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ISIS in East Asia: Strategic Shifts and Security Implications

By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani

Synopsis

As the Philippines battles with militant groups in Mindanao, ISIS supporters have reimagined the area as “Wilayah Asia Timur” as part of ISIS’ strategic shift in East Asia. ISIS terrorists in Southeast Asia may revert to crime and banditry as part of their so-called jihad.

Commentary

IN JUNE 2016, ISIS released a video that recognised the pledges of allegiance of various militant groups in Mindanao. In that video Isnilon Hapilon, leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) was recognised as amir of the ISIS groups. It also alluded to the conglomeration of ISIS elements in the Philippines. The A’maaq News Agency, an ISIS mouthpiece acknowledged the presence of ten such groups in six locations throughout Mindanao. This would include the four featured in the video, ASG, the Maute Group (MG), and Katibah al-Muhajir, a cell consisting of migrants from Malaysia and Indonesia.

At about the same time, An-Naba’, ISIS’ official weekly newsletter and other sources had begun reporting news of skirmishes and attacks, and the taking over of militant camps, as if they were engaging in regular warfare. On 24 November 2016, in an attempt at securing territory, MG planted the ISIS flag in front of the municipal hall of Butig, Lanao del Sur, in a siege that displaced close to three quarters of the population of the town. It took six days for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to push MG back into the hills.

Epicentre of Terrorism in Southeast Asia

In January 2017, following President Rodrigo Duterte's pronouncements, the AFP Chief of Staff ordered the Western Mindanao Command (Westmincom) to decimate terror groups in the area, including ASG and MG. Since the launch of the operations in Western Mindanao, ISIS has had to reconsider its strategy in Southeast Asia.

Firstly, ISIS no longer considers *qital tamkin* (conquering of territories) as the primary modus operandi of terrorism in the Philippines. While battlefield successes will be celebrated in its propaganda, the group understands that they are facing a Westmincom that is determined to wipe terrorism out of Mindanao in six months from January 2017.

In line with this shift in strategy, Daesh called on its terrorists and supporters to conduct theft or robbery of non-Muslims, claiming that it is permissible to take their lives as well as property. In the eighth edition of Rumiya, the ISIS journal just released this month, Daesh encouraged any action – crime, warfare or terrorism – that causes economic harm on non-Muslims and their governments.

This strategy is familiar to various Jemaah Islamiyah-affiliated terrorist groups and their supporters in this region, including ASG, who have been carrying out attacks and robberies to obtain *fa'i*, wealth forcibly obtained outside of war using religious justification. According to ideologues like Abu Bakar Ba'ashir, *fa'i* would be used for terrorist attacks as part of their so-called jihad.

Larger Scope

Secondly, since the bar has been lowered for the distant "soldiers of the caliphate", ISIS is able to assert a stronger image of its global reach by claiming responsibilities for attacks that happen in a larger scope of terrorist activities. This is reflected in the eighth edition of Rumiya, in which ISIS dedicated an entire page to illustrate the operations by Daesh-affiliated terrorists. The infographics detailed statistics on the operations carried out in the Philippines. What has not gone unnoticed is Rumiya's referral to the terrorists as being part of the "khilafah in East Asia" instead of being specific about where the operations actually took place.

These strategic shifts had been duly communicated to ISIS-affiliated terrorists and supporters in the region. In recent weeks, online Daesh sympathisers have begun popularising the terms *Wilayah al-Filibin* and *Wilayah Asia Timur* (Malay: East Asia Province) using them interchangeably. Most recently, encouraged by ISIS news reports of the region, they have re-imagined al-Filibin as constituting the locus of ISIS's operations in *Sharq Asiya* (East Asia).

As a result, new groups have formed with the idea that they would have to accommodate foreign fighters in their ranks. On 6 April 2017, the *Jama'at al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar bi al-Filibin* (JMAF) was formed, pledging allegiance to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, operating in Maguindanao, Cotabato and Davao, and led by Esmail Abdulmalik alias Abu Turaifi.

Local Insecurity, Regional Threat

While ISIS' strategic shift in Southeast Asia could be attributed to AFP's commitment to neutralise the terror threat in Mindanao, several domestic issues are withstanding. Firstly, one reason why militant groups pledged loyalty to ISIS is a sense of disillusionment with the peace deal negotiations. To be clear, ground sentiments, in areas controlled by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), show strong support for President Duterte's uncompromising stance against corruption, illegal drugs and ASG.

The majority of Muslims in Mindanao have invested hope in the peace deal and the Duterte administration, noting that criminal and narcotic activities have declined despite the nagging worry that corruption could be derail all these. The remaining minority with affiliations to bandits or small-time militias still view violent extremism as an attractive means for power or criminal-economic gain, especially when terrorist ideologues popularise the claim that *fa'i* is part of jihad.

Secondly, there is also concern that armed groups and corrupt politicians or government officials may link up with narco-criminals or Daesh-affiliated groups to perpetuate economics of insecurity in Mindanao. Political and family feuds may have encouraged support for or against terrorist groups. For instance, one cannot ignore the fact that Farhana Maute, MG's matriarch, is believed to be involved in a political conflict with a Butig politician, or that MG was the Maute clan's private extortion militia, before it started using ISIS imagery.

Thirdly, and most importantly, aside from Mindanao being a global village of "migrant fighters" from as near as Malaysia and Indonesia to as far as Morocco, the Duterte administration needs to devise specific strategies to intercept and deal with returnees from Syria and Iraq. This would be a déjà vu scenario of Southeast Asian fighters returning to the Philippines following the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s.

As a measure to pre-empt this threat, countries in the region have already agreed to share intelligence on returning militants since early 2016. If this issue is not addressed, new groups consisting of foreign fighters and returnees may continue to emerge despite military operations in Mindanao.

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