

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.

The Jihadist Threat in Southeast Asia: An Al Qaeda and IS-centric Architecture?

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

The threat posed by salafi-jihadists in Southeast Asia remains high. Various groups affiliated to transnational terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, which share a common ideology, are likely to merge to form a mega-jihadist grouping.

Commentary

THE SECURITY threat posed by salafi-jihadists to Southeast Asia remains high. There are various groups in the region that are affiliated to transnational terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), which share a common ideology of establishing a global Caliphate or political order.

There are also leaders who have moved from Al Qaeda affiliates such as the Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group to Islamic State in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, which is the epicentre of IS in the region even though its regional operational base is presently in southern Philippines.

Significance of Al Qaeda and IS-linked Groups

The view that the IS has replaced Al Qaeda as a sustained threat in Southeast Asia is a misreading. IS is a serious threat to regional and global security, with an identifiable leader who proclaims himself as the Caliph of the global Muslim community; IS also has ample resources as it continues to control swathes of land in Syria and Iraq, although its territories have shrunk. However, it is not the only threat.

Just as in South Asia, from Pakistan to Bangladesh, Southeast Asia is being

threatened by a dual terrorist threat posed by Al Qaeda and IS, which can have a number of consequences for regional security.

First, there is the situation of flux as to which jihadi group is the key terrorist threat in the region. Given the porosity of groups and free movement of jihadist personalities between them, the jihadist network in Southeast Asia constitutes a greater threat than individual jihadist groups, whether ISIS or AQ.

Hence, in Southeast Asia, they would include pro-Al Qaeda leaders such as Abu Bakar Bashir, Aman Abdurrahman and Isnilon Hapilon who have declared allegiance to IS, thereby temporarily weakening some pro-Al Qaeda groups.

Yet as IS is under military pressure in Syria and Iraq, there is the possibility that it may also be weakened, and its power and influence outside the Middle East reduced. This is already evident in Afghanistan and Pakistan where the pro-Al Qaeda Taliban has been able to capture more territories and launch attacks against government forces and pro-IS groups. This weakening could pave the way for the different groups to come together in service of a common mission.

Possible Merger of Jihadi Groups?

As both Al Qaeda and IS share many ideological beliefs, including common enemies, there is the possibility that they may merge and morph into a single mega jihadi group. Just as the Mujahidins fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s evolved into Al Qaeda in the 1990s, which spun off IS, there is nothing to stop the two groups from merging into a single force.

While personality clashes and differences in strategy have militated against cooperation, this may not be a permanent state of affairs. To survive and remain relevant, they may have to collaborate, especially if President Trump pursues his promise to work with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to exterminate Al Qaeda and IS in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Such tactical or strategic cooperation between Al Qaeda and IS will further undermine global security, including in Southeast Asia. We can expect increased attacks worldwide, including in Southeast Asia, where Al Qaeda and IS have an operational presence. Even during the massive demonstrations against the current Jakarta governor in November and December 2016 for alleged blasphemy, both pro-Al Qaeda and IS groups worked together to successfully pressure the Indonesian government to prosecute the governor.

Even though the last bombing linked to an Al Qaeda group in Indonesia took place in 2009, this does not mean that groups associated with it in the region are dormant. The death in March 2015 of a JI member, Ridwan Jibril, in Syria while fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra - a pro-Al Qaeda organisation - was indicative of the continued active presence of pro-Al Qaeda jihadists in the region.

Neo-JI?

Groups such as JI, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, KOMPAK, Jamaah Ansharusy

Syari'ah and Ring Banten in Indonesia, the KMM in Malaysia, and the Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines have been greatly weakened by security operations or shifting allegiance.

While this is so, many pro-Al Qaeda groups remain in the region, especially in Indonesia. The key pro-Al Qaeda leaders in Indonesia include Abu Rusydan, Abu Tholut, Zarkasih, Abu Jibril, Abdul Rahim Bashir, Mochammad Achwan, Abu Dujana, Umar Patek and Irfan Awwas.

In fact, the former Emir of JI, Abu Rusydan, has publicly stated that his organisation is presently in the phase of *i'dad*, namely, preparation for jihad. The notion of a new Jemaah Islamiyah, referred to by analysts as neo-JI, has been dismissed by these leaders who still viewed the PUPJI, JI's constitution, as the key strategic guide of the group.

Islamic State-linked Groups

Since 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the formation of IS, many groups in the region have sworn allegiance to him and IS. There are three key indicators of the existence of groups supporting IS in Southeast Asia:

The first is the existence of Southeast Asian fighters organised under the *Katibah Nusantara* in Syria and Iraq under the leadership of its Emir, Bahrumsyah. The second is the presence of *Katibah Muhajirin* fighters in southern Philippines, mostly from Indonesia. The third and most important is the appointment of Isnilon Hapilon, the former commander of the Abu Sayyaf Group, as the Emir of Wilayah Philippines based in Mindanao. Hapilon has been attracting regional jihadists, including Rohingya and Uighurs; he was reportedly injured in a military operation in January 2017.

There are many pro-IS groups in the region today. In Indonesia, for instance, this would include Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, Mujahidin Indonesia Barat and Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, not to mention groups fighting in Syria under *Katibah Nusantara* and *Katibah Muhajirin*. More than 260 IS supporters have also been detained in Malaysia.

In an environment of growing radicalisation, the likelihood of both Al Qaeda and IS-linked groups proliferating and growing in influence is very high. For instance, in the face of the weakening sway of the two key Islamic social organisations in Indonesia, namely, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, there will be more opportunities for radical groups to become influential, as was evident in the massive demonstrations in Jakarta in December 2016. This signalled not only the growing societal radicalisation and influence of Al Qaeda and IS-linked groups in Indonesia.

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

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg