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Southeast Asian Jihadi Leaders in the Post-Marawi Era

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

Even though Southeast Asian jihadists have suffered defeat in Marawi, the continued presence of key leaders pose a threat of renewed violence in the region.

Commentary

A MAJOR factor for the continued presence of various jihadi groups in Southeast Asia and the world at large is their ability to quickly regenerate their leaderships following the killings of their leaders in counter-terrorism operations. This is largely true of Al Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) as well as jihadi groups in Southeast Asia such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf.

In a way, leadership regeneration has become an important part of the organisational model of jihadi groups, which largely explains the difficulties in totally eradicating them.

The Marawi Siege

The Marawi Siege, from May to October 2017, was particularly important as it was an attempt to replicate and transplant a 'Mosul in Iraq' or 'Raqqah in Syria' in the Philippines, symbolising Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's reach in Southeast Asia as a whole. This failed but its implications are particularly significant as far as jihadi leadership in the Southeast Asian region is concerned.

While the Marawi Siege started with the Philippine Government's attempt to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the Emir of Islamic State in the Philippines, it went awry, with the Philippine authorities losing control of the highly symbolic Islamic City of Marawi to IS and its supporters.

This was the first time a terrorist group had captured a territory in Southeast Asia, what more in an urban setting and held it for five months. It was akin to a 'small Mosul' or 'small Raqqa' in the Philippines. The five months taken to wrest back Marawi City was partly due to the difficulties involved in urban warfare, which advantaged the terrorists holed up in houses and buildings, and holding civilians hostage, including women and children.

More than 1,000 people were killed, including security personnel, civilians and terrorists. Marawi City was severely damaged, becoming the site of the heaviest fighting in the Philippines since the Second World War.

From the perspective of jihadi leadership, probably the most significant consequence of the siege was the death of its key leaders, Isnilon Hapilon and Omarkhayam Maute. This represents a severe blow to the jihadi leadership in the Philippines, especially of the pro-IS groups and directly led to the ending of the Marawi Siege.

However, as conceded by counter-terrorism officials in Malaysia and Indonesia, "the battle may be over but there is still a long way to go as far as the war is concerned". This is primarily due to the jihadists' ability to regenerate themselves and even more importantly, the fact that many key jihadi leaders are still alive in the Philippines and beyond.

Post-Marawi Jihadi Leaders in Southeast Asia

While 'Osamaism' and 'Omarism' have continued in the post-Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar eras in Al Qaeda and Taliban respectively, similarly, the Southeast Asian terrorist landscape continues to be determined by the presence of leading jihadists in the region. While the Jemaah Islamiyah has been decapitated with the loss of its key leaders such as Imam Samudra, Noordin M Top, Azahari Husin and Dulmatin, the JI continues to be relevant due to its ability to replace its leaders.

In the same manner, the deaths of Hapilon and Omarkhayam have not fundamentally reduced or removed the jihadi threat in the region. Four key leaders continue to be a source of inspiration and leadership for Southeast Asian jihadists. These are Amin Baco, BahrumSyah, Abu Turaifie and Bahrun Naim:

Amin Baco is of Bugis descent from Sulawesi, a Malaysian born in Sabah who built his jihadi credentials fighting in Jolo and Basilan in Mindanao. He is also the son-in-law of two key Abu Sayyaf commanders, including Hapilon. He is a leading bomb maker, charismatic and respected among the jihadists in Mindanao even though he does not hail from any of the tribes or clans in Mindanao. Amin is the designated leader of IS in Southeast Asia and successor of Hapilon.

BahrumSyah is probably Indonesia's leading terrorist, being the Emir of the Katibah Nusantara, a Southeast Asian sub-group within IS. He was among the first few Indonesians to support al-Baghdadi and IS, and is highly regarded among the jihadi circles. He is still believed to be in Syria today.

Abu Turaifie, a former member of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF),

is the leader of a group known as Muhaajireen Wal Ansar. His group is part of IS in the Philippines. Turaifie is based in Maguindanao Province and his group has had several clashes with the security forces and the MILF group.

Bahrn Naim is a far more junior jihadi operating in Iraq and Syria. While he has been trained to be a suicide bomber in Syria, his talent is more in cyberspace, putting up pro-ISIS propaganda and motivational videos. Some believe that these online videos have played a part in the recruitment of IS supporters in Indonesia, either as fighters in Syria or to undertake violent actions in Indonesia. Unconfirmed reports say Bahrn Naim is now dead.

Implications for Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian jihadists are akin to the many-headed hydra, reviving and surfacing quickly following a successful counter-terrorism operation by the authorities. In the post-Marawi era Amin Baco is believed to be hiding in Basilan or Jolo and is probably planning a counter-attack in the very near future. His links with terrorists in Sulawesi and Sabah, making him, as one analyst puts it, Southeast Asia's first tri-border jihadist.

Added to the Amin factor is the possibility of Bahrumisyah returning to Southeast Asia following the defeat of IS in the Middle East, losing most of its territories in Iraq and Syria. If Bahrn Naim is still alive, both he and Bahrumisyah could return to Indonesia or they could transit through the Philippines' Mindanao region and link up with pro-ISIS jihadists such as Amin and his supporters.

A Bahrumisyah-Bahrn Naim link up with Amin Baco could provide a powerful primer for Southeast Asian jihadists in the post-Marawi era and represent a heightened threat. In short, instead of being euphoric post-Marawi, there is the potential that Southeast Asian security could face an even greater existential threat compared to the past.

There is every reason to be highly vigilant as new jihadi leaders such as Amin Baco, Bahrumisyah and Bahrn Naim could continue to pose a threat post-Marawi. Even though they may be recovering from defeat in the Middle East and Marawi, they may want to launch new violent attacks to demonstrate that IS is ever present.

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