



THE IMPACT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN ASIA

Policy Report
February 2015

Ahmed S. Hashim

RSiS
Nanyang Technological University

S. RAJARATNAM
SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

Policy Report
**THE IMPACT
OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN ASIA**

Ahmed S. Hashim

February 2015

**Military Studies Programme,
Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS),
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS),
Nanyang Technological University (NTU),
Singapore**



ASIA

0 miles 250 500 750 1,000 miles

©ACADEMIA MAPS, GEOATLAS®
 COPYRIGHT 2012. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

LEGEND	
CHINA	COUNTRY
TOKYO	FED. CAPITAL
Mumbai	LARGE CITY
Xi'ning	CITY
—	MAIN ROAD
—	INT'L BORDER
—	STATE BORDER
—	MOUNTAIN
—	RIVER
—	LAKE
—	DRY SALT LAKE
—	SALT LAKE

Background: A Resurgence of Transnational Terrorism in Asia?

The dramatic successes of the Salafi-Jihadist terrorist movement, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its creation, the Islamic State (IS) in the far western part of Asia known as the Middle East (or Southwest Asia) stunned the world in mid-2014. These successes were facilitated by the presence of motivated and fanatical foreign fighters from Europe and from Asia and by the tactical alliance with former Iraqi insurgents and former members of the Ba'hist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Asian governments have become worried by the potential threat posed by the Islamic State. Governments uncovered recruitment drives for the so-called jihad in Syria and Iraq, and arrested dozens of people either hoping to go on the jihad¹, engaging in facilitating recruitment, exhorting donations, or conspiring to blow up infrastructure in support of the jihad. Some analysts have claimed that the number of Asians from all parts of the continent outside of the Middle East (i.e. South Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia) involved in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq on the jihadists' side could be as high as 1,000. The growing reach of ISIS/IS has been driven in part by social

media and could pose a security threat in the coming months as its adherents in Asia turn to it as an alternative to the home-grown groups whose prestige and capabilities have been degraded.²

Is Asia facing the spectre of renewed terrorism inspired largely by trans-national terrorist groups elsewhere? This is a question that many in the various sub-regions of the continent are asking themselves as 2014 came to an end. Asians participated in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan between 1980 and 1988. Those who survived returned to their homes with pride and an inflated sense of their importance. Over a decade ago, many militant Islamist groups in Asia viewed the Al-Qaida (AQ) attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 positively.

Militant groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Abu Sayyaf (AS) in Southeast Asia sought to mimic AQ by launching daring and bloody attacks within their own territories. Jemaah Islamiyah, which set up cells throughout Southeast Asia had a short 12-year career, but it was a violent one.³ Created by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and

¹ The literature on ISIS and IS is vast and still mainly journalistic. Many of these are very good and informative. However, for more details on the origins and evolution of ISIS and IS, a number of detailed analyses are coming out, including: Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State: From Al Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.XXI, No.4 (Winter 2014), pp.69-83; Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, (November 2014).

² Ted Regencia, "Islamic State's support spreads into Asia," *McClatchy – Tribune Business News*, July 19, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1545998895?accountid=12665>

³ The literature on JI is vast. I have relied on the following for this report: Justin Hastings, "Geography, Globalization, and Terrorism: The Plots of Jemaah Islamiyah," *Security Studies*, Vol.17, No.3 (2008), pp.505-530; Gillian Oka, "Jemaah Islamiyah's Fifth Phase: The Many Faces of a Terrorist Group," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.33, No.11 (2010), pp.989-1018.

Abdullah Sungkar, members of the Islamist movement Darul Islam, the two believed that the JI should wage a jihad against Indonesia in order to set up an Islamic state. Though they did not limit themselves ideologically to Indonesia but to all of Southeast Asia, it was Indonesia, in particular, that suffered the most at the hands of the JI. Over the course of a decade, JI conducted five major terrorist assaults in the country, beginning with the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings that killed more than 200 people of whom 88 were Australian tourists. This was followed by well-executed attacks orchestrated against Western hotels and embassies between 2003 and 2005. There was a gap in attacks until 2009, when assaults on two U.S. hotel chains in Jakarta showed that the JI still had teeth. JI was also infamous for its attacks on Churches and Christian priests and its participation in inter-communal strife between Muslims and Christians in Sulawesi.⁴

Many observers began to refer to Southeast Asia as the “second front” — after the greater Middle East — in the global war against terror. By the mid-2000s, the militants had over-reached themselves: plots were uncovered and thwarted, terrorist leaders were killed or apprehended and put on trial, security and intelligence services got better, and bilateral and multilateral cooperation

between states improved. Asia, it seemed, had dodged a bullet. In 2014, a new terrorist scourge in the shape of ISIS seems to be having an impact in Asia in general, and once again, Southeast Asian countries have been thoroughly disconcerted by the presence of relatively significant numbers of their citizens in the ranks of ISIS/IS and other jihadist groups.

The purpose of this report is two-fold. First, it intends to assess the current and future impact of ISIS/IS on Asia beyond the Middle East. While there will be some discussion of the situation in South Asia and Central Asia, the focus will be on Southeast Asia and Australia. Second, it will assess the danger as objectively as possible. While we should not underestimate the potential dangers posed by alarming levels of support for IS in the home countries, by the ability of would-be jihadists to travel overseas, and by the potential impact of returnees from the jihad, we should not overestimate the impact of ISIS and IS in the region either. Certainly the phenomenon of ISIS and IS pose challenges for Asia beyond the Middle East (including in Europe and North America), but the obstacles facing a “second wave” of terror in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, need to be laid out.

⁴ “How the Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates,” Indonesia Backgrounder, International Crisis Group, Report N0.43 (December 2002), p.5.

⁵ See “Terror in South-East Asia: The elusive enemy,” *The Economist*, August 2002; Andrew Tan, “Southeast Asia as the ‘Second Front’ in the War Against Terrorism: Evaluating Threat and Responses,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.15, No.2 (Summer 2003), pp.112-138.



AQ and ISIS/IS Rivalry in the Hearts and Minds of Muslims in the Indian Sub-continent

South Asia — defined here as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan — is home to half a billion Muslims. Some analysts and government observers are concerned that ISIS/IS will make inroads into South Asia; others are not so sure and argue that while it may have sympathisers there is still a long way to go before it manifests itself physically in an operational capacity, and even that may never happen.⁶ In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Islamic State would be entering an arena already replete with large numbers of empowered and well-equipped extremist groups that may not take too kindly to its entry into their domain. Despite the disdain with which AQ is being increasingly seen by younger and more disgruntled Sunni youth, AQ has a considerable amount of support in Afghanistan and Pakistan because of long historical links going back

to the Soviet-Afghan War. On the other hand, despite the tenuousness of solid and accurate information, some of the more militant groups in both countries may have either declared support for IS against AQ or split from the parent group and created pro-IS splinter groups.

Afghanistan has suffered from rampant violence for over three decades. Its future following the withdrawal of foreign military forces helping the Kabul government fighting the resilient Taliban insurgents remains tenuous at best. The government's control over the country is weak. The capabilities of the Afghan military and security forces against the Taliban insurgents is questionable, and the Taliban themselves — despite their decentralised nature and factionalism — have managed to bring large parts of the country under their control. This is the kind of uncertain environment that IS likes and would move into if given the opportunity. Reports out of Afghanistan claim that IS sympathisers — some of them former Taliban commanders — have begun to recruit actively on behalf of the 'caliphate' in Helmand province in the southern part of the country. This brazen entry into Taliban territory has sparked armed clashes between local Taliban units and the IS sympathisers. Given the strength of the Taliban in Helmand, it is not clear how much traction IS sympathisers will gain in Afghanistan.

Deadly jihadist groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has been in the doldrums in recent months due to pressure mounted by the Pakistani military and due to intense factionalism and leadership rivalries, could team up with ISIS in order to revitalise themselves. In mid-December 2014, the TTP committed a deadly and horrific massacre of school children at an army school in Peshawar to exact revenge for the Pakistani

⁶ See "Afghanistan/Pakistan: Islamic State Not in South Asia, but Supporters Carry the Baton," Asia News Monitor, October 07, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1590706884?accountid=12665>

military's offensive against them and to show their ruthlessness and determination. This action shows that it is cut of the same cloth as ISIS. Nonetheless, for the TTP to defect from AQ and recognise the Islamic State, would be a big step and fraught with danger. AQ is still a recognised and well thought of organisation among extremists in Pakistan with whom it has established close links — the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. the TTP and other Pakistani Taliban factions claim fealty (bay'ah) to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the head of the Afghan Taliban, whom they refer to as amir al-mumineen or commander of the faithful. What benefit would the TTP gain by switching allegiance? The TTP derives its legitimacy from its long association with the Afghan Taliban and common ideological backgrounds. Should the TTP break with AQ and the Afghan Taliban — which is associated with AQ — it would transform itself into an outsider and possibly become the focus of other extremist groups' wrath. The Islamic State would not be in a position to help it. Finally, even if elements within the TTP favour joining the Islamic State, the fractious organisation is in no position to make such a major decision right now due to leadership divisions.⁷

All of the above factors do not preclude the possibility of elements within the TTP splitting from the main body and declaring support for the Islamic State. What makes the TTP potentially attractive to IS is its track record of deadly attacks and the fact that it is thoroughly anti-Shia, having targeted Shias in Karachi and in the Kurram Agency. Nonetheless, defections are not unusual; in the summer of 2014 several TTP members of the Mehsud clan — a core element of the organisation — decamped because a non-

Mehsud had become the TTP leader. In this context, in August the TTP suffered yet another split when a group known as Jamaat-e-Ahrar, which was ostensibly inspired by the successes of ISIS, broke off on its own.⁸ In the final analysis, IS may not need the TTP and its associated problems. Pakistan is replete with deadly extremist splinter groups (eg. Sepah-e-Sahaba, aka Ahl-al-Sunna wa-al-Jamaat) that might feel more empowered if they linked with the IS, and their anti-Shia credentials are not any less than those of the TTP. Moreover, they are also known to attack Sunnis who do not share their view of the world.⁹

Both India and Bangladesh have been spared to some extent from terrorist violence of the scale that afflicts the other two South Asian countries. However, both AQ and IS have begun to recognise the alleged potential that lies in India's large Sunni Muslim population, which has generally been immune to the siren song of the radicals despite the fact that India's Muslims "have suffered from relative deprivation, are sometimes suspected of harbouring loyalty to Pakistan, and have been the victims of communal violence over the years."¹⁰ Nonetheless, despite the emergence of what can be called "Indian jihadism", Indian Muslims have not been inclined to trans-national jihadist sentiment nor have they mobilised to confront the problems they allegedly face at the hands of the Indian state and the majority Hindu population.

The relative quiescence of India's vast pool of Muslims (Sunnis) is what the extremists wish to change. Two years ago, Ayman al-Zawahiri initiated the process of trying to mobilise Indian Muslims for AQ. The

⁷ See Daud Khattak, "Splits in the Pakistani Taliban," http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/03/splits_in_the_...;

⁸ Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud and Declan Walsh, "Hard-Line Splinter Group, Galvanized by ISIS, Emerges From Pakistani Taliban," *New York Times*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/asia/hard-line-splinter>

⁹ Arif Rafiq, "Will the Islamic State Spread its Tentacles to Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, July 28, 2014 <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/will-the-islamic-state-spread-its-tentacles-in-Pakistan/>

process began before the emergence of ISIS as a rival to AQ. It was only in 2014, however, that Ayman al-Zawahiri declared the establishment of an AQ Indian-affiliate known as al-Qaida in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) or al-Qaida fi Bilad al-Hind (AQAH) under Maulana Esam Umar. This growing interest in India's Sunni Muslim population was reinforced in al-Qaida's first English-language magazine, *Resurgence*. In an article titled "The Future of Muslims in India," Maulana Esam Umar wrote: "the time has come for the Muslims of India to play a proactive role in the Jihad in Afghanistan and benefit from the experience of forty years of the Jihad so that they may build a better future for coming generations." The article went on to declare that the Muslims of India are discriminated against and suffer from humiliation at the hands of the Hindus.¹¹

IS has also moved to reach out to Indian Muslims; it makes use of local languages such as Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali to attract recruits, sympathisers and people with needed skills. However, now that the Islamic State has recognised the value of mobilising Indian Sunnis on their side, a rivalry has emerged between AQ and IS for the hearts and minds of India's Sunnis.¹² For both sides, winning the hearts and minds of the large Sunni population in India is important strategically and ideologically; India will be the battleground between the forces of Islam and infidels just as Khorasan — Afghanistan,

Iran and Pakistan — before the final battle in the Middle East between the forces of good and evil. India is also very much part of the rivalry between AQ and IS, and this could have serious security implications for the sub-continent. It would not be far-fetched for both or either group to promote as much tension as possible between neighbouring India and Pakistan. Moreover, given the immense hostility that jihadi militants have for the Shia branch of Islam, any significant radicalisation of elements of the Sunni Indian population could lead to intra-sectarian violence in India among Muslims. Sunni extremists have already targeted Pakistani Shia over the years. India does not need this on top of the existing Hindu-Muslim hostility—a factor that already affects relations with Pakistan. Bangladesh, a poverty-stricken country with no end to problems, was disconcerted by the fact that ISIS/IS influence seemed to have reached it. On 18 September, police arrested one Abdullah al-Tasnim, the so-called emir of Jamaat al-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) along with six other members for acts contrary to the security of the state. These ranged from accusations of seeking to travel to join the foreign fighter contingent in Syria to planning attacks against government installations and fomenting assassination plots against VIPs. In late September 2014, police in Dhaka, the capital, arrested a 24-year old U.K. citizen of Bangladeshi origin who they accused of coming over to recruit people to go fight in Syria.¹³

¹⁰ Stephen Tankel, "Indian Jihadism: The Evolving Threat," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.37, No.7 (2014), p.570.

¹¹ See Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Regain lost glory, al Qaeda tells Indian Muslims," *Hindustan Times*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.>

¹² Sadanand Dhume, "The ISIS Siren Call to India's Muslims; In its appeal and imagery, ISIS is a bigger threat to India than al Qaeda," *Wall Street Journal*, September 04, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1559878374?>

¹³ The literature on the Xinjiang political situation is now quite extensive and I have relied on the following for developing an understanding of the situation there: K. Warikoo, "Muslim Separatism in Xinjiang," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, (Vol.4, Nos.3-4 (July-December 2000), pp.32-55; Justin Hastings, "Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest," *The China Quarterly*, Vol.208 (December 2011), pp.893-912; "Wild West – Ethnic tensions remain high in China's Xinjiang," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.24, No.8 (August 01 2012), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1023007487?> Liselotte Odegaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, "China's Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *Contemporary China*, Vol.23, No.87 (2014), pp.535-555.



AQ and ISIS/IS in Central Asia and Xinjiang

What has been the impact of the turmoil in the Middle East on Central Asia and the Chinese province of Xinjiang? Terrorism undertaken by local groups has afflicted these two regions despite the notorious attempts of the Central Asian and Chinese governments

to limit reporting on the topic. Islamists in Central Asian countries have been fighting secular authoritarian governments that are a legacy of the Soviet era.¹⁴ The number of Central Asians involved in the jihad in Syria and Iraq varies wildly according to the sources with estimates varying from 300 to 500 or even considerably higher. A report from Kazakhstan estimates that the number may be as high as 1,400.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Al-Qa'idah leader urges Uighurs to launch jihad against China," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, October 08, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/460598486?>

¹⁵ Zia Ur Rehman, "ETIM's presence in Pakistan and China's growing pressure," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, August 2014, p.2.

The countries of Central Asia vary in the strength of their state institutions and the capabilities of their coercive instruments allowing some to eradicate or push out extremist groups from their territories and implementing tough new anti-terrorism laws. The only problem is that the groups do not go far away, they simply migrate to the nearest poorly governed or ungoverned space to continue their activities and to develop links with like-minded extremists. Others like Tajikistan, which hosts a number of banned extremist groups continue to arrest young men suspected of trying to travel to join the IS in Syria. In early December 2014, Tajik authorities announced the arrest of 50 men allegedly planning to travel to the Middle East.

In the Chinese province of Xinjiang in the far western reaches of the country, the Turkic and Muslim Uyghur population — formerly a majority in Xinjiang and which many call East Turkestan — have been engaged in low level violence against Han Chinese migration into the territory and discrimination in political, cultural and economic life.¹⁶

For the longest time jihadist groups paid little or no attention to the perceived plight of Muslims in Central Asia and China. They were remote and few people from the regions joined the trans-national jihadist movement. Nonetheless, in 2009 a leading member of al-Qaida, Abu Yahya al-Libi, was the first senior member of the organisation to utter comments on the situation of the Uyghurs.

In a video posted on an Islamist website on 7 October 2009, al-Libi urged the Uyghurs to launch a jihad against “oppressive” China and called upon Muslims the world over to become aware of the plight of the Uyghurs and to lend them support against the “depredations” committed by China:

*The state of atheism is heading to its fall. It will face what befell the Russian bear. There is no way to remove injustice and oppression without a true return to their [the Uyghur’s] religion and...serious preparation for jihad in the path of God the Almighty and to carry weapons in the face of those [Chinese] invaders. It is a duty for Muslims today to stand by their wounded and oppressed brethren in East Turkestan... and support them with all they can.*¹⁷

In recent years, Islamist militants have begun to pay greater attention largely due to the increased presence of Central Asians and Uyghurs in trans-national Islamist movements (the numbers are still small in comparison with other countries) and due to the facilitation of communication provided by social media. Uyghur militant groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) allegedly have a presence in remote regions of Pakistan where it has also established links with other like-minded militant groups.¹⁸ Those links have allowed Uyghur militants to propagate their tale of woes at the hands of the Chinese government. The countries of Central Asia and the People’s Republic of China are worried by what seems to

¹⁶ The literature on the Xinjiang political situation is now quite extensive and I have relied on the following for developing an understanding of the situation there: K. Warikoo, “Muslim Separatism in Xinjiang,” *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, (Vol.4, Nos.3-4 (July-December 2000), pp.32-55; Justin Hastings, “Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol.208 (December 2011), pp.893-912; “Wild West – Ethnic tensions remain high in China’s Xinjiang,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, Vol.24, No.8 (August 01 2012), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1023007487?> Liselotte Odegaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, “China’s Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang,” *Contemporary China*, Vol.23, No.87 (2014), pp.535-555.

¹⁷ “Al-Qa’idah leader urges Uighurs to launch jihad against China,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, October 08, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/460598486?>

¹⁸ Zia Ur Rehman, “ETIM’s presence in Pakistan and China’s growing pressure,” *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, August 2014, p.2



be the sudden focus by AQ and ISIS/IS on their respective regions. In July 2014, the so-called Caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accused China of oppressing Muslims. In a speech that month, al-Baghdadi stated that “Muslim rights” have been trampled upon “in China, India, Palestine,” among many other places.¹⁹

Not to be outdone by AQ’s boss, Ayman al-Zawahiri issued some statements about the Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang. However, it was AQ’s first English-language propaganda magazine, *Resurgence*, which explicitly took up the issue of Xinjiang or East Turkestan. In an article entitled “10 Facts About East

Turkestan,” the organisation sought to portray Xinjiang as having long been an independent Muslim entity that was only recently illegally acquired by the non-Muslim Han Chinese: “in the last 1,000 years of its Islamic history, Xinjiang has remained independent for 763 years, while 237 years have been spent under Chinese occupation at various intervals.” However, the expressions of sympathy for “oppressed” Muslims in both Central Asia and Xinjiang, which both AQ and ISIS have uttered in recent months, does not necessarily mean that they have the “band-width” to do much of significance in an operational sense either by sending men or material to help local militant groups in both places at the

¹⁹ Alexa Olesen, “China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home,” http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/11the_islamic_stat

²⁰ See the excellent article by Jacob Zenn, “An Overview of Chinese Fighters and Anti-Chinese Militant Groups in Syria and Iraq,” (Jamestown Foundation) *China Brief*, Vol.14, No.19 (October 10, 2014).

present. However, the threat to Central Asia and Xinjiang could very well lie in the near future when nationals return from the wars in the Middle East. The Chinese government estimates that 100 Chinese — both Uyghur Muslims and Han Chinese — are fighting in the Middle East with jihadist groups.²⁰ A recent media report suggested that the total number of Chinese nationals fighting alongside ISIS may be as high as 300.²¹

Islamic State's Impact on Southeast Asia

It is Southeast Asia, which for purposes of this report includes Australia as well as those Southeast Asian countries with Muslim-majority or substantial Muslim-minority populations, that has been the most worried by the impact of IS because of the number of foreign fighters from the sub-region who have gone to Syria and Iraq. This worry stems from the lingering fear of what they could do were they to come back, and because ISIS and its creation IS seem to have attracted the support of small but increasingly vocal groups of Islamist militants in the sub-region who might conduct local attacks on their own.²² The brutality of ISIS, so evident in its mass murder of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers, Muslim civilians, minorities, and beheadings of innocent Western journalists, has been applauded by young and disgruntled Muslims but widely condemned by most Muslims, including leaders in Southwest Asia. In Indonesia, former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono called ISIS a humiliation for

Muslims, while Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak condemned ISIS for crimes committed in the name of Islam.

In Spring 2014, Malaysian police arrested 20 ISIS-inspired individuals plotting to blow up pubs, discos and a Carlsberg beer brewery. Much to the consternation of Malaysian security officials, there has been no let-up in the number of people under suspicion or being interrogated or even arrested for trying to travel to join the jihad or for expressing support for IS. Malaysia has expressed particular concern at the threat posed by extremists to its exposed state of Sabah, which had been targeted by Islamic militants from the southern Philippines, home to pro-Islamic State extremist groups such as Abu Sayyaf.²³ Malaysia has also been worried by the threat of extremist groups such as ISIS seeking to recruit trained soldiers from the Malaysian armed forces following the arrest of two soldiers for allegedly expressing support for the Islamic state. Not surprisingly, Malaysia has been at the forefront of calling for further regional cooperation and intelligence sharing to fight the trans-national jihadist phenomenon.

Tiny Singapore is a country that treats threats to its national security very seriously because of the structural vulnerabilities it labours under: small size and the fact that it is sandwiched between two very large neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia; it is a multi-racial society which must work hard to maintain harmony among its various communities.²⁴ It is also a major commercial and financial centre, a fact that makes it a

²¹ Michael Martina, "Around 300 Chinese fight alongside ISIS," Al Arabiya, December 15, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/15/About-300-Chinese-said-fighting-alongside-ISIS.html>

²² Jack Hewson, "Rise of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia," McClatchy – Tribune Business News, September 01, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1558534649?>

²³ "Malaysia steps up regional intelligence sharing to counter Islamic State," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, September 19, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1563010868?>

²⁴ For more details see Yee-Kuang Heng, "A Global City in an Age of Global Risks: Singapore's Evolving Discourse on Vulnerability," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.35, No.3 (2013), pp.423-46.

target rich environment. One of its biggest worries in recent years has been the danger of trans-national terrorism, which can threaten its internal harmony and seriously undermine its reputation as a stable and secure global economic hub. Unsurprisingly, Singapore takes counter-terrorism measures seriously because it had been targeted in the past.²⁵ Even then, prosperous and well-run Singapore has seen at least two of its citizens joining IS.

This has been a source of concern but because of its efficiency and small size, Singapore can hope to better contain attempts by citizens to travel to join the jihad and to deal effectively with returnees because of their small numbers — even if they expand beyond the current handful — and because it has a de-radicalisation programme and effective surveillance conducted by its police and security services.²⁶

What concerns Singapore most is the likely impact of jihadists returning to Singapore's close neighbours, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as these radicals could well have their sight on the island state. The Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean told the Parliament: "If this group expands in Southeast Asia, it will pose a regional threat like the [terrorist Jemaah Islamiyah] network which had aimed to set up a Southeast Asian Islamic archipelago encompassing

Singapore."²⁷ Furthermore, its decision in November 2014 to send combat support troops to aid the anti-IS coalition may lead jihadist groups to focus on that country.

Indonesia worries the most about the ISIS threat in the region because of long historical experience with terrorism, extensive attempts by local militant groups to mobilise on behalf of the jihad in Syria and Iraq, and because of the fear that the returning fighters could threaten the security of the country by injecting life and vigour as well as expertise into the largely moribund and poorly-trained local jihadist groups. All of this has been clearly reflected in statements by officials and senior military officers.²⁸ General Moeldoko, the commander of Indonesia's armed forces, told a gathering of people at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in late October 2014 that regional countries must work together to deal with the ISIS threat. He expressed particular concern about what might happen when the jihadist fighters return to their home countries: "When they return to their countries...it is not easy to predict what actions they might conduct. This why we need to think about scenarios to anticipate what might happen when they return."²⁹

Indonesia has an extensive history going back decades in trying to deal with violent Islamist movements that have threatened its

²⁵ For more details on the past terrorist threats to Singapore and Singapore's counterterrorism response, see: Dan Murphy, "Singapore arrests tied to Al Qaeda: Alleged plans by Islamic militants to blow US Embassy point to terrorist cells in Southeast Asia," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 08, 2002, p.6; Andrew Tan, "Terrorism in Singapore: Threat and Implications," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.23, No.3 (2002), pp.1-18; Andrew Tan, "Singapore's Approach to Homeland Security," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2005), pp.349-362; Andrew Tan, "Singapore's Cooperation with the Trilateral Security Dialogue Partners in the War Against Global Terrorism," *Defence Studies*, Vol.7, No.2 (2007), pp.193-207.

²⁶ The literature on deradicalisation is vast and growing. For a good survey of definitions and a good bibliography see Jason-Leigh Striegher, "The Deradicalisation of Terrorists," *Salus Journal*, Vol.1, No.1 (2013), pp.19-40.-

²⁷ Quoted in Ricardo Saludo, "How grave is the ISIS threat to the Philippines?" *The Manila Times*, October 8, 2014

²⁸ The best and most detailed analysis of the impact of ISIS on Indonesia is "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, Report No.13 (September 24, 2014).

²⁹ Quoted in Zakir Hussain, "Returning ISIS fighters 'pose threat to region,' says Indonesia's military chief," *Straits Times*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/10/30/returning-isis-figh>

national security. The story goes as far back as the early years of independence when Islamist political activist, S.M. Kartosuwirjo, proclaimed an independent Islamic state in 1949 in West Java. This set the stage for the emergence of the Darul Islam movement, which attained control over a number of provinces. Jakarta immediately perceived it as an internal security threat and ordered the national army to crush it. This task took more than a decade (1949-1962) of counter-insurgency campaigning that led to thousands of deaths.³⁰ The struggle of the Darul Islam movement inspired the emergence of Negara Islam Indonesia (NII) movement in the 1970s, which also aspired to establish an Islamic state by revolutionary action. That movement, in turn, inspired various terrorist splinter groups — eg. Komando Jihad — to commit acts of terror, including attacks on government installations and the hijacking of a plane from the national carrier, *Garuda*. The most dangerous terrorist threat came with the emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah in the mid-1990s and whose terrorist campaign was detailed at the beginning of the study. It is this historical background that makes Indonesia very jittery about the current situation.

Indonesian Islamist organisations have paid considerable attention to the ongoing violence in Syria and Iraq since 2011, with some radical Islamist groups declaring support for the Islamic State.³¹ In 2012,

Islamist organisations and charitable groups raised funds and sent teams of medical volunteers to render aid to the Syrian civilian population caught in the crosshairs of a brutal civil war.³² However, many may have travelled there to join jihadist combat outfits under the guise of humanitarian aid. The Hilal al-Ahmar Society in Indonesia, associated with the JI and which is trying to rejuvenate itself, has sent medical supplies, food and personnel. Some of the personnel have been suspected of “switching uniforms from relief worker to rebel.”³³ This dynamic has Indonesia worried on two levels: first, fund-raising for the jihad in the Middle East has provided Indonesian extremist groups with the experience in raising money at home; and second, the returnees from the jihad could provide a well-experienced core or leadership cadre for the embryonic and largely incompetent contemporary groups who might be seeking to emulate what JI did in the first decade of the 21st century.³⁴

Another aspect that deserves scrutiny, but which is rarely mentioned, is the potential for Sunni-Shia violence in Indonesia as a result of incitement by returnees against Indonesia’s Shia population. The Sunni extremist movements are violently anti-Shia, this has been expressed in statement and in deeds in Syria and Iraq and their stance may gain traction in Indonesia with potentially dire results for inter-communal relations. Tensions between Sunni and Shia are a

³⁰ For details of the Darul Islam movement, see Hiroko Horikoshi, “The Dar-ul-Islam Movement of West Java (1942-1962): An Experience in the Historical Process,” *Indonesia*, Vol.20 (October 1975), pp.59-86; June Chandra Santosa, “Modernization, Utopia, and the Rise of Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia,” Ph.D dissertation, Boston University, 1996; David Kilcullen, “Globalisation and the Development of Indonesian Counterinsurgency Tactics,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.17, No.1 (March 2006), pp.44-64.

³¹ Evan Jendruck, “OSINT Summary: Indonesia militant Islamists pledge allegiance to Islamic State,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, Vol.14, No.8 (September 1, 2014), <http://search.proquest.com/doview/1545135076?accountid=12665>

³² Jacob Zenn, “From Syria to Sulawesi: Could Mujahideen Indonesia Timor become an ISIS Ally,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.12, No.7 (April 04, 2014), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D...

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Joe Cochrane, “Indonesian Militants Join Foreigners Fighting in Syria,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/world/asia/indonesian-militants>

potential problem that Jakarta will not be able to duck for much longer.³⁵ As Chiara Fomichi, a well-known specialist on Indonesian Islam said in an interview, throughout the 1980s-1990s, anti-Shia attitudes were limited to government and religious organisations' statements, requesting the Indonesian ummah to hold on to their Sunni traditions and "stay away" from Shia Islam. This was not exactly a positive attitude towards Shias; however, no physical confrontation ever took place. Even when the first attacks occurred in the early and mid-2000s, these were minor incidents which were dealt with locally and exploring the relevant social, economic and political rationales, with no suggestion that tensions could be eased by Shias converting to Sunnism. In 2012-2013, a Shia religious school and several houses were burnt in the so-called Sampang Incident, which led a hundred Shiites to flee from Madura to Java. The government's diffident attitude — the Shia villagers might be able to return to their homes if they considered "returning to the true teachings of Islam," implicitly encourages "open season" on Muslim minorities by fanatics. Moreover, such views are not consistent with the Indonesian Constitution, which allows freedom of religion.

The government of Indonesia tasked the National Counter-terrorism Agency (BNPT) with maintaining surveillance of extremist activities of all kinds in the archipelago including monitoring of open support for IS in the social media and with preparing for returnees from the jihad.³⁶

The ISIS danger to the Philippines is now small, but it can quickly grow, both in the country and especially in the Middle East where there are hundreds of thousands of

Filipinos. There have been several reports about ISIS elements or sympathisers recruiting followers in Mindanao universities and schools. Some 200 Filipinos are said to have left the country and joined the self-proclaimed Sunni Muslim "caliphate" occupying vast northern swathes of Iraq and Syria. Former president, defence secretary and armed forces chief Fidel Ramos said recently that "at least 100 of our young Filipino Muslims have already infiltrated Iraq to undergo training to return and be jihadists or militants."³⁷ In a YouTube video in August, the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a splinter group of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), pledged support for the Middle East rebels. "We have an alliance with the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," declared BIFF spokesperson Abu Misry Mama. Misry denied that BIFF sent fighters to ISIS or was recruiting for it. "But," he added, "if they need our help, why not?" And reported on Monday in this paper, a Lanao del Sur militant group called Ghuraba (strangers or foreigners in Arabic) said a "Khilafah Islamiyah" or Islamic caliphate has been established in the country. This is mere propaganda designed to elicit support and recruits; none of the small militant groups have the capabilities to establish a functioning "caliphate" or so-called Islamic State.

But a number of Filipino commentators are worried by something else. They argue that the immediate danger posed to Filipinos by the self-styled jihadist movement is not in the Philippines, but in the Middle East. There were an estimated 2.5 million Filipinos in the region as of 2012, including 1.2 million in Saudi Arabia; 930,000 in the United Arab

³⁵ Mark Ulyseas, "Chiara Formichi – Shia-Sunni Relations in Indonesia," http://liveencounters.net/?page_id=5705

³⁶ "Indonesia: Indonesia Clamps Down on ISIS Support and Threat of 'Alumni' Jihadis," Asia News Monitor, (August 15, 2014), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1550741713?>

³⁷ Ricardo Saludo, "How grave is the ISIS threat to the Philippines?" The Manila Times, October 8, 2014.

Emirates; and about 200,000 each in Kuwait and Qatar. If ISIS or any other extremists want to target or pressure the Philippines, they do not have to strike halfway across the world. They can threaten, kidnap, hostage and kill Filipinos in their region, most of who are in nations like the four cited above, where the majority faith is Sunni Islam — the religion espoused by ISIS. Many Filipinos have urged their government to take action to counter the potential threat to Filipino nationals in the Middle East by educating expatriates on necessary security protocols and cooperating with police and intelligence agencies in host countries. Commentators have implored the government to avoid any pronouncements and actions likely to provoke ISIS attacks on Filipinos in the Middle East, whom the Philippines has zero capability to secure. President Benigno Aquino's offer to help the U.S. in its war against ISIS has been seen as ill advised by Filipinos. His aid offer would contribute nothing that America sorely needs to fight the extremists, but would put countless Filipino citizens in the Middle East at grave risk.

On the surface it would seem that the jihadist threat to Australia would not be a concern to that country. It is far from the Middle East and is not traditionally seen as being involved in the problems of the region. This is simply a bogus argument. Distance does not save a country from terrorists if they choose to target it. Australia has been involved in Middle Eastern issues. It has relations with many Middle Eastern countries and has participated on the side of the U.S. in military operations in that region. Furthermore, Australia has an Australian Muslim population of around 500,000. The vast majority, of course, are law-abiding citizens who wish to benefit from

the Australian "dream", but it is clear that for many their low socio-economic status and limited upward mobility opportunities has been a source of resentment. Finally, the outbreak of the brutal Syrian civil war has resonated among Australian Muslims because many of them are either Syrian or Lebanese by origin. Some of them are Sunnis and some are Shia and there has been some tension between the two sects in Australia.

Not surprisingly, the Australian government first mentioned the Islamist jihadist phenomenon as a national security threat in 2010. In the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) report to Parliament for 2013-2014, ASIO puts the terrorist threat posed by jihadists at the top of the list of security threats to Australia. Australia has been mortified by reports that between 60-80 Australians are involved with the Islamic State in Syria or Jabhat al-Nusra, the AQ-affiliated rival of IS. It is not clear how many Australians are involved with other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. According to the Australian Federal Police, more and more Australians continue to slip through the net of increased surveillance to go fight in Syria and Iraq. The Australian government has proposed significant measures such as control orders to restrict the movement of suspected radicals and their interactions with like-minded individuals or cancelling the permanent resident status of those who had gone to fight with ISIS and other groups — to try to stem the flow of its citizens to the jihadist battlefield.³⁸ The fact that it has also sent military forces to join the U.S. coalition to fight IS has ramped up the IS threats against Australians.

³⁸ Rob Taylor, "Australia Warns of Islamic Militant Migration; Australia Increases Counterterrorism Strategies to Combat Threat," Wall Street Journal, June 24, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1539388618?accountid=12665>

What worries the Australian government were calls from IS members for sympathisers at home to attack people in Australia rather than traveling to join the jihad in the Middle East.³⁹ It is in this context that the siege of the Lindt Café in Sydney's Martin Place in mid-December 2014 must be seen. The gunman, Man Haron Monis or Hossein Mohammad Manteghi, an Iranian immigrant who had converted from Sunnism to Shiism had a long criminal record and a history of abusive comments against the families of Australian service personnel. He cannot be classified as a "lone wolf" terrorist acting alone on behalf of an ideology. Rather, he was an unbalanced individual with a sense of grievance against the Australian state. His grievances were half-baked political ideas delivered in street speeches in Sydney and finally at the Lindt Café siege during which he bizarrely asked for an ISIS black flag. Nonetheless, Australia should be prepared for more serious political copycats in the coming months. Although the "ideas" of Monis are unlikely to motivate a copycat, the psychological impact of his personalised terrorism and the media attention given to the event in Martin Place cannot have escaped the attention of those with malicious intentions towards Australia.

ISIS Threat in Asia: Between Exaggeration and Underestimation

In the alarm generated about the potential for ISIS/IS to threaten the rest of Asia, many analysts have voiced the opinion that we need to take a step back and analyse the situation very carefully.⁴⁰ Indeed, this should be the starting point. We must navigate

carefully between the Scylla of hysterical overestimation of the threat and the Charybdis of underestimating the threat of trans-national terrorism. How serious is the threat of the Islamic State to Asia?

First, while there is cause for concern about the potential impact of IS in the rest of Asia, we need to be realistic about the threat and its magnitude rather than alarmist, particularly in light of the fact that the situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq is still evolving. It is not clear yet that any part of Asia will become a "second front" in the fight against ISIS or IS. On 11 September 2014, U.S. President Obama laid out what he promises to be a robust political and military strategy for dealing with ISIS/IS. While we should not underestimate ISIS/IS, we need to understand it may implode sooner than later and its fighters scattered to the four corners of the globe if the U.S. and its allies engage it successfully in these two theatres of operations in the coming week. Consequently, its military capabilities and its political stranglehold over important regions of Syria and Iraq will most likely collapse.

However, this may not necessarily mean the end of ISIS. The U.S. has been proclaiming the end of Al Qaida — now a bitter opponent of ISIS/IS — for years, yet it still exists and continues to threaten the peace and security of many regions in Africa and the Middle East. ISIS/IS itself is not yet and might never become a threat to the regions to be addressed in this report, that is, beyond Syria and Iraq. The threat that ISIS/IS pose to both Syria and Iraq is a potentially existential one to their national security and integrity. ISIS/IS does not pose that kind of threat to the rest of Asia. If ISIS/IS implodes due to effective concerted action by the United States and

³⁹ See Jane Perlez, "ISIS Lieutenant Emerges From Australian Red-Light District," *New York Times*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/asia/isis-australia>

⁴⁰ For a realistic and sobering analysis, see, in particular, Joseph Chinyong Liow, "ISIS Goes to Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, (September 21, 2014), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/09/21-isis-goes->

regional powers, ISIS remnants might return to their respective homes seeking to exact revenge for the failure of their “state”.

Second, while some jihadists have reportedly returned home to their respective countries, it is not clear what they are doing or whether they are involved in extremist circles. Nor is it clear what national intelligence and security services know about “returnees” or would publicly acknowledge what they might know. We simply have no data on this particular aspect. In short, we have to make inferences or educated guesses based on available data.

Third, the threat posed by returnees will take time to germinate. Both lone wolves — terrorists acting alone — and small cell structures will take time to set up and operationalise. It is only if they are nipped in the bud before they act or unfortunately after the commission of a terrorist act will we be able to formally acknowledge the potential or actual threat posed by the returnees. However, on the other hand, given the experiences with terrorism in the first decade of the 21st century, intelligence, police and other security services are more professional and far better at their jobs than in the past, as reflected in their being proactive and having better operational capabilities.

However, Asian governments must take into consideration a number of structural issues as they devote time, energy and resources to the nature and characteristics of non-state threats. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was the smug assessment that Asian states, then undergoing solid economic growth and increasing regional harmony, would be immune to non-state threats. Security services also tended to focus on opposition

groups in countries that were making the uncertain transition from authoritarianism to democracy. There was a “curious neglect” of the threat of terrorism.⁴¹ 9/11 and the emergence of a significant level of terrorist activity changed all that and security services began to focus their attention on that specific threat. They got better and the defeat of the JI wave of terrorism came as a result of greater professionalism within the security and intelligence forces aided by sheer luck and mistakes on the part of the terrorists. Information gathering and intelligence processing of data on extremists is still sub-par in terms of accuracy and rapidity of dissemination to the requisite authorities. Many individual nations do not have “holistic” counter-terrorism strategies. Rather they have “patchy” counter-terrorism strategies and approaches in the sense that they have aspects or organisations that are very good or effective at what they specifically do; however, their efficiency is reduced by lack of coordination and cooperation with other organisations or by inefficiency on the part of these other governmental organisations. Third, there is a tendency in many countries in Asia (as well as other regions) to mine the experiences of past dealings with the threat of terrorism — particularly in the first decade of the 21st century — for lessons for the present. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that; that is how organisations, including police and intelligence services, learn. There needs to be constant thinking “outside of the box”, the terrorist threat of the past is not the terrorist threat of the present. There are similarities with the past, but there are also substantial differences that personnel and analysts must take into consideration as they construct their intelligence “terrain” of the terrorist threat posed by IS.

⁴¹ See David Martin Jones and Michael Smith, “The Perils of Hyper-Vigilance: The War on Terrorism and the Surveillance State in South-East Asia,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.17, No.4 (Winter 2002), p.32.

In conclusion, as we enter the year 2015 it is clear that IS continues to show remarkable resilience despite the battering it has taken at the hands of coalition airstrikes and seemingly revitalised Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian forces. The extremist group has begun to show signs of fatigue due to loss of senior commanders, desertions, rejection by Sunni Arab tribes in Syria and Iraq, and inability to govern effectively the large amount of territories it has seized. Nonetheless, it remains a threat to the countries of the

Middle East (including countries where it has established some symbolic but deadly presence as in Egypt and Libya), it still draws the disgruntled and the adventurous, and its foreign fighters remain a potential danger to their countries of origin. In this context, Asian governments must maintain vigilance concerning the returnees and their potential for causing mischief or providing organisational support and technical skills to local extremist groups.

About the Author

Ahmed S. Hashim is Associate Professor of Strategic Studies in the Military Studies Programme at RSIS. He focuses on security and defence issues from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia, dealing specifically with insurgency and counter-insurgency, terrorism and counter-terrorism, defence policies of nations from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. His most recent publications include: *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Forthcoming studies include: "The Evolution of Iranian Defense Doctrine," in Walter Posch (ed.), *The Iranian Security Structure*, London: Routledge, 2015; and *Small Wars: Too Big to Ignore*, London: Hurst; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

About IDSS

The **Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS)** is a key research component of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). It focuses on security research to serve national needs. IDSS' faculty and research staff conduct both academic and policy-oriented research on security-related issues and developments affecting Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. Its research agenda presently comprises the following programmes: Military Transformations, Military Studies, Maritime Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Asia and the United States.

For more information about IDSS, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg/research/idss.

About RSIS

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

For more information about RSIS, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg

