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The ISIS Threat to Southeast Asia: An Assessment

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

The ISIS terrorist threat to Southeast Asia is not as great as that from a rejuvenated Jemaah Islamiyah which has a more extensive network in the region.

Commentary

Appearing before a US Congressional Subcommittee on Counter Terrorism and Intelligence on 27 April 2016, I gave an assessment of the ISIS threat in Southeast Asia. I began with the observation that terrorism was not a new phenomenon in the region but went as far back as the era of anti-colonial struggle. It gathered pace after 9/11 with a series of attacks perpetrated mostly by the Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah. I continued:

Against this backdrop, recent ISIS-inspired attacks in Jakarta and the southern Philippines serve as a timely reminder of the threat that terrorism continues to pose to Southeast Asian societies.

Three related forms of threat

Related to ISIS, the threat takes three forms.

First, the danger of attacks perpetrated by local groups or individuals inspired by ISIS. These groups or individuals might not have direct links to ISIS central. Rather, they possess local grievances, for which the abstraction that is ISIS provides impetus and inspiration, usually via the internet. Jakarta was an example of this.

Second, the threat posed by returnees from Syria and Iraq. In particular, the

possibility that hardened militants would be returning with battlefield experience and operational knowledge to either plan or mount attacks in the region. But this has not yet happened. Thus far, the returnees in custody are deportees who failed in their attempt to get to Syria and Iraq.

Third, the threat posed by militants who will soon be released from prison. At issue is the weak prison system in Indonesia, and the radicalization that occurs within prisons. We should bear in mind though, that not all of these soon-to-be released militants are ISIS supporters or sympathizers. In fact, the vast majority are members of militant groups known to be anti-ISIS.

So, how serious is the threat posed by ISIS? The threat is certainly real and warrants our attention for reasons I just mentioned. But at the same time, we must take care not to exaggerate it. Let me make three points:

One, when we speak of ISIS in Southeast Asia, we have to be mindful of the fact that at present, there is no such thing as an “ISIS Southeast Asia,” nor has ISIS central formally declared an interest in any Southeast Asian country. For the most part, we are dealing with radical groups and individuals who have on their own taken oaths of allegiance to ISIS. **

Two, the number of Southeast Asians fighting in Iraq and Syria remains comparatively small. We are talking of, at most, 700, mostly from Indonesia. By way of comparison, thousands are coming from Europe. In addition to this, a large proportion of Southeast Asians there – I would say around 40 percent – comprise women and children.

Three, in our anxiety over ISIS, we must be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. There are multiple militant groups operating in Southeast Asia. Many are at odds with each other; not all seek affiliation to, or are enamored of, ISIS. In fact, I would argue that the greater, long-term threat comes from a rejuvenated Jemaah Islamiyah, which has a larger network and is better funded than the pro-ISIS groups in the region.

Terrorism in Southeast Asia

What about terrorism in Southeast Asia more generally?

Here too, it is imperative that we keep things in perspective. Yes, for Southeast Asia today, the question of terrorist attacks is, unfortunately, no longer a matter of “if”, but “when.” Even if the influence of ISIS diminishes over time, and it will, terrorism is part of the lay of the land and will not be eradicated anytime soon.

But, terrorism –whether perpetrated by ISIS or Jemaah Islamiyah - *is not* an existential threat to Southeast Asian societies. All indicators are that from an operational perspective, the threat remains at a low level. Of course, given the resilient and evolutionary nature of terrorism, this situation might well change. As I alluded to earlier, one possible factor that could prompt a change is a deliberate shift of attention of ISIS central to Southeast Asia. This however, seems unlikely for now

as ISIS is preoccupied with its immediate priority of holding ground in Iraq and Syria, and expanding its fight to Libya and Europe.

A final observation. Without being complacent, we should also recognize that regional governments are today better equipped and prepared to deal with the threat compared to a decade and a half ago, although capacity can, and should, be further improved with cooperation among themselves, and with some help from the United States.

*** ISIS central has claimed that attacks on 9 April 2016 on Philippine forces were waged by Mujahidin who have sworn allegiance to the Caliphate.*

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