



ISIS and the Saudi Wahhabi Threat to Asian Security

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Abstract

Despite US-led coalition's largely military campaign to degrade ISIS, it is not addressing the root cause of its existence—Saudi Wahhabi ideology. Asian security officials are expressing alarm at Saudi-funded proliferation of Wahhabism that is radicalizing traditionally moderate Asian Muslims to join ISIS, and calling for regional countermeasures against Riyadh that continues to spawn other terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiah, Abu Sayyaf, MILF that threaten Asian security.

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Analysis

While the US-led coalition is focused on decimating ISIS, it is not addressing the root cause of its existence—Saudi Wahhabi ideology. Even if ISIS is degraded, Saudi export of Wahhabism will continue to spawn new ISIS type jihadists in the Mideast, Africa, Asia, South America and elsewhere. This is especially so in Southeast Asia.

“Saudization” of Southeast Asia

Retired Malaysian diplomat Dennis Ignatius¹ recently penned an article highlighting the Saudi threat to Asian stability and security, and calls it the “Saudization” of Southeast Asia. When he joined the civil service in 1972, the biggest threat then was the spread of communism supported by China. Now, it is Saudi-exported Islamic extremism.

Young Southeast Asian Muslims from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and elsewhere are radicalizing and joining jihad in Syria and Iraq, with ISIS even forming a military unit² for Malay-speaking fighters—Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah (Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).



Terrorism expert Professor Rohan Gunaratna from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore also expressed alarm that Indonesia may be declared the next ISIS province, and that “there is a misperception that the ISIS threat is Syria-and Iraq-centric.”

Malaysian security authorities said four new terror groups were planning to create an Islamic caliphate to rule parts of Southeast Asia, called “Daulah Islamiah Nusantara” which will cover Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Thailand and southern Philippines.

Ignatius is gobsmacked that the once moderate Malaysia is now infested with extremists wanting to impose sharia law, and “a constitutionally secular and democratic nation like Malaysia is even having a discussion about amputating limbs, beheading, stoning, and even crucifixion.”

He attributes the sole cause of extremism in Southeast Asia to Saudi Arabia’s aggressive export of Wahhabi ideology, spending more than US\$100,00 billion the past few decades to export a culture of “intolerance, hate and violence” to all corners of the globe. Ignatius views the Saudi-Wahhabi nexus has such a stranglehold on Sunni religious discourse, having polluted thousands of mosques, seminaries, universities, schools and

¹ See also: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/the-wahhabi-threat-to-southeast-asia-dennis-ignatius>

² See also: <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia>



community centers that “unquestionably, the Saudi-Wahhabi nexus has become the greatest single threat to peace and stability in the world today.”

Saudi WMD (Wahhabis of Mass Destruction) proliferation

Indeed, Ignatius echoes Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who also pointed to Saudi Arabia as the “queen bee” spawning terrorism in Asia. According to Lee, Muslims in Southeast Asia were traditionally moderate and tolerant. But beginning in the 1970s, awash with petrodollars, Saudi Wahhabis began to export this “venomous religion” via thousands of mosques and madrasas that has radicalized Muslims in South and Southeast Asia.

As a result of Saudi proliferation of WMDs—or Wahhabis of Mass Destruction—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines have fallen victim to Wahhabi-driven extremists groups such as Jemaah Islamiah, Abu Sayyaf, MILF, ISIS, Taliban, and others.

In a 2003 interview with Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek*, Prime Minister Lee warned that Americans are mistaken in seeking a largely military solution to combat Islamic terrorism. “In killing terrorists, you will only kill the worker bees. The queen bees are the preachers, who teach a deviant form of Islam in schools and Islamic centers, who capture and twist the minds of the young.”

Even Egypt’s President al Sisi recognizes the “queen bees” are the root cause of terrorism, and joins PM Lee in calling for a ‘religious revolution’ in Islam at Cairo’s Al Azhar University back in January.

Thus ISIS is just a violent expression of Wahhabism, and even if it is ultimately degraded and defeated, Saudi proliferation of Wahhabi ideology will continue to spawn other WMDs in the forms of Al Qaeda, Al Nusrah, Muslim Brotherhood, Boko Haram, Abu Sayyaf, Taliban, ETIM, TIP, IMU, Caucasus Emirate, and other mutations.

India³ likewise is sounding the alarm on infestation of Wahhabism⁴ and potential creation of new jihadi groups in the subcontinent. In a September 2014 *Indian Defence Review* article, retired Indian general Afsir Karim shares Lee Kuan Yew’s⁵ concerns that Saudi Wahhabis are trying to exert domination over other strands of Islam (e.g., Sufi, Shia, etc.) and proclaim themselves as the gold standard for what it means to be a “good” Muslim. General Karim⁶ exposes how Saudis are using the Wahhabism weapon to dominate India, pumping millions of petrodollars into madrasas and mosques to propagate Wahhabi theology and that “anyone outside the Wahhabi sect is a heretic and will burn in hell.”

This doctrine of intolerance and violence is now polarizing Indian society and radicalizing its Muslims, projected by Pew Research⁷ to be the largest Muslim population in the world by 2050, even surpassing Indonesia.

Thus with the double onslaught of potential ISIS bases and Saudi-sponsored radicalization of Asian Muslims casting a long shadow on its future, what is Asia’s recourse?

³ <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2014/12/20/the-radicalization-of-south-asian-islam-saudi-money-and-the-spread-of-wahhabism/>

⁴ See also: <http://www.oneindia.com/india/interview-wahabism-saudi-weapon-dominate-india-1789915.html>

⁵ See also: <http://www.aiseyman.com/2015/04/14/lee-kuan-yews-insights-on-the-future-of-islamic-extremism-part-ii/#sthash.yPIJ9SYu.03E8bWNQ.dpbs>

⁶ <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/wahhabism-in-south-asia/>

⁷ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/By-2050-India-to-surpass-Indonesia-will-have-largest-Muslim-population-Study/articleshow/46790174.cms>



Countermeasures by ASEAN, EAS, SCO

Dennis Ignatius for one proposed some courses of action such as confronting Saudis about their export of Wahhabism/"WMD" proliferation and the serious threat this poses to Asian security, as well as working with the international community to identify and dismantle entire infrastructure of extremism including institutions, organizations and groups, schools and madrasas, funding, and dissemination of extremist literature.

Current Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also kicked off a new counterterrorism symposium in April during the East Asia Summit (EAS) to mobilize collective Asia Pacific response against the threat of ISIS and Islamic extremism. EAS comprises the ten ASEAN countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United States and Russia.

Additionally, the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is also beefing up its counterterror and energy security posture by admitting India in July, joining current members of China, Russia, and the four Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

With the SCO, EAS, and ASEAN comprising various energy consumers and producers, the Asia Pacific region can collude and diversify oil imports away from Saudi Arabia to stop underwriting its proliferation of Wahhabism and "WMDs." In June, Saudi Arabia already lost its spot as top crude supplier to India and China, replaced by Nigeria and Russia.

If Riyadh continues to ignore Asian warnings and pump petrodollars to export Wahhabism that harms their regional security, one wonders if it is a matter of time before Saudis reap an Asian version of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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