

## TRANSNATIONAL RADICALISM: A GLOBAL ISIS?

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On January 14, 2016, central Jakarta was rocked with a series of well-orchestrated terrorist attacks involving suicide bombings and shooting. Jakarta police identified ISIS-affiliated Indonesian Bahrun Naim, who is currently based in Syria, as the mastermind behind the attack. This fuels fear that the overwhelming threat of ISIS in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has finally spread over to Southeast Asia.

The unexpected sudden emergence of ISIS may have caught the world unprepared but its rapid territorial and ideological expansion should not come as a surprise. ISIS not only has the machinery and bureaucratic structures to run the quasi-state it has carved for itself but it has also the ability to tap the cyberspace in recruiting fighters and influencing social media-savvy radicals from around the world. Despite great territorial losses in 2015 amid counteroffensives by various governments and coalition forces, it is undeniable that ISIS has incredible staying power.

### *Non-state but with territory*

Since its rise in 2014, ISIS has captured and controlled tracts of Syria and Iraq and has allied groups in Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Radical groups in Southeast Asia, including Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in the Philippines, have also pledged allegiance to ISIS, although the nature of ISIS' involvement is still subject to speculation. It has also so far been able to recruit thousands of fighters – including women – across Middle East and North Africa and other parts of the world.

ISIS is primarily concerned with the creation of an Islamic caliphate, which requires territories with a highly bureaucratic organizational structure. It does not recognize the laws of states much less the laws of the international community; it only recognizes their strict interpretation of the Koran as the only law. It controls all the aspects of daily life in the areas it controls in Syria and Iraq, including running schools, mosques, banks, and courts. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry even went so far as to say that ISIS “seeks to subjugate civilians under its control and dominate every aspect of their lives through terror, indoctrination, and the provision of services to those who obey”. Its source of power is being an entity not accountable to anybody or institutions, using all available means to instill fear and committing violence and atrocities unmindful of existing conventions.

Reports say that ISIS is highly bureaucratic and has transformed itself from a military force to a quasi-state with systems in place to provide services and incentives to residents in its controlled territories. They also provide attractive compensation package to its mercenaries. Its rapid expansion is made possible by its massive wealth reserves accumulated from illegal oil trade, trade of looted historical artifacts, extortion and tax collection, bank looting, kidnapping, and slave trade. But since April 2015, ISIS has reportedly lost a significant percentage of its captured territories, including its oil infrastructure and key supply routes, as a result of local and international efforts. A leaked ISIS document exposed early this year also suggests that ISIS is cutting its fighters' salaries by half due to “exceptional circumstances”.

However, ISIS's weakening power is coupled with its increasing terrorism abroad. Since its self-declaration as an Islamic caliphate in June 2014, its mercenaries have expanded the organization's operations outside their captured territories in Syria and Iraq. In a survey by CNN, there have been over sixty attacks in twenty countries committed by ISIS-affiliated and ISIS-inspired individuals outside the Levant, killing estimated 1,160 people and injured 1,700 others. This goes to show that its ideological appeal has not waned and, in fact, has inspired more radicals to commit terror attacks in the name of Islam.

### *ISIS's ideological appeal*

While majority of Muslims does not share ISIS's interpretation of Islam, the organization's revival of a historical political entity governed by Islamic laws and traditions provides a sense of belonging to Muslims and individuals who may have felt alienated in their

countries of residence that is deeply divided along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and socioeconomic lines. This challenges the imperialist-imposed European state system in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. ISIS appears to be providing the ideological force under the banner of “global jihadi ideology” to unite the Islamic world. Its espousal of Islamic extremist narrative, ideological opposition to the West, and its expansionist project also appears to them as an alternative to Middle Eastern states’ failed attempts to nation-building.

Possessing soft power with sufficient military resources, ISIS suasion is based on its ability to strike force and violence and utilize social media platforms for propaganda and recruitment of potential jihadists from all over the world. The jihadists has attracted and exploited the growing desire of the younger generation in search of identity, belongingness, and change in a hostile environment. These, coupled with high youth unemployment rates, general lack of education, and weak governmental structures, ensure a fertile ground for radicalism. Its rhetoric of ‘jihad’ provides an identity anchor for those alienated and disenfranchised by their society and by their own governments.

*“There should be focus on improving political and socioeconomic conditions from which radicalization stems in the first place and be cautious in employing counterterrorist measures so as to avoid provoking intensified retaliatory attacks.”*

#### *Spread of ISIS terror*

ISIS has so far succeeded in attracting individuals – especially Muslim youth – from Europe, North America, South Asia, and South-east Asia. Many ISIS supporters have traveled to Syria to fight for the group and some carry out coordinated and planned attacks in their home countries. Others are also exploiting the Syrian refugee crisis to slip into target countries to attack such as the ISIS suicide bomber in Istanbul’s historic Sultanahmet Square on January 12, 2014 entered Turkey as a refugee from Syria. Governments should also be concerned about the threat of citizens who have traveled to Syria and returned radicalized. Some perpetrators of the series of coordinated attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 which killed 130 people are European citizens who returned from Syria. ISIS members, in their social media accounts, also threatened to carry out attacks in Europe, US, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. It is not far-fetched to assume that more sophisticated operations will be carried out by ISIS-affiliated and ISIS-influenced individuals and groups in the near future.

The weakening of ISIS in Syria and Iraq does not diminish its ideological appeal. The growing transnationalization of ISIS’s terror operations is but one of its consequences. Recent events have shown that ISIS is getting more dangerous as a terrorist organization abroad, possibly to compensate for its huge losses of its quasi-state last year. It has, in fact, constructed an image of being a global actor.

Addressing issues of mal-governance, failure of state institutions to provide security, unemployment, and lack of education could curb radicalization in the long term. But the recent attack in Jakarta has just provided solid evidence that ISIS has already reached Southeast Asia and may intend to carry more attacks. The Philippines is not exempted from this. In the short term, governments should avoid being complacent with ISIS’s waning power in the Middle East. Instead, there should be focus on improving political and socioeconomic conditions from which radicalization stems in the first place and be cautious in employing counterterrorist measures so as to avoid provoking intensified retaliatory attacks. 🌸

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