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Luring Southeast Asian Fighters to IS: The Case of Former GAM Fighters

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

Former independence fighters in Aceh, Indonesia, have begun to express their intentions to join Islamic State (IS) and willingness to support jihadists in Iraq and Syria. This increases the security threat posed by IS to Southeast Asia.

Commentary

IN THE ongoing military conflict in Iraq and Syria, a Malay-based militant outfit has been established to support the transnational militant organisation, Islamic State (IS). The Katibah Nusantara, established in September 2014, largely dominated by fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia, supports IS militarily. Since its proclamation in June 2014, IS, which occupies a large swathe of Iraq and Syria, has become a powerful recruiting magnet for would-be jihadist fighters from Southeast Asia.

It now appears that former fighters of GAM, the Aceh Independence Movement, have begun to respond to the appeal of IS. Although GAM was disbanded following the peace agreement between the separatist movement and the Indonesian government in 2005, ending a 30-year struggle, many former fighters who were not integrated into society felt they did not benefit from the peace.

Former GAM fighters to join IS

While GAM had previously rejected Al Qaeda's overtures, the rise of IS is beginning to have an impact on many former GAM fighters. This may be appreciated in the context of Indonesian jihadists' leadership of the Katibah Nusantara and the ability of Indonesian jihadists to reach out to their compatriots in Indonesia.

In July 2015, a leader of a GAM faction that did not benefit from the peace deal, Fakhruddin Bin Kasem @ Din Robot, had expressed his intention to take the pledge of allegiance to Islamic State even though he has yet to do so. He expressed his intention to join along with more than 100 fighters. He stated that the peace deal had not benefited everyone, and many former GAM fighters were worse off and could not provide basic needs of their families.

He cited economic reasons as the main motivation for supporting IS. However, while pledging to die

for the Islamic cause, he also desisted from launching a military struggle in Aceh as this would harm local Muslims.

Implications of GAM faction's statement

While Indonesia ended the conflict with GAM in 2005, the post-conflict situation seems to be creating a new breeding ground for extremists and terrorists. GAM was never declared a foreign terrorist organisation. In part this was because GAM did not support Al Qaeda. This situation is about to change with some former GAM members expressing support for IS, with which many governments around the world are at war.

What the GAM faction's statement has indicated is also in line with the general jihadi discourse in Indonesia at present. Indonesian radical ideologues supporting IS have expressed their unwillingness to launch an armed struggle in Indonesia as it is likely to harm Muslim Indonesians more. Hence, their willingness to support a jihad against the 'far enemy' as is being undertaken in Iraq and Syria.

The statement by Fakuiddin seems to be in line with this general position, signalling that some of the Acehnese are probably joining IS for economic, political and ideological reasons. These are probably the same drivers that have seen other Indonesian fighters supporting the IS cause.

The establishment of the Katibah Nusantara, its military victory over the Iraqi Kurds in April 2015 and the uploading of a new video showing Indonesian Katibah Nusantara's fighters en route to a battle in July 2015, would confirm the existence of a successful Indonesian jihadi unit. This shows the effectiveness of IS propaganda in winning new recruits.

The IS magnate and policy implications

While local conditions seem to have driven these Acehnese to support IS, the ideological magnet itself cannot be discounted. With IS looking for Wilayats (provinces) in Southeast Asia other than Poso (in Sulawesi), there is now the possibility of Aceh as another base. If the nexus between some former GAM members and IS fails to materialise physically (even as ideologically they support the Islamic State), there is the possibility of former GAM fighters joining the IS affiliate, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) led by Santoso.

Additionally, just as IS seems to have provided a powerful pull factor for the Acehnese, there is nothing to stop similar jihadists associated with radical groups such as the MILF, MNLF and Abu Sayaf in the Philippines, or PULO in Thailand or even RSO and ARNO in Myanmar becoming the next wave of recruits for IS.

Of greater concern, internally displaced communities or refugees such as the Rohingya could also be motivated to join the recruitment wave, including Rohingya who have been resettled in northern Sumatra. A new wave of foreign fighters from Southeast Asia joining IS cannot be ruled out.

Policy implications

From a policy perspective, the statement by the former GAM fighters has signposted that the challenge posed by Islamic State is bigger than is often assumed. This calls for strong, comprehensive and robust measures to prevent Southeast Asians from making their way to Iraq and Syria. While the Katibah Nusantara may be fighting in Iraq and Syria today, the threat it poses for ASEAN is real.

Not only is there the danger of Katibah Nusantara's returnees, after having been ideologically fortified and having experienced combat, thus militarily endangering the region, they may also act as motivators for self-radicalised individuals in the region, without their having to make the journey to Iraq and Syria. Already this seems to be taking place.

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