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Uyghurs look to Indonesia for terror guidance

By Zachary Abuza

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In mid-September, Indonesian authorities arrested four Uyghurs from western China along with four local terrorism suspects on Central Sulawesi. The Uyghurs had traveled on forged Turkish passports made in Thailand and landed in Sulawesi along a circuitous route encompassing Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

They were immediately ascribed to have ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In part, this is due to the fact that Turkey has served as a gateway for Southeast Asians and other foreigners to join ISIS's fighting ranks. With the collective concern about an estimated 200-300 Southeast Asians believed to be fighting in Iraq and Syria with ISIS and the al-Qaeda linked al Nusra Front, regional authorities are jumping to sometimes rash conclusions.

Indonesian investigators have since largely discounted that the apprehended Uyghurs or local suspects have ties to ISIS. The four appear instead to have been trying to make contact with the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), a splinter group from the old Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) led by Santoso, one of Indonesia's most wanted terrorism suspects.

MIT has recently been linked to a spate of attacks on policemen in Eastern Indonesia and is believed to be trying to reconstitute JI's previous terror network. JI, once recognized as Southeast

Asia's most lethal terror organization, has been decimated in recent years by successful police-led, foreign-backed counterterrorism operations that have resulted in the capture or killing of many of the group's leaders.

The four Indonesian suspects apprehended in Central Sulawesi are all thought to have links with MIT, now viewed as an umbrella group for Indonesian militants. Six more MIT suspects were arrested and one killed in a raid in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara, on September 21. In retaliation, MIT members gruesomely beheaded a man suspected of being a police informant. On October 7, MIT militants attacked a mobile brigade unit with IEDs and small arms following the arrest of four more of its operatives.

The MIT is largely based in the Poso area of Central Sulawesi, the scene of horrific sectarian violence in 1999-2001. Poso has been at the center of debates within the Indonesian jihadist community pitting those who want to focus on the "near enemy", viewed broadly as the Indonesian secular state, and create a pure Islamic base from which to expand and those who instead favor an Al Qaeda-based approach of targeting the "far enemy", or Western states that support what they view as apostate regimes in the Muslim world.

Indonesian counterterrorism officials believe that the four Uyghurs were simply in Indonesia in order to receive training in IED construction and paramilitary operations that could be used in their campaign against state authorities in China. Chinese officials continue to assert, without providing much evidence, that a growing number of Uyghurs are now seeking training with ISIS.

On September 19, Indonesian authorities charged the four under counter-terrorism laws. It is unclear whether China has requested their extradition, though it is likely. In the past, China has successfully pressured Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam for the return of Uyghurs who Beijing suspected of being involved in separatist activities in western China. Malaysia is expected to come under similar pressure from Beijing with the October 3 detention of 155 illegal Uyghur migrants.

Discriminatory practices

The Indonesian government may face domestic pressure not to extradite them due to China's hard-line policies in Xinjiang that have all but criminalized the practice of Islam. These policies have included recent bans on veils and hijabs, forced shavings of men, bans on Ramadan fasting, restrictions on Friday prayers, bans on private madrassas, enforcement of strict birth control laws, limitations on the Uyghur language, as well as financial incentives for mixed marriages.

The Chinese government has fueled resentment among the estimated 10 million Uyghurs in China who are increasingly turning to violence in response to Beijing's draconian policies. Beijing's suppressive "Strike Hard" campaign has led to the arrest of many hundreds of Uyghurs, including a respected and anti-independence academic who was recently sentenced to life in prison and death sentences and/or execution orders for at least 24 others so far this year.

There is a logic for Uyghurs to pursue such training in Indonesia. There has been a steady increase in both the number and brutality of attacks by Uyghur separatists in the past year.

Beyond a series of public demonstrations that have turned violent, there have also been a number of bold attacks that have escalated violence and government counter-measures, including:

- On October 28, 2013, Uyghur separatists crashed a car in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, killing five and wounding 38.
- On March 2, 2014, 29 people were killed and 143 wounded when knife wielding assailants struck in Kunming's train station.
- In late April, a car bomb at the Urumuqi train station killed three and wounded 79 during President Xi Jinping's visit to the restive province.
- On May 23, assailants threw IEDs out of two SUVs which they then crashed into a crowded market in Urumuqi, killing 31 and wounding 94.
- On August 1, a pro-Beijing Uyghur Imam was stabbed to death in Kashgar.
- On September 22, three bombs killed two and wounded nearly two dozen in Luntai, Xinjiang.

While these attacks have been bloody and struck fear among a wide cross section of Chinese citizens, they have been one-offs and sporadic. What the Uyghur separatists have been unable to achieve so far is a regular campaign of bombings or a sustained low-level insurgency.

The current global focus is on the threat of ISIS and the group's reach into Southeast Asia. But there is a patchwork of regional Islamist groups that are also able to provide assistance and training to China's increasingly violent Uyghur separatists without being caught in the crosshairs of a major international conflict - one that could alienate potential supporters in the West.

There is, however, a potential counterterrorism silver lining. As Uyghur separatists become more transnational, it could force Beijing's security services to reach out to their regional counterparts in the region. China's mostly ham-fisted "Strike Hard" campaign has only led to escalating violence. Since the 9/11 attacks in the United States, security services across Southeast Asia have done a comparatively good job in uprooting regional terror groups or negotiating political solutions with secessionist rebels.

Those achievements have largely come through the professionalization of regional security services, greater commitment to international cooperation, improved intelligence gathering, empowerment of moderates, and legal reforms. It is evident to most apart from China's leadership that their current draconian counterterrorism strategy is only fueling more Uyghur radicalism and regional terror group linkages.