



Assessing ISIS Expansion in Southeast Asia

December 2016

MAJOR THREAT OR MISPLACED FEAR?

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In an era of international terrorism and the rise of large, well-organized Islamic jihadist groups working hard to violently establish strict conservative Islamic states, the need for continually evolving threat assessments becomes paramount for the safety of lives and assets. One such threat assessment to evaluate is the vulnerability of the Southeast Asian region as a possible new theater for the expansion of the jihadist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Southeast Asia is a fairly diverse region that incorporates multiple nations that include Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, and East Timor. Among these is Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. One might assume that any Islamist terrorist group would have the most success gaining a foothold in Indonesia, however, several factors need to be evaluated before making such an assumption.

The first question to be asked is what are the factors that will allow for or diminish the likelihood of an expansion of an ISIS presence in Southeast Asia? There are many different factors that could contribute to the failure or success of an Islamist jihadist group anywhere in the world, and each global region has its own range of factors. The most salient factors present in the Southeast Asian region are political, historical, cultural, religious, economic, and institutional. In narrowing down these broad factors, what are a few of the more specific factors particular to Southeast Asia that need to be looked at?

Factors assessed

- The historical nature of an Islamic struggle against Southeast Asian governments.
- The political interests of competing groups that may already be established.
- The general Islamic sentiment of society in Southeast Asia.
- The internal policies of the current Southeast Asian governments.
- The strategic goals, interests and capabilities of ISIS.

When making a closer examination one can conclude that there are more challenges than material or ideological support at this moment. ISIS may not enjoy an overly significant expansion of its operations in Southeast Asia at this time, however, that could change in the near future for a number of reasons. Vigilance and continual evaluations should be made. Jihadist struggle in the case of this assessment should be restricted to an understanding related to militancy and not a personal struggle within an individual.

Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and East Timor

Southeast Asia is a broad region; fortunately, we can narrow down the threat areas to a collection of more specific locations where a threat would be more pronounced. Starting with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and East Timor, it can be noted immediately that these nations are predominantly non-Muslim nations. The governmental structure and religious nature of their societies do not lend themselves readily to offer support or resources to a jihadist cause.

In Vietnam, the vast majority of society (80.8 percent) either identifies with a traditional folk religion or is non-religious as a result of the past policies of the Communist government. While the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is technically still a one-party system, the Communist Party of Vietnam did introduce many capitalist economic policies in the 1980s. Buddhism is the second most predominant religion in Vietnam, registering at approximately 9.3 percent. The very small minority of Muslims in Vietnam (0.1 percent) are concentrated mostly in the Cham minority ethnic groups which are related to Malays.¹ The Cham Muslim minority has remained relatively removed from the outside world of Islam, both geographically, and due to a lack of established religious schools. Any insurgency has historically revolved around nationalistic or communist struggles, and there has never been an Islamist jihadist struggle.

The societies of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand identify predominantly as Buddhist with 66.8 percent, 96.9 percent, and 93.6 percent respectively. Thailand has the largest Muslim population out of these nations, and Islam is the largest minority religion at 4.9 percent.² The Thai government has been relatively accommodating in promoting social and political equality for the Muslim minority and thus Muslims experience no great oppression or economic inequality that prompts anti-government sentiment or the need for a perceived Islamic struggle. To be sure, there are separatist sentiments in the Southern border regions of Thailand, which maintain the highest concentration of Thai Muslims, yet these are mostly nationalistic and not Islamist in nature.

East Timor is predominately Roman Catholic (96.9 percent), with a Protestant minority and an even smaller Muslim minority at 0.3 percent.³ While there has been a history of Islamic violence towards Catholic groups in East Timor, since its 1999 independence from Indonesia there has been relatively little violence there. Historically, insurgencies in these nations were indigenous nationalist fights against colonial rule or for autonomous and separatist identity. Even with some religious diversity to include small minorities of Muslims, these nations will not present themselves as environments where a jihadist presence will enjoy any significant sentiment, sympathy, or gain any major traction.

Myanmar

Myanmar has a particularly unusual situation relating to religious violence and Islamic issues. Here, the Muslim minority is persecuted through violence perpetrated by Buddhist groups. Myanmar, much like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, is predominantly Buddhist at 89 percent. It has a Muslim minority of 4 percent.⁴ The vast majorities of people who identify as Muslim belong to the ethnic Rohingya minority group, and reside mostly in the Western coastal area bordering Bangladesh.

Government policy tends to be hostile towards these individuals and through the Citizenship Act of 1982 it does not consider the Rohingya to be Myanmar citizens or one of the national ethnic groups.⁵ While the conditions are present that would normally create a space for an Islamist struggle—particularly government persecution and economic inequality—the unusual situation of Buddhist groups engaging in extreme violence towards the Rohingya has kept them very isolated, while the Rohingya themselves do not have the will or the capacity to wage anything resembling a jihadist insurgency.

The Philippines

The Philippines is unique in several ways regarding Islam. The Philippine Islands are predominantly Roman Catholic (82.9 percent). The country has a Muslim minority of 5 percent. However, Islam was at one point the dominant religion and has an extensive political history in its resistance to western colonialism. Today, however, the Muslim minority is mostly isolated in the Southern areas, which include Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, and Islam is mainly found among ethnic minority groups such as the Maranao, Iranun, Tausug, Yakan, Sangil, Kaagan, Kolibugan, Palawan, Molbog, and Bangsamoro. Parts of these areas are considered closed societies, and are actually off limits to outsiders.

Islamist jihad appears strongest in the form of the Moro conflict. This conflict has been ongoing since the late 1960s between the central government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.⁶ This historical and ongoing conflict serves as a foundation for current jihadist activities. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front has claimed an allegiance to ISIS, as has the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf. Aside from the inroads ISIS has made recently in Malaysia, the southern areas of the Philippines Islands have provided the most active and fertile grounds for ISIS's brand of jihad violence in Southeast Asia. Many of the Southeast Asian nations that have had fighters leave to go join an Islamist rebellion in the Middle East mainly believe the idea that the middle east region

is ground zero and have no plans to return to their home areas. Unlike these areas of Southeast Asia, the Philippines seems instead to be attracting Islamic fighters towards its geographic area. It has even been reported that Chinese Muslim Uighurs have been in the area and are training with and occasionally fighting alongside the Islamist jihadist groups there.⁷ This southern area of the Philippines seems to be the most susceptible as a staging area for further jihadist violence. A last note in relation specifically to the Philippines is that the current president, Rodrigo Duterte, has declared a hostile and violent approach to dealing with drug traffickers operating within his nation and has carried out vast numbers of extra-judicial killings of drug users, dealers, and traffickers. His rhetoric has also threatened the same policy towards terrorists, although those threats have not translated to an actionable policy as of yet.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei

The Southeast Asian nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei are predominantly Muslim, with a very small minority of other religions. It is within these particular Southeast Asian nations that a viable threat could be developed and should be continually evaluated. Making a threat assessment of this kind includes the variety of factors already discussed. One such factor is the nature, both historically and contemporary, of the jihadist struggle within these Southeast Asian nations. Historically, there has been an Islamic jihadist struggle present in Southeast Asia for some time. As far back as the 1930s, a jihadist struggle was present in the southern areas of Southeast Asia in the form of the Darul Islam Indonesia movement.⁸ This was a movement specifically established to fight against Dutch rule in Indonesia and to provide an “alternative vision of Islamic society to Indonesians.”⁹ In 1949, the Indonesian National Revolution successfully fought for independence from the Dutch Empire, and this struggle continued even after the 1949 change of government, although to a much lesser degree, as many leaders in the movement were killed or imprisoned. Time would relegate these movements

to history, and national governments became more conciliatory toward Islam to the point of now recognizing Indonesia as the largest Islamic nation on Earth. However, eventually, other Islamic militant groups moved into the area as offshoots from the Darul Islam Indonesia movement, either to fight locally or to recruit locally to fight elsewhere.

Although there has been some jihadist activity against the oppressive and authoritarian regimes that held power throughout most of Southeast Asia, the biggest incarnation of a jihadist movement was not one seeded in a localized struggle to overthrow national governments, but instead was situated around support for the resistance against Russian occupation in Afghanistan. During the 1980s, the vast majority of Southeast Asian jihadist militants traveled to fight in Afghanistan instead of in local insurgencies.¹⁰ The idea of this particular jihadist struggle was one where in the minds of local insurgents, they are supporting a jihadist fight in a geographic location (the Middle East) regarded as more central to an overall global jihadist struggle, and one which was considered to be far more important than Southeast Asian territories. This historical aspect of focusing on the Middle East and Central Asian region as ground zero for the Islamic struggle interferes with bringing the Islamic struggle home to Southeast Asia, but this sentiment is very slowly changing.

Although there has been a historical precedent of Islamic insurgencies, operations, and threats in Southeast Asia, it is of a different nature than the ideological vision and goals found in ISIS. This leads us into the next major factor to be looked at in making a threat assessment—the political interests of competing groups that may already be established. As has been seen historically, the Islamic groups that developed had very particular purposes and fought against a governmental institution that was viewed as either a colonial invader, or unsupportive of Islamic ideals and values. Since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, modern terrorism has taken on

an entirely new threat. There has been a dramatic expansion in operations on an international scale, and Southeast Asia has not been immune, as was seen most infamously in the October 2002 Bali bombings.

This terrorist attack in Bali was carried out by a group known as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which is an affiliate of al Qaeda. As in the past, Southeast Asian fighters from this group were traveling to Afghanistan to fight against the Russian occupation, and these fighters saw the Middle East and Central Asia as ground zero for the Islamic struggle. This changed in the 2000s when al Qaeda turned to international operations as it saw the continued interference of Western nations in the affairs of Islamic nations. Jemaah Islamiyah continues to be closely aligned with al Qaeda, and boasts the largest membership of any Islamic group in Southeast Asia.¹¹

In 2013, a public disagreement resulted in the splintering of the al Qaeda organization, which gave birth to ISIS. This division was created when the al Qaeda leadership disagreed with the violence against and widespread apostatizing of Muslims that members of al Qaeda in Iraq were engaged in. This splintering created a deep rivalry between JI and ISIS, leading to a diminished support of ISIS values as many more Islamic militants are aligned with JI. Further, JI maintains its vision of an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia—unlike ISIS which has defined borders in the Middle East and Central Asia that do not include Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia this clearly leads to a larger threat coming from JI than from ISIS. Indeed, JI has been responsible for the vast majority of successful and planned attacks in Southeast Asia.¹² Out of the small minority of Islamic jihadist militants residing in Southeast Asia, there is greater membership and support for this kind of anti-ISIS group, and this leads to a greater overall concern about the activities of these groups than those of ISIS.

There are at least seven pro-ISIS groups that exist in Indonesia and Malaysia—Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, Jamaah Tauhid wal Jihad,

Ring Banten, Gema Salam, Mujahidin Indonesia Barat, and FAKSI. However, these pro-ISIS groups must contend with fierce opposition from anti-ISIS groups. Aside from Jemaah Islamiyah, there is also Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia and Jamaah Anshorul Syariat. Comparatively there are more pro-ISIS groups than anti-ISIS groups, however, the anti-ISIS groups have greater numbers, support, and have been established for longer.¹³

Terrorist recruitment of foreign fighters has been mostly targeting those individuals connected in some way to people who have already been involved in jihadist groups, either through family loyalty and connections, or influenced by group rivalries. These connections are most often found in individuals joining JI. Although not exclusively, these individuals tend to be more professional-oriented and educated, whereas social media outlets are inspiring younger, more impulsive followers to join ISIS-aligned groups.¹⁴ In fact, the largest benefit that ISIS has been able to enjoy in the fertile Islamic areas of Southeast Asia is rather modest recruitment, which as a percentage of foreign fighters is far less than that found in Europe. However, more recently, as ISIS has lost ground in Syria and been driven from areas of Iraq, there has been a greater outreach effort in Southeast Asia. This recent trend includes the release of a newspaper 'al-Fatihin,' and several pro-ISIS websites which are written in the Malay language.¹⁵ This suggests that as ISIS loses sanctuary in Syria and Iraq, it will eventually be displaced to another theater to attempt to regroup, reorganize, and try to strengthen its appeal in more far-flung areas outside of its declared Islamic caliphate. Whether its vision will remain the same or will adapt to a new reality is unclear.

Connected to and interwoven within this last factor is the general Islamic sentiment of society in Southeast Asia. This sentiment is important to note, as it highlights whether or not there is an overall supportive nature within the general society towards the ISIS vision, or a rationale to bring that vision and/or fight back home. While it cannot be ignored that

up to approximately 550 individuals from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have traveled to Syria or Iraq, many of these individuals are family members of the foreign fighters, made up of women and children in a non-combative role.¹⁶ Percentage-wise, the number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq from Europe is far greater in number than those from Southeast Asia. The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have created pro-Islamic states that alleviate many of the oppressive feelings and policies that tend to give rise to anti-establishment ideologies. The general population does not experience an environment where the people feel oppressed or discriminated against, because the average governmental policies favor and support the Islamic ideals that the population wishes to have in place.

Internal policies of Southeast Asian governments are directly tied to social sentiments. While Indonesia enjoys a moderate social viewpoint and government efforts have been strong to promote such moderation, Malaysia has had an issue with this. United Malays National Organisation, which is the dominant political party in Malaysia, was originally created to promote a Malay Muslim-focused society. The current government has been propagating the view that Islamic identity is under threat from non-Muslim cultural and religious influences and groups, including other internal political groups.¹⁷ Some of these political groups are actually rival Islamic political parties. A political environment of trying to "out-Islam" one another creates a dangerous situation. This could lead to Islamic groups, the government itself, and general society becoming more and more conservative and intolerant of non-Muslim minorities. Brunei reflects the same situation as Malaysia in its leaning toward conservative Islamic ideals.

The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia initially reacted cautiously to ISIS threats in an attempt not to create the perception of anti-Islamic policies. Yet, in having prior experience in dealing with the threats of Jemaah Islamiyah, Jakarta concluded it had to

change course. Sweeping counter-terrorism efforts towards ISIS have not only been employed by law enforcement and proclaimed by the government, but also by the Islamic community as a whole. Regular statements denouncing the ideologies, activities, and behaviors of ISIS have been continually made in the media by politicians and community leaders.

It should be noted that within the ISIS organization, there is a militant unit known as Katibah Nusantara. This group is made up of Southeast Asian fighters that speak the common Malay language and was established to introduce Southeast Asian fighters to the Middle East, the Arabic language, and ideological indoctrination. The last official estimate was that Katibah Nusantara had about 100 fighters, although more recent estimates have increased this figure to about 200.¹⁸

Regarding the issue of hardened fighters returning from the Middle East, those that have traveled abroad have the mindset that the Middle East region is ground zero for the Islamic struggle. Many of the fighters that have traveled to engage in this apocalyptic battle will more likely stay and fight to the end. Couple this with the fact that ISIS is in need of fighters to be directly in Syria, Iraq, or even Libya

where the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate is centralized, and what results is that very few fighters have been returning. Those that have returned have been mostly detained by governments or are individuals who were unsuccessful in arriving on the battle front and were deported back or traveled back on their own.¹⁹ Even as there are some Southeast Asian fighters traveling to fight for ISIS, local sentiments do not lead to greater support for ISIS in a way that would result in a significant increase in local fighting and insurgencies.

So, while there is a very small population of individuals and groups with radicalized ideologies that have sympathies for and are supportive of the ISIS vision, at the moment there is very little overall support in the general sentiments of societies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Furthermore, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have been quite proactive and effective in routing out and eliminating radical Islamic activities and targeting those groups that give support to ISIS.

Regarding the fighters that are recruited from Southeast Asia, there is a distinction between those traveling to support ISIS and those traveling to support an anti-ISIS group, such as Jemaah Islamiyah



Map illustrates the geographic boundaries of the Islamic State's plan of establishing an Islamic caliphate.

and Al-Nusra. This distinction is important when considering those fighters who have traveled and are returning back to their homes. One can see that for the moment the Indonesian and Malaysian governments and mainstream society in general do not favor the ISIS vision. However, that could and is starting to change.

The last key factor in making a threat assessment is the strategic goals, interests, and capabilities of ISIS itself. The first thing to be considered is the stated goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate based on Islamic history. This vision of what constitutes the boundaries of a future Islamic caliphate strictly includes a very particular geographic area with defined boundaries, and those boundaries do not include Southeast Asia as we can see by the official map produced by ISIS depicting the intended geography of the new Islamic caliphate. This sets the stage for the main fight in those locations and diminishes the rationale to deploy resources and finances to areas in terms of physical occupation, and political and religious transformation incorporated in a future Islamic caliphate. Since the geographic boundaries of this future Islamic caliphate have been declared, ISIS will focus the majority of its efforts on those areas specifically, which leaves out Southeast Asia. This does not preclude ISIS from carrying out terrorist activities in areas outside of its declared borders. There should be a distinction between ISIS developing a formal presence in a geographic area and ISIS staging attacks to further its goals or coercing other governments to accept its legitimacy.

Another factor to consider is how well the fight is currently going. In the beginning, ISIS enjoyed huge gains, but since then it has not only been stalled in its forward movement but has lost ground, financial assets, resources, and fighters. This limits the capabilities of ISIS and forces it to focus its remaining strength on either regaining lost ground, or refocusing on another part of its intended boundary. However, this could also lead to a desperate reaction—ISIS could seek to employ traditional terrorist activities in targeting outside groups,

institutions, and nations in an effort to force those nations to rethink interfering in Muslim-majority areas or to pressure them to end military efforts abroad.

Conclusions and Evolving Security Concerns

Various factors have been identified that both diminish and contribute to any level of success that ISIS would have in expanding operations, spreading its vision, or recruiting in Southeast Asia. A difference should be noted between ISIS expanding its presence physically and simply launching attacks on targets. The latter has already been seen with the January 2016 attack in Jakarta, Indonesia, the June 28, 2016 attack outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, both being claimed by ISIS, and with several recent attacks in the Philippines. While this illustrates that the region is not entirely immune to jihadist violence by ISIS, establishing a meaningful physical presence requires far more than infiltrating an area, planning logistics, and carrying out an attack.

Factors that diminish ISIS's ability to significantly expand

- ISIS must contend with larger, more organized, and more established jihadist groups that oppose the way ISIS implements its agenda.
- Anti-ISIS groups have been successful in casting ISIS in a negative light to the general population for its brutality towards and apostatizing of other Muslims on a grand scale.
- A lack of sympathy or support from mainstream societies.
- Fierce efforts from governmental policies in security and law enforcement to combat designated terror groups.
- Limitations within ISIS's own projection capabilities and resources.

Factors that to contribute ISIS's ability to recruit and expand

- ISIS has scaled up its outreach into Southeast Asia with a printed newspaper and several websites written in the Malay language.

- The changing landscapes of internal politics in South Asian governments could create an environment where ISIS doctrinal vision could eventually take hold.
- If the governments of Malaysia and Brunei continue to become more politically conservative and intolerant, then there is more likelihood of an environment where the radical ideals of ISIS could grow and perhaps take on a more significant following and gain more support.

Factors that could help mitigate ISIS expansion in Southeast Asia

- A continued policy by Southeast Asia governments of counter-terrorist activities.
- Continued and increased cooperation and intelligence sharing between various security organizations and governments.
- An increased awareness of internet and media venues for discussion, support, and recruitment.
- Active cybersecurity operations to identify and dismantle internet websites, venues, and chatrooms.
- Active identification and prevention of extremist newspapers.

Evolving Security Concerns

- More established jihadist groups present a deeper and more long-term threat to U.S. interests in Southeast Asia than ISIS does.
- The longer that ISIS is able to continue fighting against perceived invaders or non-Muslim occupiers, the more probable it is that a newer and younger generation will be exposed to and develop a jihadist mentality.
- The more ISIS loses ground in Iraq and Syria and is displaced, the more likely foreign fighters may begin applying the ISIS vision to their own home nations.

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NOTES

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