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## **Islamic State's Wilayah Philippines: Implications for Southeast Asia**

*By Bilveer Singh & Kumar Ramakrishna*

### **Synopsis**

*The announcement of Wilayah Philippines in southern Philippines epitomises a new IS strategy to “pivot” to Southeast Asia. It signals a direct threat to countries in the region even as IS Central comes under pressure in the Middle East.*

### **Commentary**

THE ESTABLISHMENT of an Islamic State *wilayah* (province) in south Philippines in April 2016 epitomises a new IS strategy to “pivot” to Southeast Asia. It signals a new direct threat to countries in the region even as IS Central comes under pressure from US-led forces and Russia in the Middle East. Not only will IS take the fight to regions where it has strong support, regional fighters need not travel to the Middle East to support IS.

“Wilayah Al-Filibin” (WP) - the largely porous tri-border area adjoining the southern Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia - will allow regional fighters to congregate in support of IS’ regional operations or even as a transit point. Although IS operating in Iraq and Syria remains a distant threat, through WP the self-proclaimed caliphate has explicitly laid claim to Southeast Asia. It is IS’ most powerful signal yet that it has political, ideological and military claims over the region as it believes it has strong support in Southeast Asia, as suggested by the presence of approximately 1,000 Southeast Asian fighters organised as the Katibah Nusantara grouping in Syria and Iraq.

## **More Attacks in Southeast Asia?**

More profoundly, it should not be forgotten that Southeast Asia is home to a quarter of the global Muslim population. Hence, IS' strategists – many of whom are after all, deeply radicalised military and intelligence officers of the old Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and hence, should not be underestimated – would likely view the region as a potential strategic reserve.

This is probably one reason why IS propagandists outside and within the region have recently ramped up social media output in the Malay vernacular, including IS' first Malay language newspaper (*Al-Fatihin*) to ensure that the virulent IS extremist vision is effectively disseminated throughout vulnerable constituencies in the region.

To be sure, the emergence of WP is pregnant with security implications. It would be folly to dismiss it as a mere public relations exercise. As an official *wilayah*, WP will fully be expected to intensify and coordinate operations within the region. It means that the probability of increased terrorist attacks in the region has just gone up. Already IS-inspired attacks have taken place in Jakarta and Puchong near Kuala Lumpur. Southeast Asia should brace itself for more IS-linked jihadi operations in the coming months, as the fledgling *wilayah* actively seeks to legitimise and announce its existence.

Attacks similar to those in Africa perpetrated by the likes of Boko Haram and Al Shabaab are now distinct possibilities in the region, especially within the tri-border areas of the Riau archipelago adjoining Malaysia and Singapore. The presence of local jihadi groups in southern Philippines, moreover, provides IS a unique sanctuary, much like the way the Al Qaeda-linked and Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyah network found a similar permissive milieu in the same area since the late 1980s. Already, *Katibah al-Muhajir*, a Southeast Asian combat unit has been established in WP in July 2016.

## **Why *Wilayah* Philippines?**

Furthermore, the jihadi networks in southern Philippines are also very likely to be transformed by the WP. While Mindanao will act as an even greater magnet for regional jihadists, IS supporters from outside Southeast Asia are also likely to gather in southern Philippines. There are indications that Arabs, Uighurs and even Caucasian fighters have begun to appear in the WP.

The Philippines was chosen as the fulcrum of IS operations in the region because the original locus of regional jihadist activity, Poso in eastern Indonesia, saw its appeal steadily diminished. This has been due to the intensive counter-terrorism campaign by the Indonesian military against the Santoso-led MIT (East Indonesia Mujahideen) since late 2015. Santoso was killed in mid-July 2016. The Emir of WP is Abu Abdullah, also known as Isnilon Hapilon, leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), by most accounts the most brutal terrorist group in southern Philippines. WP – with the ASG at its core - is to all extents and purposes a micro-Islamic State and has emerged as a key node in IS' global network of terrorism.

WP shares the key attributes of IS and is ideologically Salafist-jihadist. Significantly, Abu Abdullah has sworn allegiance (*baiyaat*) to IS' self-declared caliphate. As supreme commander, Abdullah has apparently succeeded in uniting local and regional jihadists and has hence created a jihadist force of a multi-national character, with foreign fighters and different armed units from within the Philippines.

Additionally and crucially, the ASG enjoys tacit territorial control over parts of the southern Philippines and has demonstrated the capacity for undertaking not just terror attacks but even small-scale conventional operations against government forces, with dedicated armed units using modern weapons. Moreover, its well-worn tactic of kidnapping for ransom aside, the ASG has also been involved in beheading – a grisly trademark of IS.

### **Southern Philippines as a potential Afghanistan?**

In sum, southern Philippines seems to be evolving to become the region's Afghanistan and the epicentre of the jihadi threat, replete with the intra-jihadist rivalry and conflicts between IS and AQ-linked groups, as has happened in other areas in the Middle East declared as *wilayah*. Regional governmental preoccupation with rising tensions between rival claimants over the South China Sea will only enhance the ability of IS to sink deeper roots in Southeast Asia.

It behoves Southeast Asian governments to respond to the looming danger posed by the highly significant emergence of Wilayah Philippines collectively, as no single state can tackle the IS threat by itself. Failure to forge deeper and more effective diplomatic, military, intelligence and economic collaboration to comprehensively uproot IS from southern Philippines will quite simply, have dire downstream consequences for Southeast Asia - sooner rather than later.

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