesh-isation of Southeast Asia, jihadis in the region also attempt to engage in conventional warfare, even though, in reality, their enemies are far more superior. Jihadi forces in Mindanao – involving elements of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayyaf Group, Mujahideen Indonesia Timur (MIT), and Malaysians – are regrouping for that reason. A similar jihadi joint operation is also taking place in Poso where the Indonesian government states that more than 100 foreign jihadists are operating.

What Makes Daeshisation?

Just as ISIL is a conglomerate of multi-national, multi-ethnic brigades or *kataib* in allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, these groups from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, although loosely-organised with different aims, are crystallising into a unified force. Unlike the past, the present Daesh-oriented security threat is driven by an ideology that gathers support from any group or individual that believes in the Daesh vision to establish a *wilayat* in support of a global Caliphate.

Additionally, foreign elements have also joined in local jihadi missions, as is increasingly evident in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. Most recently, inroads are being made online to pull the historically insular Thai insurgency into Daesh-isation, with the emergence, on social media, of a Daesh flag superimposed on the map of southern Thailand.

They are unified not just through allegiance to a self-styled caliph, but also through a common Southeast Asian language group, comprising mainstream and dialects of the languages of the Malay world. When the Jund al-Tawhid faction from the Philippines released its video of oath taking, online supporters recognised the video as a product of “*Mujahidin Serumpun Melayu*” (Mujahidin of the Malay Family). Daesh’s ideas are also propagated through local Southeast Asian languages such of Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog as seen in official ISIL Telegram channels directed at Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the presence of multi-national militants in Poso, including Uighurs and Mandarin-speaking fighters, and reports of Arab fighters in Mindanao imply an internationalisation of a symmetrical war in the tri-border area straddling Sabah, Sulawesi and Mindanao. On 9 April 2016, Mohammad Khattab, a Moroccan bomb-making instructor was killed during a fire-fight in Basilan with Filipino forces. He was reported to have wanted to unite the ISIS-affiliated groups in the Philippines and link them with the international terrorist organization.

Symbolism of Discarding Passports

However, Daesh-isation of Southeast Asia involves the application of *wilayat* as an extension of the global caliphate. This ISIL contribution to jihadi parlance brings sophistication to jihadi activities, strategy and operation. Jihadis do not just act out local grievances through banditry under a jihadi command centre. Jihadis are now ostensible citizens of an illegitimate global caliphate, and their sub-state *wilayat* is expected to add value to the caliphate, by supplying new recruits or to broaden the imagination of the boundaries of the elusive Islamic state.

Fighters are known to have discarded passports, as a gesture of the rejection of their previous allegiance to the state system; they identify themselves instead through their *bai’aat* or oaths of allegiance and crude identity cards created as conduits of “citizenship”. With *wilayat* as an extension of ISIL’s pseudo-state, Daesh-isation also introduced the concept of non-military contribution, instead of merely frontline fighting.

Even Jihad in Southeast Asia is beginning to take on a Daesh flavour. Whereas Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Al-Qaeda are now apparently more careful or are in postponement of sectarian conflict, Daesh is uncompromising in its hatred of out-groups, especially the Shi'ites, inherited from its late founding father, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Already, Malaysia is adamant in not accepting Shi'ism as part of Islam while Indonesia has a history of blood-spilling, house-burning sectarian violence. The sectarian aspect of Daesh-isation is compatible with regional communal tensions and online fighters receive approbative responses whenever they turn to using Shias as whipping boys for Daesh's atrocities in the Middle East.

New Paradigm for Counter-terrorism

Aside from the existing regional political consensus and inter-agency intelligence information-sharing, to defeat Daesh in Southeast Asia, there should also be joint operations where necessary, especially when groups such as Abu Sayyaf operate over multiple borders. The Mindanao-based group had recently abducted Malaysians and Indonesians in the waters off Semporna and an unknown location near Malaysian waters.

Even if such joint operations are just a show of force or combined training efforts, a united multi-state front comprising both police and military institutions will shatter any dreams of a wilayat spanning the archipelago. From the bottom to the top, the order of battle (ORBAT) of the police and militaries of Southeast Asia will have to address areas such as Mindanao and Poso to significantly reduce the pernicious threat of terrorism in the region.

ISIL's affiliates seem to have no conception of defeat. They are neither concerned about the global opposition, nor the weakness of their own forces, in the belief that death is the imagined salvation usually unattainable, while defeat is but a temporary setback. After Paris, Istanbul and Brussels, a paradigm shift is crucial to counter, contain and degrade, if not eliminate the jihadi militants of Daesh so as to prevent them from creating havoc on earth.

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