

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 169/2016 dated 7 July 2016

The ‘Day After’ Islamic State: Scenarios for Southeast Asia

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

While the self-styled Islamic State (IS) is losing some of its territories in Syria and Iraq to the western-led coalitions new dangers are emerging with its ideological spread worldwide. Many Southeast Asian fighters supporting IS may return to launch attacks on home soil.

Commentary

THE SELF-STYLED Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or IS is coming under increasing pressure as the western-led coalitions against it are driving it out of territories in the two Arab states, such as the recapture of Falluja near Baghdad. However there may be little to cheer as the more pressure is piled on IS the more dangerous it will become. While the IS’ power is shrinking physically the consequences of a weakened and defeated IS may be more horrendous as the suicide bomb attacks in Baghdad on 3 July 2016 demonstrate. This attack in the holy month of Ramadhan in which 150 people were killed, and the recent attacks in Istanbul, Brussels, Paris, Baghdad, Istanbul, Puchong (Malaysia) and Solo (Indonesia) are IS-led or inspired.

Following a string of military conquests in Iraq and Syria in 2013 and 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the self-proclaimed Caliph of a self-declared Caliphate on 29 June 2014. Since then, it has been in decline. Thousands of its fighters and several military commanders have been killed in coalition air raids, with the IS losing key cities and about one quarter of its territory.

'Day After' IS is Defeated

IS will crumble but may not disappear immediately, especially if Libya emerges as the new epicentre of the Caliphate. The endemic problems of governance in Iraq and Syria, and the heightening Sunni-Shia sectarian divide in the Middle East will delay the immediate death of IS. However, its dwindling power may heighten the threat to the world, especially Southeast Asia. Four scenarios are likely to present themselves:

Scenario 1

With IS under challenge in Iraq and Syria, its world-wide affiliates are likely to initiate attacks in various parts of the world. The more IS comes under siege in the Middle East, the more it will be motivated to strike targets outside the region. In Southeast Asia, this could lead to attacks by IS' returnees and supporters, including by non-Southeast Asian jihadists such as the Uighurs and Arabs.

This trend is already visible in Southern Philippines which has emerged as the regional hub for IS' activities. Since April 2016, with the appointment of Isnilon Hapilon as Amir, a wilaiyat (province) has already been declared in southern Philippines, literally a de facto self-declared Islamic State in the region.

IS' attacks in Brussels and Istanbul are symptomatic of this strategy. An IS under threat will see its affiliates widen their attacks abroad to deflect and deter various coalition members from attacking IS in the Middle East. This is also to demonstrate to its supporters that it is capable of hurting its 'enemies'. This danger is likely to increase in Southeast Asia in the coming months and years.

Scenario 2

There may be a 'business as usual' approach as IS will not be easily defeated militarily due to the weakness of Iraq and Syria. While IS' territories may shrink, it will still be in a position to control large swathes of land and continue to recruit fighters due to the power of IS' ideology, and the weaknesses of most Sunni-majority Muslim states.

The hatred against the West will continue to provide a powerful motivation to win adherents for the IS. A weakened IS will still be able to pose a serious threat to most of Southeast Asia. Thus, even if the IS is not physically dismantled, its threat to Southeast Asia will remain.

Scenario 3

A military defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria is also unlikely to end the threat posed by it. Just like Al Qaeda, following its defeat in Afghanistan in 2001, IS' affiliates will be able to pose a serious threat to various regions, including Southeast Asia. This is due to the presence of a large number of trained and ideologically fortified Southeast Asians in Iraq and Syria as well as a large pool of supporters and sympathisers in the region.

In Iraq and Syria, Southeast Asians fighters are organised under an IS affiliate called Katibah Nusantara, and the return of its battled-hardened fighters would not augur well for the region. Even more chilling is the 'buy in' of the IS ideology by members of the security apparatus, raising the possibility of attacks by some military and police personnel in the region.

Scenario 4

The defeat of IS may also not end the threat posed by terrorism. A new round of low-insurgency warfare may surface as most of the issues that led to the rise of IS remain unresolved. Just as local jihadi groups were attracted to the Al Qaeda and later to IS there is every likelihood that a post-IS threat will emanate. Middle East geopolitics has been conducive for extremism and terrorism, and this is unlikely to change.

A new threat may be even more lethal than the one posed by IS. One possibility is the merger of Al Qaeda and IS which are ideologically aligned but split by personal differences. Southeast Asian fighters with the pro-Al Qaeda Jabhat al-Nusra may link up with IS fighters to pose an existential threat to the region.

In May 2016, an IS video showed Southeast Asian fighters in Katibah Nusantara declaring war on the region. Hence, Southeast Asia should remain vigilant rather than laud the end of IS.

As IS weakens, its danger stems from its willingness to strike at international targets through its global franchises. This is to remain relevant politically, gain more recruits and justify its *raison d'être* ideologically. The more IS shrinks territorially, the more it will free up its fighters for acts of global terrorism. The more IS is threatened, more fighters are likely to return to their home countries, bringing the IS' fight to various regions of the world, including Southeast Asia.

This would be the *déjà vu* scenario as happened to the Afghan Mujahids following their success in the Afghan War in the 1980s. In short, Southeast Asia has to be even more prepared for acts of terrorism conducted in the name of IS once it is weakened or defeated in Iraq and Syria. In fact Southeast Asia's larger war with terrorism would begin once IS is defeated in the Middle East.

Bilveer Singh is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
