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Coalition Conquest of ISIS-held Mosul and Raqqa: Implications for Southeast Asia

By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani

Synopsis

The future of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) is in doubt at it is in danger of losing the Sunni-dominated twin cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. Despite these developments, the decentralised threat from ISIS remains present and may expand through the proliferation of terrorist ideology from the returnees.

Commentary

ON 16 OCTOBER 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the beginning of the assault on Mosul, some 28 months after the city was lost to ISIS, also known as IS. The near-simultaneous attack on Mosul and Raqqa has placed immense pressure on the ISIS leadership, which is probably fighting for survival. While the military battles are still going on, of great significance will be the implications of what the loss of the two ISIS hubs would mean for the so-called Islamic State and its fighters, including Southeast Asian jihadists.

As ISIS 'capitals' in Iraq and Syria, they are of great propaganda value. The likely loss of the two cities could relegate ISIS to a dispersed underground movement a la Al Qaeda, and undermining its claim to being an ever "remaining and expanding" Islamic State, notwithstanding the group's recent gains in Palmyra.

Implications for IS

However, the eventual loss of the two cities will not signal the death of the group. The ISIS that exists today is a result of morphing that has taken place since 2004 and its likely defeat in the two cities could probably lead to a new group emerging with or without al Baghdadi as Caliph. ISIS began as Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in

1999, before becoming Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006 (after a short-lived coalition of insurgent groups called the Mujahideen Shura Council), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 and finally the Islamic State (IS) in 2014.

Unlike Al Qaeda, ISIS has been able to control large territories and run a de facto state for more than two years. Having proclaimed a Caliphate and sustained it for more than two years, ISIS diehards are likely to motivate like-minded groups to continue with the struggle, especially following the humanitarian crisis that is likely to follow with a Shia-led offensive against the two largely Sunni cities.

An immediate danger of the attacks on the two cities is the likelihood of revenge raids on the coalition members carrying out the attacks on ISIS. This has been the case for those who had taken part in the 'Sunni Uprising' against Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its later mutations, resulting in the various targeted assassinations and lynching conducted at the homes of the members of the complicit tribes.

Implications for Southeast Asian Jihadists

For Southeast Asia, the eventual fall of the two cities will not mark the end of ISIS or its threat to the region. A decentralised ISIS could be no less dangerous as it could open up multiple fronts in many countries. Unlike Al Qaeda which has no territories or 'provinces', ISIS has an epicentre in the Levant and various 'provinces' and enclaves worldwide including in Southeast Asia. While holding on to Mosul and Raqqa has been important for ISIS, their loss is unlikely to terminate its struggle to establish a global Islamic Caliphate.

While Iraq and Syria have been the epicentres of ISIS since June 2014, the loss of two cities could result in new centres of gravity. They could pose a greater security threat as the West is less likely to commit forces to counter it especially in Asia and Africa. This would simply mean the export of ISIS struggle from the Levant to the rest of the world, especially the Khorasan and Southeast Asia.

ISIS is also likely to launch the next phase of its offensive against its enemies. It could attack soft and hard targets worldwide, especially countries belonging to the coalition forces. A weakened and decentralised ISIS would result in less predictability, and these countries would need to be ready for such a landscape of insecurity. As ISIS has already succeeded in spawning radical networks in the region, the likely loss of Mosul and Raqqa would raise Southeast Asian insecurity on two fronts.

First, Southeast Asian jihadists returning home from the battlefield, numbering more than 1,000 to date, could pose a serious threat to regional security. This could result in attacks in states such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and even Singapore. Hence, while the 'war against ISIS' has largely focussed on Syria and Iraq, the end of Mosul and Raqqa as ISIS's strongholds could open new fronts in the region, thereby endangering regional security.

Low-level Insurgency?

Southeast Asian jihadists operating in Mosul and Raqqa, including leaders such as Bahrumsyah, the Emir of Katibah Nusantara and Bahrun Naim from Indonesia and Wanndy from Malaysia, could still order attacks in Southeast Asia. The attacks could source forces either from the ISIS Philippines in Mindanao under the leadership of Hapilon, the Maute group in Butig, or through the returnee foot-soldiers in the region.

Also, the attacks need not be simply by nationals of individual states but could also be through jihadi networks developed in Syria and Iraq that could include radicalised Uighurs, Rohingyas and others who may find expediency in the cause of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.

The threat could be in the form of a low-level insurgency or dangerous terrorist attacks which these operationally-ready returnees – who are well-trained, with battlefield experience, and adept in use of modern weapon systems and military organisation – will be able to carry out. While the returnees' 'lone wolf' or packs of 'lone wolves' attacks can be expected, there could also be attacks by organised small groups, as were carried out during the Paris attacks in November 2015, or in the Puchong (Malaysia) grenade blast in June 2016.

Returnees and Ideological Proliferation

The other major impact of the returnees or 'escapees' from Mosul and Raqqa is the importing of a more radical and strident form of Sunni Islam to their respective societies. Defeating ISIS is not just a military battle but also a political, economic and ideological struggle. How Southeast Asian societies cope with the returnees will be an equally important challenge, especially in managing the radical ideas these individuals hold. The revival of the ideological concepts, such as a "caliphate" or sectarian enmity should not be dismissed.

A failure to deal with this ideological threat could lead to the returnees' ability to inspire radicalism at home and breed a new generation of radicals, as had happened following the return of jihadists from the Afghanistan battlefield in the 1980s. This would mean that to deal with dangerous, violence-sanctioning ideas, states would have to develop effective counter and de-radicalisation programmes.

Rather than be euphoric at the conquest of Mosul and Raqqa, in Southeast Asia the appropriate response should be extra vigilance and resilience as the next phase of ISIS threat could wreak havoc to the peace, stability and inter-religious harmony in the region.

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