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BLACK FLAG RISING ISIL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The article deals with unconventional security threats in Southeast Asia. The object of the research is to determine the scope and dimensions of ISIL's penetration into Southeast Asia and assess the effectiveness of some of the main policies that have been put into place to address the group's activities in this part of the world. The conclusion of the research is that ISIL has established a foothold in Malaysia, Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, the southern Philippines. Not only nationals of those three countries are known to have travelled to fight with ISIL in the Middle East, but many prominent Islamist groups and leaders in the region have pledged their allegiance to the group. Numerous jihadist suspected of plotting bombings and other acts of violence have been arrested, some of whom have subsequently been connected to the official state apparatus.

Key words: the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), caliphate, the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM), the Middle East, Southeast Asia, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT).

Although the prime focus of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been on establishing a state - a caliphate - in the Middle East, it has also sought to gain a presence beyond that area. Southeast Asia is one region that's now receiving increased attention as a potential beachhead for the group. Most concern has focused on Malaysia, Indonesia, the southern Philippines and the Malay Muslim provinces of Thailand.

Estimates of the number of Malaysians who have travelled to Syria and Iraq, to participate in the group's jihadist struggle, range from 30 to 150. A number of them have already returned home and are now playing an active role in encouraging heightened domestic militancy. Since 2013, 122 people have been detained for having some type of connection to ISIL.

Estimates of the number of Indonesians who have travelled to fight with ISIL vary, although the total could be more than 500. Especially prisons have proven to be an effective conduit for ISIL recruitment, both for disseminating the group's propaganda and for fostering support for the militant missives that it espouses. Within the country, a number of Islamist entities have also openly campaigned for ISIL, organising mass gatherings at which more than 2,000 Indonesians have expressed support for the group.

ISIL's influence in the Philippines isn't thought to be as extensive as it is in either Malaysia or Indonesia. However, there are signs that the group has sought to extend its reach there, particularly in Mindanao, where at least two rebel groups have sworn allegiance to the organisation. Arguably more relevant in terms of ISIL's threat to the Philippines is the potential for the estimated 2.5 million expatriates who live and work in the Middle East to be co-opted as a vehicle for jihadi recruitment or targeted for direct attacks.

ISIL's influence in Thailand has been marginal. Although intelligence sources believe it has tried to establish links among the separatist groups fighting in the kingdom's so-called «deep south», there's so far been no sign that those attempts have yielded results¹.

After September 11, 2001, Southeast Asia came into focus of USA antiterrorism strategy. Catching their attention was the Islamic revival in the region which began in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s, the region's complex geography and porous borders, weak states, Islamic rebellions and ethnic strife. Some observes went so far as to liken Indonesia to another Afghanistan and Abu Sayyaf to the Taliban. After U.S. military action against the Taliban, reports circulated that al-Qaeda operatives and Arabs fighting for the Taliban were fleeing to the Southeast Asia and getting involved in the ethnic conflict in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi. Other analysts feared that Southeast Asia with its weak and unregulated banking system would become a financial hub for international terrorists. In short, Southeast

¹ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 5.

Asia was proclaimed as the «second front» in the war against international terrorism¹.

Malaysia is generally regarded as the main focal point for ISIL support and influence in Southeast Asia. Estimates of the number of its citizens, who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to participate in the group's jihadist struggle, range from 30 to 150. In May 2014, a former factory worker, Ahmad Tarmini Maliki, earned the dubious honour of being the first Malaysian linked to ISIL to die as a suicide bomber, after he drove a sports utility vehicle packed with explosives into the local headquarters of an Iraqi SWAT unit near Ramadi in Anbar Province. Since then, there's been at least one more «martyr» attack, and the overall number of nationals from this particular Southeast Asian state killed while fighting for ISIL is now in the range of between 10 and 15.

While most of those who left for Syria and Iraq are thought to still be fighting in the Middle East alongside Indonesian volunteers, a few are known to have returned to Malaysia and are thought to be playing an increasingly active role in encouraging Islamist militancy in the country. According to informed commentators, at least 122 people have been arrested for having some sort of tie to ISIL since 2013. The main zones of militancy appear to include the states of Kedah and Perak as well as the capital, Kuala Lumpur, where a nascent ISIL network under the command of Murad Halimudin (aka Murad Sudin) - an ex-leader of the now defunct Kumpulan Militan Malaysia - is believed to have taken root².

One highly publicised dragnet against Sudin's cell occurred in August 2014, when he and 19 other «seasoned» jihadists were taken into custody for planning to bomb bars, discos and the prominent Carlsberg brewery in the federal administrative centre of Putrajaya. Although the alleged plot had apparently not proceeded beyond the discussion stage, law enforcement sources claimed that the people involved had bought aluminium powder (a potential explosives ingredient), had been inspired by ISIL and intended to travel to Syria and Iraq for further training³.

More recently, on 5 April 2015, authorities detained a further 17 people in Kedah and Kuala Lumpur for conspiring to kidnap the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister, the Home Minister and other high-profile figures as leverage to force the release of all ISIL prisoners and suspects held under counterterrorism laws. Later that month, another dozen alleged jihadists were intercepted on Mount Nuang in Central Selangor state with 40 kilograms of explosive material that was apparently being prepared for attacks against undisclosed government buildings, police stations and other «strategic» targets in and around the Malaysian capital⁴.

Two of those held in the April 2015 arrests were later found to be members of the Royal Malaysian Air Force who were purportedly facilitating the travel of Malaysians to the Middle East. The earlier raid in August 2014 also resulted in the arrest of uniformed personnel - two commandos, who were charged with encouraging membership in al-Baghdadi's group. These cases have generated considerable concern among security officials that ISIL's ideology is now resonating with some elements of the armed forces. Indeed, authorities in Kuala Lumpur concede that at least 71 soldiers are known to have some sort connection to the group, although what that involvement entails and whether it goes beyond passive sympathy remain unclear⁵.

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim state, and because of the past activities of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) it's the one Southeast Asia country with the most extensive experience of dealing with transborder jihadist-inspired terrorism. The nation has received considerable attention as a potential beachhead for regional ISIL extremism and, as in Malaysia, there are definite signs that the group is making decisive inroads into the polity.

The Indonesian pro-ISIS groups, prompted by the need to be united under one umbrella, have established the Jamaah Ansharut Daulat (JAD), in March 2015. JAD comprises students of Aman Abdurrahman who previously joined various groups. Indeed the key leaders of KN (Katibah Nusantara)

¹ Rüländ, Jürgen (2004). *The Nature of the Southeast Asia Security Challenges*. <http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt_papiere/R_land_Southeast_Asian_Security_Challenges_ks.pdf>.

² Gunaratna, R. (2015). *The rise of the Islamic State: terrorism's new face in Asia*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

³ Brandon, J. (2014). *Syrian and Iraqi jihadis prompt increased recruitment and activism in Southeast Asia*. Sentinel: CTC.

⁴ Gunaratna, R. (2015). *The rise of the Islamic State: terrorism's new face in Asia*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 17.

⁵ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 11.

such as Bahrum Syah and Abu Jandal are former students of Aman. JAD considers its main mission to be the facilitation of a more coordinated communication between Indonesian fighters in Syria and ISIS supporters in Indonesia¹.

Disturbingly, a leaked report from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in March 2015 profiled two Indonesian commercial airline pilots who had possibly joined ISIL in the Middle East. The first was named as Ridwan Agustin, who had flown for the Malaysian-based discount airline AirAsia and was now thought to be living in Raqqa. The second, identified as Tommy Hendratno, a former employee of the charter company Premiair as well as the national carrier Garuda, started posting extremist Islamist-related material on a Facebook account at the end of 2014. Although at the time of writing there's no firm evidence that either had been inducted into ISIL's ranks, that this may have occurred remains a matter of concern for intelligence and counterterrorism officials in several countries. Certainly, the AFP is taking the issue seriously, warning authorities in the US, the UK, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Switzerland, Germany and France that the men's access to and knowledge of aviation security and safety regimes could facilitate attacks similar to past global events involving aircraft.

Prisons have proven to be an especially effective conduit for ISIL recruitment by both disseminating the group's propaganda and fostering support for it. A strong sense of jihadist solidarity and affinity has been allowed to develop among inmates, making the penal system a hub for terrorist indoctrination. Several factors have contributed to this dysfunctional state of affairs, including corruption, overcrowding, organised violence, protection rackets, the limited available intelligence on detainees and their activities, and poorly managed, trained and paid. Even in maximum-security penitentiaries, prisoners have had a remarkable degree of latitude to not only access ISIL literature and translations but also to issue proclamations of allegiance that have found an audience among other detainees as well as the public.

A number of Indonesian Islamist entities have openly campaigned for ISIL. The largest and most vocal is the Forum of Islamic Law Activists (FAKSI), which was set up in early 2013 under the combined leadership of Tuah Febriwansyah (aka Muhammad Fachry) and Bahrum Syah, with Aman Abdurrahman acting as the spiritual mentor. The group's ostensible aim is to impress on the public the theological criticality of the current struggle in Syria, presenting it as the fulfilment of an ancient Islamic prophecy that the final battle at the end of the world will begin and end in the Levant.

Another entity that has been influential in generating grassroots support for ISIL is the Forum Pendukung Daulah Islamiyah (FPDI). Dr Amir Mahmud (a veteran of the Afghan mujahideen) founded the group on 15 July 2014 and, like FAKSI, it has staged a series of public gatherings to promote al-Baghdadi and his cause. More than 500 men attended FPDI's inaugural meeting outside the Baitu Makmur Mosque in Solo, during which they openly backed the establishment of a dedicated Islamist caliphate in the Middle East.

The country's most active terrorist group, Mujahideen Indonesia Timor (MIT), has also pledged allegiance to ISIL. Santoso (aka Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi al-Indonesi), a former field commander in JAT, leads the group. It acts as an umbrella movement for militants based in the simmering conflict zones of Poso, Palu and Bima and has been linked to numerous attacks on the police. Despite an intense crackdown on its activities, MIT continues to threaten domestic security and according to intelligence officials has a high potential to commit terrorist acts and accept fighters from the international Islamist network into its membership.

Overall, more than 2,000 Indonesians are thought to have declared support for ISIL. While many of these individuals will probably neither seek to go to Syria or Iraq nor propagate violence, the figure is indicative of the residual appeal that the idea of a caliphate can have in a devout public. As with Malaysia, there are fears that at least some of these individuals will seek to carry out attacks in the group's name. Those concerns received a significant fillip in March 2015, when a homemade chlorine bomb consisting of several bottles and a timer was discovered at the ITC Depok shopping mall in Jakarta. Although no explosion occurred, the device involved was very similar to one used by ISIL against Kurdish forces in Iraq three months earlier, and the attack itself was the first time that such a strike had been attempted in Indonesia. Another potential target that has received attention is the Borobudur Temple in Java, a major tourist attraction and the world's largest Buddhist monument. An ISIL-linked Facebook page in August 2014 called for the site to be demolished by Islamic caliphate mujahideen, in the same manner as Taliban fighters destroyed the statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan in March 2001.

¹ Arianti, V and Jasminder, S. ISIS' Southeast Asia Unit: Raising the Security Threat. <<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15220-isis-southeast-asia-unit-raising-the-security-threat/#.Vng4vbaLSt8>>.

While ISIL's influence in the **Philippines** isn't thought to be as extensive as in Malaysia or Indonesia, there are definite indications that the group has sought to extend its reach to the country, particularly the Muslim majority islands of the south. In July 2014, an Australian-born Christian convert to Islam and regular attendee of the al-Risalah salafi centre in Sydney, Musa Ceratino, was arrested in Cebu City for inciting terrorism on the internet and urging Filipinos to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq. More disturbing have been several reported incidents of ISIL elements seeking to recruit sympathisers and followers from schools and universities in Mindanao, purportedly promising to pay 7,000 Philippine pesos (A\$209) as a joining bonus.

The dominant rebel group in the area, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has vociferously denounced al-Baghdadi and his movement. Despite MILF's firm rejection of al-Baghdadi, at least some Filipinos are thought to have left for the Middle East to fight for his cause. In August 2014, leaked government documents claimed that as many as 200 nationals had infiltrated Iraq to undergo military training with ISIL, warning that many of these individuals intended to return to the Philippines to wage jihad as hardened and experienced Islamists.

Perhaps a somewhat more concrete indicator of ISIL's impact in the Philippines is pledges of support that have been made by at least two rebel entities: the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

Of the four main countries of concern in Southeast Asia, **Thailand** is the one where ISIL's influence is the least prominent. Although intelligence sources believe the group has tried to establish links in the loosely organized milieu of separatist groups fighting in Yala, Pattani and Narithiwat but no sign that these attempts have yielded any concrete results in either operational or logistical terms¹.

Indeed, the US State Department's Country reports on terrorism 2014 specifically stated: «There was no direct evidence of ... linkages between ethno-nationalist Malay Muslim insurgent groups in southern Thailand and ISIL or other international terrorist networks ... While Thai officials have long expressed concern that transnational terrorist groups could establish links with southern Thailand-based groups, there have been no indications that transnational terrorist groups were directly involved in the violence in the south, and there was no evidence of direct operational links between southern Thai insurgent groups and regional terrorist networks².

Responding to ISIL

Malaysia has introduced various measures to counter ISIL activities. On 1 July 2003 was officially launched the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) which serves as a leading centre in the Southeast Asia region to train and enhance the capacity of enforcement, security and government officials on counter-terrorism issues in collaboration with established think-tank institutions and international organisations³.

On 7 April 2015 the Malaysian government was passed an anti-terrorism law The Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (Malay: Akta Pencegahan Keganasan 2015, abbreviated POTA). It enables the Malaysian authorities to detain terror suspects without trial for a period of two years. POTA also does not allow any judicial reviews of detentions. Instead, detentions will be reviewed by a special Prevention of Terrorism Board. The POTA bill has been criticised by opposition elements as a reincarnation of the former Internal Security Act, which was revoked in 2012⁴.

Another organisation that's been highly active in the war of ideas is the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM) which was established as an initiative of Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib in April 2012. The group has spearheaded a number of events aimed at building a network of non-traditional civil-society stakeholders to hone and disseminate credible counter-narratives to ISIL's ideology, including roundtables, workshops, university and college outreach programs and at least one information technology conference⁵.

¹ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 12-14.

² *State Department 2015. Country reports on terrorism 2014*, Bureau of Counterterrorism, Department of State, Washington DC, June. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/239631.pdf>>.

³ The Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT)/ The Ministry of foreign affair of Malaysia. <<http://www.searcct.gov.my/about-searcct/introduction>>.

⁴ The Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (Act 769 Laws of Malaysia). <[http://www.federalgazette.agc.gov.my/outputaktap/aktaBI_20150604_Act769\(BI\).pdf](http://www.federalgazette.agc.gov.my/outputaktap/aktaBI_20150604_Act769(BI).pdf)>.

⁵ The Global Movement of Moderates. The Ministry of foreign affair of Malaysia. <<http://malaysiaunsc.kln.gov.my/>>

In order to minimise the potential for Malaysia becoming a finance hub for ISIL (and other militant groups), the parliament passed an amendment to the country's 2001 Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing and Proceeds of Unlawful Activities Act, with effect from 1 September 2015¹. The modification significantly widens the government's investigation and enforcement authority to track and freeze monies that directly or indirectly support extremist militant activity, in line with standards specified by the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering.

At the forefront of the battle against terrorism are specialised military, law enforcement, and civil defence units, namely: 11th Uniform Squadron Rejimen Gerak Khas, Alpha Platoon of PASKAL, Flight Hostage Rescue Team PASKAU, Counter-Revolutionary Warfare 69 Commando of PGK, Special Actions Unit of PGK, Marine Combat Unit, Rapid Actions Troop, Special Task And Rescue, Special Tactical Group².

The government has also moved to promote anti-ISIL messaging. In October 2014, the Malaysian Islamic Development Authority, which oversees most of the country's mosques and Muslim clerics, issued a fatwa against al-Baghdadi's self-styled caliphate, labelling it illegal under sharia law and denying the status of «martyr» to those who die fighting for it. The authority has since sought to ensure that Friday sermons have dedicated sessions that educate Muslims on the peaceful meaning of jihad and explaining why those who seek to subvert it for their own deviant causes can't be trusted as «true» representatives of the Islamic faith³.

Indonesia has reacted more forcefully to the appearance of ISIL than it has to any other militant entity in its history. Then President Susilio Bambang Yudhoyono officially banned the group in August 2014, making it a crime for any person to belong to it or directly support its operations. The current administration of Joko «Jokowi» Widodo has stepped up efforts to prevent nationals going abroad to join ISIL and in January 2015, Tedjo Edhy Purdjanto, the Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, announced that he would seek to revoke the passport of anyone who had fought for the movement in the Middle East or had attempted to do so. The government has complemented these moves by instituting closer and stricter surveillance of Indonesians already known to be in Syria, Iraq and Turkey, particularly those who may be seeking to return home⁴.

On 30 June 2003 Indonesia was launched Special Detachment 88. It's an Indonesian Special Forces counter-terrorism squad, and part of the Indonesian National Police which is funded, equipped, and trained by the United States and Australia. The unit has worked with considerable success against the jihadi terrorist cells linked to Central Java - based Islamist movement Jemaah Islamiyah to be home to radical networks, such as Poso, Palu, Bima, Ambon and East and Central Java⁵.

In June 2015 Indonesia created a new joint special operations command, within the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI - the armed forces). The squad, which is based in Sentul, West Java, has a complement of 81 highly trained and experienced personnel drawn from the army, the navy's Special Operations Unit and the air force's Bravo 90 Team. The force has been designed to be small and «lean» to facilitate swift deployment and can be mobilized at short notice, either at the direct request of Special Detachment-88 or by presidential order⁶.

Indonesia also launched an Interdepartmental National Anti-terrorism Agency (BNPT), which has made significant progress in countering terrorism in the country and the region. The Indonesian government also developed a framework on combating terrorism based on six principals, which outline the supremacy of the law, indiscriminate, independence, democracy and participation⁷.

index.php/malaysia-at-the-uncs/malaysia-s-commitment/global-movement-of-moderates-gmm.

¹ Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing and Proceeds of Unlawful Activities Act 2001 (Act 613 Laws of Malaysia). <http://www.bnm.gov.my/index.php?ch=en_legislation&pg=en_legislation_act&ac=879>.

² Counter-terrorism in Malaysia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-terrorism_in_Malaysia>.

³ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 19.

⁴ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 17.

⁵ Special Detachment 88. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detachment_88>.

⁶ Chalk, P. (2015). *Black flag rising ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australia: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 17.

⁷ Van den Heric, L., Schrijver, N. (2013). *Counter-Terrorism Strategies in a Fragmented International Legal Orders*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 60.

Jakarta has also emphasized hearts-and-minds endeavors to counter ISIL. The government has consistently stressed that ISIL's agenda is contrary to the unitary state ideology of Pancasila, asserting that it represents a direct threat to the country's underlying cultural and religious diversity. Indonesia has also increasingly exhorted community leaders, Muslim elders and Islamic clerics to speak out against the extremist missives of al-Baghdadi.

Efforts have also been made to track Islamic websites and social media chat rooms and shut down those considered to contain radical material. On 30 March 2015, the National Anti-terrorism Agency drew up a list of 22 electronic media outlets that were deemed to be detrimental to national security and were subsequently blocked by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.

Conclusion. One of the biggest unconventional security issues for Southeast Asia nowadays is ISIL's penetration into the region. The three countries most seriously affected by ISIL's influence - Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines - have all taken rigorous steps to address the group's activities. Despite the authorities of Malaysia and Indonesia have introduced various measures to combat ISIL activities, such as the creation of a special center for counter terrorism, joint special operations command, passed special antiterrorism law, promoted anti-ISIL messaging, monitored the web sites, the problem of terrorism still exists and requires joint efforts of Southeast Asian's countries to deal with this problem. However both Malaysia and Indonesia are still concerned whether their approach as outlined above is effective against this unconventional terrorism.

– In Malaysia, there's been huge criticism towards the «Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015» as a significant and unjustified departure from the present legal process. Some have interpreted this as an attempt to silence legitimate opponents of the government and some kind of instrument to guaranty the political «status quo» for the ruling coalition and concern remains over the possible implications of the government's deliberate politicization of Islam.

– In Indonesia, problems with radicalization and recruitment in prisons as well as the largely unchecked and unregulated proliferation of Islamist literature loom so does the potential remilitarization of domestic terrorism.

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