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http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-02-121114.html

Premonitions of a militant homecoming

By David Hamon and S James Ahn

11/12/2014

For many Westerners, violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) embody brutal and puritanical zealotry capable of eliciting society's deepest fears and carrying out the worst human atrocities in the name of an ideology or belief. It is difficult to understand how a group with such extreme messages and practices could attract those besides likeminded hardliners, much less those beyond the group's immediate center of operations in the Middle East.

According to some intelligence estimates, however, ISIS militants come from 80 countries, and they join the ranks of 15,000 or more foreign fighters within Iraq and Syria. Fighters come from several countries in Asia with predominately Muslim populations and where extremist groups that pledge allegiance to ISIS train recruits - particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, and parts of the Philippines.

These trainees eventually join ISIS forces in the Middle East, or in some cases carry out acts of terrorism in Asia. Recent estimates by both unofficial reports and governments in the region indicate that up to 200 Indonesians, 40 Malaysians, 100 Filipinos, 150 Australians, and a "handful" of Singaporeans may have joined ISIS in Iraq or Syria. These figures do not account for militants who may have traveled to Iraq or Syria indirectly through Turkey or by other means.

ISIS allures Southeast Asians ISIS's message is not only reaching jihadi ideologues and sympathizers in the Middle East, but is also taking root and establishing a base of adherents in the Asia-Pacific. ISIS's success appears to have galvanized jihadi activity among certain groups, and, to a degree, its message also seems to unify them. In July, the Jemaah Islamiyah network pledged allegiance to ISIS and is reportedly providing financial support to the group.

Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, another jihadi group in Indonesia, also pledged its support to ISIS, as did other groups such as the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, the newly formed group Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters in the Philippines.

Gavin Greenwood, a security analyst with Allan & Associates in Hong Kong, warns of the growing popularity of ISIS in the region: "ISIS's success to date has and no doubt will continue to attract recruits to the movement with any survivors to what may be years of fighting from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand."

The international community has taken measures to impede ISIS recruitment. Most notably, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2170 condemning violent extremism and underscoring the need to discourage travel to Syria and Iraq.

The European Union has begun stepping up efforts to coordinate counterterrorism activities and is considering the use of tools such as the Schengen Information System and a Passenger Names Record to flag terrorist activity. The EU has also been in dialogue with major social media providers, such as Twitter and Facebook, in search of ways to curb the effectiveness of ISIS messaging across social media platforms.

Meanwhile, the United States is leading a global coalition of more than 60 partner countries to degrade and defeat ISIS; these countries include Canada, South Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and many others. Each country has a role in the global effort, but some leaders, such as Malaysia's Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, criticize the coalition for lacking effectiveness, and this month he called for more effective Southeast Asian cooperation to counter ISIS and extremism in the region.

Altogether, such international efforts signal important messages to would-be terrorists and may serve as initial, short-term impediments that either block or discourage individuals from supporting or joining groups like ISIS. However, according to some security analysts and government officials, the real long-term threat to and concern for Asia lies beyond the recruitment of militants who aid and abet ISIS operations across Iraq and Syria.

When militants return home

From the perspective of Asian countries, ISIS militants pose a greater threat when they eventually return home than when they are trained and recruited to fight in the Middle East. Militants who spend time in the center of ISIS activity among fellow violent extremists may return with their radical ideas endorsed, and they would bring the experience and the capacity to train others to carry out acts of terrorism.

Upon their return, they may also revive and inspire other militant groups to act on their radical beliefs. A report published in September underscored this concern for the NATO countries: "Officials and counterterrorism experts fear that many of these individuals will return espousing an anti-West, anti-Semitic ideology and desire to 'bring the fight home' after having spent time amongst extremists groups."

Speaking frankly of the same unease in Asia, the head of Indonesia's National Counter-Terrorism Agency Ansyaad Mbai stated, "Our main concern remains what those who fight there will do when they return." Todd Elliott, a terrorism analyst, echoed the sentiment, saying, "I don't think there is an immediate threat of jihadists returning and immediately using any skills they have to launch a terrorist attack, but the fact that they have skills and they're available and they can pass them on to younger jihadists and other groups, that's where the risk lies."

Indonesia's former Deputy Chief of Badan Intelijen Negara, the state intelligence agency, reiterated these views and disturbingly warned, "They will return to their homes across the world, repeating what happened when fighters in Afghanistan returned: a new wave of international terrorism will likely recur."

Unfortunately, the first instances of this blowback have already occurred in the NATO countries, and may be a portent of what lies ahead for Asia:

Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old French national, returned home in March 2014 after a year of fighting in Syria with the Islamic State. In May, he opened fire at a Jewish museum in Belgium, killing three people. At least two other attacks involving returning fighters have been uncovered in NATO member countries.

Although some governments in Asia are cracking down on ISIS-related activities, deeper, far-reaching measures and planning are required to adequately counter and prepare for the return of an evolved and energized class of extremists in Southeast Asia. Returning militants will not only consist of battle-hardened fighters, but may also include engineers, logisticians, propagandists with social media acumen, and others whose collective abilities have the potential to cause serious harm in the region in unforeseen ways.

Beyond guns and bombs, militants with these campaign-hardened skills may prove more effective at undermining or destabilizing governments; disrupting aid and development programs; disrupting economic activity and financial institutions; and in some cases spreading their general influence through subtler propaganda. Disturbingly, as the world's best-resourced terrorist organization, ISIS seems closer to achieving its anti-Western objectives than any other extremist organization has before.

In light of ISIS's success in the Middle East, its momentum, and its burgeoning base of support in Southeast Asian countries where terrorist groups already reside, ISIS militants returning to Asia after serving in Iraq or Syria could easily find channels through which ISIS-like extremism can take root and flourish. In the short term, the region may experience increasingly violent acts of terrorism, which may also affect the United States and its interests.

The US has considerable business, cultural, education, defense, and development programs and presence across the region. Related personnel, offices, vehicles, and other assets may be vulnerable to a direct attack. In the long term, Southeast Asia could become a major hotbed of extremist activity in direct opposition to US interests. This would pose a significant and persistent threat not just to the region, but also to the United States and its tireless mission to counter and reduce global terrorism.

Before it is too late to effectively prevent returning militants from rejoining and reinforcing radical groups in the region, effective counterterrorism measures should be implemented and coordinated across countries in Southeast Asia and among interested stakeholders, including the United States. The US and the global coalition it leads should take assertive steps now to support the region in anticipating these threats.

Such support might include sharing intelligence information, providing specialized training in counterterrorist operations, developing contingency plans for stopping threats before they materialize, and assuring friends and partners that the United States is committed to preventing radical extremists from gaining more influence and capabilities in Southeast Asia.

Additionally, the US should begin work now to aid Asian countries on the political level to delegitimize extreme ideology, the kind emanating from social media. The time to develop and execute a counter-information strategy is not during an attack.