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## **IS Resilience in Southeast Asia?**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Despite the death of IS' "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019, events in Southeast Asia have since shown that IS networks, while weakened through the loss of key leaders and fighters, have regrouped and continued attempts to launch attacks.*

### **COMMENTARY**

FOLLOWING THE five-month Marawi siege in the Philippines since May 2017 in which leading Southeast Asian jihadists such as Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute, from the Philippines, and Dr Mahmood Ahmad and Amin Baco, from Malaysia, were killed, many analysts believed the terrorist threat in the region has been largely neutralised.

Yet in the last two years, security forces in Southeast Asia continue to foil potential attacks and arrest networks of mainly IS-linked operatives. In this period, around 519 individuals in Malaysia and another 500 in Indonesia have been remanded, while authorities in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines have also dismantled networks of suspected IS cells and supporters.

### **Leadership Decapitation & Rejuvenation**

Recent reports of senior Malaysian militants Akel Zainal and Rafi Udin being killed in counter-terrorist operations in Syria have meant there are currently no known Southeast Asian fighters holding leadership positions within IS in Syria and Iraq.

This is significant as a living Southeast Asian fighter stands a greater chance of being accepted as 'the' leader of IS' affiliate networks in the region, having earned the status of having fought and survived the 'jihad' in the Middle East.

There is thus interest on who will emerge to lead the various IS networks affected by leadership losses in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, veteran ideologues such as Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakar Baasyir remain alive, albeit in remand, and continue to have some influence on their specific radical circles in Indonesia specifically.

However, the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the largest terrorist group in the country, currently operates as a loose network of autonomous pro-IS cells, following significant losses to its central and provincial leadership in recent years.

In the Philippines, there are known persons (such as Hatib Sawadjaan and Furuji Indama, who helm IS' branches in Sulu and Basilan provinces respectively) who have emerged to lead IS-linked groups there. In contrast, Malaysian IS networks have been disrupted by the recent loss of key figures such as Akel and Rafi.

Going forward, with IS' affiliates worldwide retaking their pledges of allegiance to the newly declared IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, including networks in Southeast Asia, it is likely new individuals will emerge into leadership roles, possibly from the pool of regional militants returning from the Middle East or among the kin of dead IS terrorists.

### **Post-Caliphate Landscape**

According to estimates, nearly 1000 Indonesians, 100 Malaysians and some nationals from the Philippines and Singapore had journeyed (*hijrah*) to IS-controlled territory in Syria during the height of its caliphate operations between 2015 and 2017. Since then, some 85 Indonesians and 40 Malaysians have been reportedly killed in battle, many of them male suicide bombers.

Several of these ideologically hardened and combat ready fighters could seek to return home, following IS' territorial losses in Syria; many are currently either held in prison and detention camps, or still fighting for IS' remaining networks there.

Having developed ideological affinity, shared experiences in battle and close personal ties with fighters from within and outside Southeast Asia, they could seek to form alliances to coordinate terror operations around the region once back home.

There is clear precedent for such a scenario. During the 1980s, many Southeast Asian jihadists migrated to Afghanistan to join the so-called jihad against Soviet occupation.

Several who subsequently returned formed the nucleus of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which was responsible for high-profile terrorist attacks in the 1990s and early 2000s. For IS, whose regional affiliates are already among the most organised in Asia, the prospective return of battle-hardened fighters from the Syrian theatre, could fortify these networks further.

## **Implications & Outlook for Regional Security**

Effectively tackling potential women and child returnees is also vital. As was evident in the Surabaya bombings in May 2018, women and children have taken on increasingly prominent roles in jihadi operations regionally.

Adopting best practices from programmes used in other countries on this issue could buttress the 'tool kit' of regional counter-terrorism practitioners, although they would need to be adapted to the Asian context.

The infiltration of non-Southeast Asian militants into the region to participate in terror attacks, some of whom may have previously forged links with Southeast Asian IS fighters in Syria and Iraq, also requires monitoring. This was evident during the 2017 Marawi siege, when a number of foreign jihadists were killed in clashes with security forces, including some Uighurs in Indonesia.

The death of leading Southeast Asian jihadists such as Hapilon and Akel raises important questions about the future course of the regional threat landscape, an issue brought more sharply into focus since the death of al-Baghdadi.

Authorities are expected to closely monitor who fills the leadership vacuum within jihadist networks in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines following the death of key leaders in these countries.

Although a new IS Emir in Southeast Asia has not been clearly designated following the death of Hapilon in October 2017, local and regional leaders will likely emerge from the group of battle-hardened fighters who migrated to the Middle East theatre and have since returned.

Potential leaders could also emerge from the expansive networks of local IS affiliates, supporters and sympathisers dotted around the region.

The re-emergence of JI is also most likely to be closely monitored. Since JI's last attack in the region in 2009, it has regrouped, and consolidated its position, especially in Indonesia.

JI could consolidate its position further, especially since many of its key leaders remain alive. These include Yazid Sufaat, a prominent biochemist and bomb-maker, who was recently released by Malaysian authorities after almost two decades in custody.

JI's reinvigoration also provides a potential well-trodden path for IS' own resurgence in the region. Possible tactical alliances, involving JI and pro-IS cells to launch joint attacks, also cannot be discounted.

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