Southeast Asia has been called a second front for Islamic State following the recent pushback in Syria and Iraq. It is a new theatre for the Islamic State (IS) movement, whereas al-Qaeda (AQ) has been present in the region since the turn of the century. Through four studies, this book specifically zooms in on the presence of IS and AQ activity in selected countries in Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Looking into the four cases it appears that this region has the potential to teach us something about how local insurgencies, democratic transitions, nationalist struggles, and polarised debates about the state and religion all matter for explaining the occurrence of transnational jihad. Most interestingly, the book raises the question of why some local conflicts in the region escalate and are redefined as part of a global ideological battle, while others maintain a local focal point.

Based on field trips, interviews as well as secondary materials, the four authors contribute to an understanding of why transnational jihadist movements like al-Qaeda and IS, with their regional and global agendas, find space in the local milieus of the Southeast Asian states. Most importantly, the volume seeks to contribute comparative insight into the question of why Islamic State and al-Qaeda can gain a foothold in new places, and what exactly the global-local dynamics are. One of the points that this volume makes is that while strategic decision-making and expansionist ambitions from their core leadership have a role to play, local contexts and conflicts are also important for the appeal of transnational jihadist movements.

Edited by Mona Kanwal Sheikh

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GLOBAL JIHAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
Examining the expansion of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda

Edited by Mona Kanwal Sheikh
# Table of contents

- The traction of transnational jihad in Southeast Asia  
  Mona Kanwal Sheikh  
  Page 7

- Transnational jihadism in the Philippines  
  Lars Erslev Andersen  
  Page 19

- Islamic State and al-Qaeda in a thriving Indonesian democracy  
  Mona Kanwal Sheikh  
  Page 39

- From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia  
  Nicholas Chan  
  Page 59

- The risks of transnational jihadism in Thailand  
  Hara Shintaro  
  Page 81

- Biographies  
  Page 97
In 2019, five years after the caliphate was declared, the Islamic State movement was driven out of the last pocket of land it held in the Syrian desert. This does not mean that the Islamic State and its supporters have disappeared from Syria and Iraq, but it has taken away their territorial privilege. While one of the defining traits of contemporary jihadism is that it is a transnational and global ideology that attracts foreign fighters, not only from neighbouring countries, but also across regions, it also represents a conflict that has in itself proven an extraordinary ability to travel across borders, regions and continents. One of the concerns that this raises is whether IS has the ability to establish itself and control areas on new battlefields – as it has already tried to do in the Philippines and Libya to a certain extent – besides continuing to fight in Iraq and Syria.

A recent UN report states that despite the defeat of the so-called caliphate, the Islamic State "has continued its evolution into a mainly covert network." This is true not only in the Middle East but also in Africa, the Arab peninsula and Asia. The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka of 21 April 2019 shook the world, as they not only displayed the appalling spread of IS ideology, but also that local jihadi movements and actors may embrace the IS brand and carry out attacks in unexpected places. The bombings targeted at churches and luxury hotels in three cities and seven locations in Sri Lanka were conducted by two local groups: National Tawheed Jamath (NTJ) and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI). Some of the suicide bombers had travelled to Syria, while others involved were believed to have studied IS methods before the attacks. However, investigations revealed that the core leadership in Syria/Iraq did not direct or facilitate the attacks, nor did it know about them in advance.
In order to understand these types of dynamics behind transnational jihadism, this volume zooms in on the presence of IS and AQ activity in selected countries in Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The overall question that the chapters seek to illuminate is why transnational jihadist movements like AQ and the Islamic State, with their regional and global agendas, find space in the local milieus of Southeast Asian states? The authors of the chapters also reflect on the degree to which IS/AQ presence is orchestrated the central leadership of the movements.

The volume is a continuation of earlier research conducted at DIIS on the dynamics behind IS/AQ expansion (Sheikh 2018) and the relationship between AQ, IS and local jihadist movements (Crone 2016). It seeks to mediate the cleavages in the academic and think tank literature that either stresses the importance of the strategy and ideology of the central leadership of AQ and IS, or alternatively the defining significance of understanding the local context in explaining why transnational jihadist ideas find resonance and recruits. The development undoubtedly depends on the local context: its history, political tensions, local conflicts, grievances and cleavages. But strategic decision-making from the core leadership also seems to matter.

The chapters of this volume do not set out theoretical contributions to the larger academic debate on foreign fighters, terrorist motivations, transnationalisation or conflict extension, but should be read as ‘raw’ empirical contributions that can certainly inform theory-making. The chapters are based on field trips, interviews and secondary materials. Most importantly the volume seeks to inject comparative insight into the question of why Islamic State and al-Qaeda can gain a foothold in new places, and what the global-local dynamics are. Each of the four chapters also consider some main characteristics of the counter-terrorism efforts of the four countries. The term ‘jihadist’ is used throughout the volume in a purely nominalist way, and it indicates how the local and transnational movements themselves motivate their acts of violence as warfare with religious/spiritual significance for them.

The volume has been limited to the study of these four cases, though the geographical area of Southeast Asia also covers other countries. The selection is based on an initial analysis of IS/AQ activity (see below), and the case of Thailand has been included as it represents a puzzling ‘non-case’ in the sense that IS/AQ have not yet established a considerable presence in the country in spite of their potential to tap into the local conflict in southern Pattani.

**SOUTHEAST ASIA CALLING FOR ATTENTION**

Recent IS and AQ activity is obviously not only limited to Southeast Asia, but appears in other regions as well, which also deserve attention. The case of Southeast Asia is, however, intriguing, not least because it provides some special contextual features as compared to the Middle East such as: non-Arab culture and language, Muslim minority countries (in this volume the cases of the Philippines and Thailand), in some instances conflictual relations between Buddhists and Muslims, and a political tradition of accommodating Islamist parties.

At the same time the region calls for more attention since not much has been written comparatively about IS/AQ in Southeast Asia outside regional think tank reports. Recent developments and news reports point to the risk that Southeast Asia is becoming the new theatre for IS as it has already been for AQ for some decades. Some observers have even called Southeast Asia the ‘second front’ for IS, arguing that Islamic State have strategically eyed Southeast Asia as their new hotspot since the pushback in Syria and Iraq.

Reports from 2018 indicate that IS have formally added a new Southeast Asian province to their landscape of IS provinces: Wilayat Shaaq Asyya. From an IS perspective the self-declared province spans Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Southern Thailand and Myanmar. Before this IS had allegedly also declared two ‘local’ provinces in the southern Philippines, one known as Wilayat Filipines, and the other as East Asia Wilayat. The first militants from the region declared their pledge of allegiance in mid-2014 (for example Isnilon Hapilon of the Philippine-based Abu Sayyaf Group, and Santoso of the Eastern Indonesia Mujahideen [MIT]).

At the same time the region has witnessed a series of terrorist attacks attributed to IS-affiliated groups in Southeast Asia. A remarkable feature of the attacks is that they are often targeted at places of worship, hence creating tensions among different faith communities and accentuating the image of a religious war. In some cases returnees from Iraq and Syria have been implicated in attacks in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines or in supporting local IS affiliates, in some cases these have been tasked by IS leadership (not necessarily in detail but as an overall encouragement to carry out attacks), and again in other cases there have been no logistical or operational linkages between the core leadership and the local actors.
Observers of Southeast Asian terrorism have noted that there was a first wave of transnational jihadism in Southeast Asia that can be traced back to 2002, starting with the devastating bombings in Bali of the same year. This lasted until 2008 (see the Global Terrorism Index 2009), and it was primarily al-Qaeda related movements such as the Philippines’ Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Indonesia’s Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that were behind this era of jihadist violence.

The second wave can be traced back to 2016 and the Islamic State movement: in the period between 2016-17 Southeast Asia suddenly experienced a 36% increase in deaths due to terrorist attacks. In 2017, alliances were made between local movements and IS, either through pledges of allegiance, the return of foreign fighters to the region, or through IS-inspired individuals and families. Figures show that IS affiliates committed 348 attacks in Southeast Asia that year which resulted in 292 deaths. The perpetrators came from within the region, from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand (and Bangladesh). The 2018 Global Terrorism Index also shows that the Philippines in particular recorded the highest number of deaths from terrorism in 2017 since 2002.

WHAT ARE THE MODES OF IS AND AQ EXPANSION?

What does it mean that transnational jihadism has established a presence in Southeast Asia? As described in an earlier contribution, there are several ways in which IS and AQ make inroads into new countries and areas.

The most concrete way of establishing a presence has been through the control of territory, which also marks a substantial difference between AQ and IS: AQ never controlled large territories, although it tried to do so in Anbar province in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and regional AQ groups have had intermittent control of smaller territories in, for example, Syria and Yemen. In contrast, from its start in 2006, IS had as its declared goal the establishment of an Islamic state, first in Iraq, then in Syria, culminating in the ambition to create a caliphate stretching ‘from China to Rome’.

Aside from territorial expansion, IS and AQ expand their presence when a local jihadist movement makes a pledge of allegiance (bayah) to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the IS spiritual leader or Al-Zawahiri the AQ leader. Alternatively, the central leadership can, through their communications, declare their presence in a given country or region or their ‘opening’ of a new chapter/province, moving strategically and ideologically in a given direction, driven, for instance, by their apocalyptic vision or strategic interest in gaining territory where they can organise, train and mobilise new recruits or funding. And finally, sometimes the local and transnational jihadist movements are drawn together by their overlapping interests, such as the call or struggle for a Sharia-based state, which can foster linkages through training or funding. The two movements can use each other, without the central leadership of IS or AQ being involved in, for instance, the identification of concrete targets, while the local movement may have no objection to the transnational jihadist movement claiming responsibility for an attack that was identified and carried out without its direct support.

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

Earlier research at DIIS (2016, 2017) that was based on comparisons across regions (looking at the cases of Lebanon, Bangladesh, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan and Pakistan, North Africa and the Sahel, Syria and Iraq, Russia and the Caucasus) has, among other trends, pointed at following expansion dynamics. These were summed up in Sheikh 2017 as:

- Military interventions by the West in a given region/country (Afghanistan, Syria/Iraq, Mali and Libya) have had the effect of dispersing these movements. AQ went from being active in Afghanistan to having strong branches in, for instance, North Africa (AQIM), the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and South Asia (AQIS). The aftermath of the Iraq intervention in 2003 gave rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which later split into one faction that remained faithful to the AQ agenda and another that wanted to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Levant (ISIS). With the renewed Western-led military campaigns in Iraq from 2014 and in Syria later the same year, IS went from being a movement fighting for the interests of Sunni Muslim Arabs in Iraq and attracting foreign fighters to Iraq/Syria, to encouraging their Western sympathisers to carry out attacks in their home countries.

- Western interventions are not the only factor in disseminating jihadist networks: the development of jihadism is also rooted in local conditions, and as an integrated part of their ideology and modus operandi, their expansion into new battlefields is significant.
Both AQ and IS are attracted to countries where there is political unrest and a polarised political climate. In Bangladesh, for instance, a domestic war crimes tribunal handed down the death penalty to collaborators with the Pakistani army in the independence war of 1971, among them the leaders of Jamaate Islami, the largest Islamist party in the country. The clashes this caused ‘invited’ militant jihadism onto the Bangladeshi stage. In Burkina Faso, the end of the 27-year regime of President Blaise Compaoré moved the country into a new security situation that allowed jihadism to flourish.

The lack of rule of law is another factor likely to increase political polarisation, as was the case not only in Burkina Faso, but also in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where, until very recently, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have had space to organise, take control, undertake service provision etc.

The historical presence of anti-Shia movements and cleavages is particularly exploited by IS sympathisers. IS often taps into local and regional conflicts where there is a sectarian dimension (note that the movements that pledge allegiance to IS also often have a sectarian agenda). However, sectarian rivalry and differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims do not in themselves increase the probability of transnational jihadism gaining a foothold. In Lebanon, not even foreign attempts to boost Shia-Sunni conflicts have led to an organised IS or AQ presence. At the same time Bangladesh, with its homogenous Sunni Muslim population and no noteworthy Sunni-Shia clashes, has attracted both IS and AQ.

Repressive autocracy is not a bulwark against transnational jihadism, but it is more likely to export jihadists to other places, such as when Saudis travel to Yemen or Afghanistan. In Saudi Arabia political differences are repressed by an autocratic and repressive regime, and the lack of political rivalry can partly explain why neither AQ nor IS have managed to establish a successful presence there, in spite of the regime being demonised by both movements.

Neighbouring unrest or foreign intervention in nearby countries increases the risk of regional spillovers of jihadism. Foreign interference by NATO, France and the UN in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013) has fuelled a growing insurgency which, for example, spilled over into Burkina Faso. Similarly, the international intervention in Afghanistan and the US drone campaign in the tribal areas of Pakistan from 2004 onwards have had repercussions in the form of the appearance of Islamic State in Afpak (i.e. the Islamic state of Khorasan), while the involvement of Bangladeshi jihadists in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has fostered operational ties with both AQ and IS, which can be exploited when they return home.

Strategic decision-making and ideological fulfilment on the part of the central leadership is another aspect of the situation. In September 2014, for example, Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced the presence of al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), its aim being to operate in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Since then AQ has had a presence in these countries, and we have seen an increase in AQ-related terrorist attacks in South Asia.

Humanitarian crises where Muslims are victims are also utilised by transnational jihadist movements as they fit into the narrative of a systematic attack on Islam by infidel forces. This refers both to cases where Muslims are in fact persecuted or vulnerable, such as the Rohingya Muslims, Muslims in Indian-held Kashmir etc., or cases where there is military interference by foreign forces in Muslim-majority countries. AQ especially has established its presence on the basis that it is an ‘international solidarity movement for downtrodden Muslims’, in line with its narrative of Islam being under systematic attack.

The interference of foreign/neighbouring countries through the use of proxies is also a factor that leads to the transnationalization of jihadist conflicts. Afghanistan has for example been a stage for not only international rivalry between Russia and the US, but also regional rivalry for decades, and local jihadi movements are often sponsored or supported by foreign donors, including support in the form of fighters from abroad.

Taking a look at what then might have served as a bulwark, the following patterns stand out:

Socio-economic development and stability can prevent transnational jihadi movements from establishing their presence. Lebanon has one of the strongest economies in the region, and oil has made Saudi Arabia wealthy. In both countries AQ and IS have not successfully gained a foothold. Burkina Faso, by contrast, is one of the world’s poorest countries, and although Bangladesh (where both AQ and IS are active) is developing rapidly, millions of people, especially in rural areas, still live below the poverty line.

Authoritarian states have success in handling the internal threat of transnational jihadism. This implies that stability (and successful counterterrorism efforts) must often be balanced against the rule of law and respect for human rights. Saudi Arabia is, for example, one of the most repressive regimes in the world, with an efficient security sector, which has managed to prevent both AQ and IS from establishing a strong presence there.
WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN THEATRE?

The four cases examined in this volume do not bring to light empirical insights that challenge the conclusions above. However, whereas our earlier research has included many countries that experienced contemporary, Western-led military interventions, the case of Southeast Asia can bring our attention to other factors. The region is puzzling because it has until recently, as described by Finnbogason & Svensson (2018) been a region that has avoided the internationalisation and escalation of local Islamist conflicts due to two factors: a) the openness of political channels for voicing Islamist aspirations, and b) government repression. The aspirations of IS and al-Qaeda in the region however are pulling in another direction, where the presence of Islamist conflicts might not be important for determining or explaining expansion.

The region can potentially teach us something about the linkage between local insurgency and transnational jihadism, as it ‘hosts’ four conflict areas where armed insurgencies have appeared. As described by Finnbogason & Svensson (2018) these include insurgencies in Thailand’s southernmost provinces (Pattani), Mindanao and the Sulu islands (Bangsamoro) in the Philippines, Aceh in Indonesia, and northern Rakhine state in Myanmar.

**Philippines**: This chapter zooms in on the question of the relationship between IS and AQ and the local jihadist groups in the Philippines. The case displays an involvement of the IS core in Syria/Iraq, but without a detailed regulation of events. At the same time the case illustrates an example of a local conflict in Mindanao where foreign fighters have actually operated. Finally, the case of the Philippines displays how transnational jihad plays into the local/nationalist struggles, such as the Moro nationalism that dates back to the 1960s.

**Indonesia**: This chapter looks closely into the dual development of democracy (and the overall prosperity of the country) and violent jihadism, which challenges the idea of democracy and voicing opportunities (for Islamists) being bulwarks against transnational jihad. It raises a debate that we know from the Middle Eastern context after the Arab Spring, which is about the linkages between democracy and the rise of conservatism. The case of Indonesia also displays how families are playing an increased role in the organisation of terrorist attacks, reducing the significance of local Islamist movements.

**Malaysia**: This chapter highlights the significance of counter-terrorism efforts, including repressive laws, that may explain the relative success in containing IS influence in Malaysia. The country, which has been used a ‘transit hub’ for transnational jihadists, reinforces the notion of a link between repressive state policies and the ‘export’ of jihadi fighters. The case of Malaysia also addresses the question of how polarised debates about the state, religion, and politics matter for evaluating the vulnerability of the Malaysian population in the face of movements like the AQ and IS.

**Thailand**: This chapter analyses the intriguing case of Thailand, where the local conflict in Pattani province particularly demands attention. The case in interesting as neither IS nor al-Qaeda has successfully transformed the local conflict into an area attracting foreign fighters (unlike the case of the Philippines), and the main discourse around the conflict has remained ‘ethno-nationalist’ more than ‘religious’. However, an increased radicalisation of Buddhist militants and a growing Islamophobia across the country might be developments that can tap into the ideology of movements like IS and AQ.

The case shows that local insurgencies, where Muslim minorities are involved, can sometimes remain ‘local’, which in turn points to a central question that deserves more focus in future research on transnational jihad: why do some local conflicts get enlarged and redefined as a global ideological battle, while others successfully remain local?
NOTES


2 Ibid.


12 Ibid.

13 See Global Terrorism Index 2018 at http://globalterrorismindex.org/.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 27 January 2019, two bombs detonated in- and just outside the Catholic cathedral in Jolo in the southern Philippines. Twenty were killed and more than 100 injured. As always, when a terror incident occurs, the exact data about what happened is hard to grasp as conflicting rumour and speculation immediately flourish. This confusing situation is quite normal anywhere in the world. In the Philippines, where terrorist incidents occur quite often, the confusion about what really happened continues for months and sometimes forever.

This situation is due to conflicting political interests in how to understand, interpret and evaluate the terrorism threat in the Philippines, especially when it comes to transnational jihadism. The confusion and speculation are further reinforced by the fact that government institutions and security authorities try to block access to the crime scene for the media and others wanting to investigate. This was the case after the cathedral bombings in Jolo. Months later, we are still not certain about what happened. After the authorities first claimed two Malaysians were responsible for the bombings, it was later revealed it was two Indonesian citizens, a woman and her husband, who carried them out by detonating two improvised explosive devices (IED) with mobile phones. Whether they were suicide bombers or just did not escape the scene and were killed by their own bombs, is not clear.¹

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AN ISLAMIC STATE EMIRATE IN MINDANAO?

The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack on the ‘crusader temple’, as they called the cathedral, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) blamed the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG), an active local jihadist group with a long history in the southern Philippines, for organising the attacks. After having links with al-Qaida (AQ) for many years going back to the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, ASG swore allegiance to IS in the summer of 2014. However, it is not at all clear how close and developed the relation between IS and ASG is today. This relation and the relations in general of IS and AQ to the jihadist groups in the Philippines is the main question raised in this chapter. It is well known that jihadist groups in Philippines for more than four decades have worked together with AQ and other transnational jihadi networks and offered training facilities and camps to jihadists in the region, especially from Indonesia. However, whether AQ and, from 2014, IS actually have an operational presence in the Philippines or are actively supporting the local groups with logistics and resources is disputed.

The Jolo cathedral bombings came a little more than a year after President Rodrigo Duterte declared victory over IS in the Philippines. His statement followed the Marawi siege, a five-month-long conflict in the city of Marawi in Lanao del Sur from the end of May 2017 to October the same year between government forces and jihadi insurgents. Almost 1,000 jihadists, including the so-called ‘Emir of IS’, Isnilon Hapilon, were killed. Following the president’s statement IS posted a video on social media threatening him and the Philippines with revenge. Some commentators see the cathedral bombings as this revenge for the Marawi siege. They indicate that local jihadist groups with links to IS are determined to create an IS base in the southern Philippines from where it can conduct insurgency and terrorism in the region of Southeast Asia as well as in the Philippines.²

Worries that IS will try to gain strongholds outside the Arab Middle East, e.g. in the Philippines, have gained strength after the dissolution of the IS caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2018. Many argue that IS will continue its insurgency and fight for a caliphate in areas beyond the Middle East by establishing Islamic emirates and point to conflict zones in Southeast Asia.²

These worries and warnings were further fuelled by the terrible terrorism at Easter time in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019. In coordinated suicide operations seven perpetrators attacked three churches and three luxury hotels killing 258 persons and injuring around 500. The Easter bombings also indicate that IS does not need a strong presence in the areas where it wants to conduct terrorism. Contacts and connections with very few persons in a local conflict zone is, under certain conditions, e.g. ignorance by local authorities of warnings and countermeasures, enough to be able to organise mass casualty terrorism as we saw in Colombo.

Analysts and commentators warn that these conditions exactly are present in the Philippines today: a long history of jihadist insurgency, transnational links between local groups and AQ and IS, and small groups operating especially in the south, make the Philippines vulnerable to attacks from transnational jihadists, they claim.⁴

The worries about the Philippines being turned into a hub for transnational jihad in the Southeast Asia region got wide exposure in a front-page article in the New York Times on 9 March 2019. The article ‘How ISIS is Rising in the Philippines as it Dwindaes in the Middle East’ quoted a rather alarmist statement made by Philippine researcher Rommel Banlaoi: ‘ISIS is the most complicated, evolving problem for the Philippines today, and we should not pretend that it doesn’t exist because we don’t want it to exist’.³ Although some sources I interviewed in Manila, consider Banlaoi too alarmist in his assessments, the warning that IS is about to create a stronghold in the Philippines among local jihadi groups needs to be taken seriously and discussed – not least in light of the claimed IS links to the Jolo cathedral bombings in January and the Sri Lanka Easter bombings in April 2019.⁵

THREE NARRATIVES ON THE THREAT OF TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISM

The debates in the Philippines on the question of AQ and in particular IS involvement in local conflicts are very diverse and can, for an overview, be divided into three main positions: on the one side the ‘alarmists’ where we find Rommel Banlaoi and others who identify a strong and increasing transnational jihadist development in the southern Philippines and on the opposite side the position of NICA (The National Intelligence Coordinating Agency) and other government agencies that downplay IS’s role and argue that there is only a limited foreign influence among the local jihadi groups. This position has largely also been that of the president’s office, but it has somewhat changed with Duterte in office, who expresses a middle position; less alarmist but more concerned about the threat than NICA are. Of course, multiple other narratives and positions, often vested with different political interests, can be identified. However, these narratives group themselves around the three dominant positions.

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The Philippines is an archipelagic country, covering 300,000 km² and consisting of more than 7,107 islands divided into three main groups: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The capital Manila is situated in central Luzon while the year-long Islamic insurgency has primarily unfolded in Mindanao in the south. The population amounts to approximately 107 million consisting of up to 175 different ethnic groups with Visayan (32%) and Tagalog (29%) being the largest ones. The Muslims are named ‘Moros’, a name given by the Spanish (like ‘Moors’ in Andalusia).

While the Spanish colonisation today is visible in culture, names and religion, the American impact has been on language and in the political sphere and popular culture. When the Americans accidently became colonisers in the Philippines, they tried to fulfill the vision of Woodrow Wilson in making ‘the World safe for Democracy’. The results were mixed. The US granted independence to the Republic of the Philippines in 1946, but the Americans never really left as they kept bases, businesses and other institutions in place, and today the US Embassy is staffed with around 1,500 employees. During the Cold War the Philippines was an important ally to the US and later America needed the Philippines in the containment of China’s interests and activities in the South China Sea. The Philippines has also been a close ally in the US-conducted War on Terror, and US aid, weapons and resources to the government and the security forces (army and police) in counterterrorism operations in Mindanao have shaped the security architecture.

Since the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, the relationship between Washington and Manila has somehow dampened. When Barack Obama, before a scheduled meeting with Duterte in Manila in 2016, announced that he would put a critique of the deterioration of the human rights situation on the agenda because of Duterte’s brutal war on drugs where estimates are that between 6,000 and 12,000 have been killed, Duterte replied by calling Obama ‘a son of a whore’ and Obama cancelled the meeting. Subsequently, the USA has withheld or redirected allocations to the Philippines. Another issue is Rodrigo Duterte’s interest in having closer relations to China in contrast to the majority among the Philippine ruling classes, including the elites and the AFP, that prefer to stay with the USA. Donald Trump, who is not concerned about human rights issues and favours strong men as state leaders, praised Duterte’s War on Drugs in a telephone conversation in April 2017 and invited him to the White House; an invitation Duterte later declined. While the State Department in Washington and US politicians in Congress are concerned about the human rights situation in the Philippines as well as the jihadist insurgency...
in Mindanao, especially the Marawi siege, Trump needs the Philippines in his Indo-Pacific strategy directed at containment of China. Despite Duterte’s continuing rapprochement to China, most analysts and commentators in Manila expect the Philippines to stay aligned with the US.  

The development of democracy in the Philippines since its independence has been difficult and was even suspended during the last part of the rule of Ferdinand Marcos until a ‘people power’ movement in 1986 forced him into exile and democracy was reinstated. The political structure of Philippine society is to a large extent divided between family clans with separate economic and political interests: elite and rich families who ‘exert powerful influence over elections, legislation, policymaking, regulatory bodies, jurisprudence and the distribution of government resources. This has put severe limitations on any full democratic development.’

This situation has provided space for criminal gangs and widespread corruption where the Philippines is, in 2018, ranked 99 out of 180 countries on the corruption perceptions index developed by Transparency International. The inequality between rich and poor is big with a developing middle class in between.

Duterte is considered a populist strongman with a dirty language (a bit like the rhetoric sometimes used by Donald Trump). There is serious concern about his War on Drugs, especially in Western countries and among human rights organisations, which accuse the Duterte regime of violating rights and conducting killings randomly.

The Philippines has experienced growth in the last 15 years, and this continues under Duterte. Beside of the War on Drugs, his main priorities are investment in infrastructure, social reforms including in the health and education sector where the state under Duterte has opened for free access, and a constitutional reform that will turn the Philippines into a federation. Duterte has also committed himself to continue the peace process with the insurgencies groups in Mindanao.

While politicians and media in the West are criticising Duterte for the way he conducts the war on drugs and accuse him of random killings and human right violations as well as undermining democracy, Duterte himself rejects the critique and claims that the war is necessary and the only way to get rid of a serious problem that is an existential challenge to the development of the Philippines. Alongside his controversial war on drugs, Duterte’s social reforms in general represent necessary progress in order to develop Philippine society. Concerning the issue of counterinsurgency and the fight against transnational jihadism, it is an improvement that the peace process seems to be back on track.

This has led to the paradoxical situation whereby in the international society and media Duterte is portrayed and criticised for his ‘strongman leadership’ but domestically is very popular: the Philippine voters like that he is keeping his campaign promises to combat crime and drugs, is investing in infrastructure, making social reforms, fighting poverty, and keeping a good growth rate in the economy. He also appeals to an Asian nationalism with his rapprochement to China. Duterte’s popularity also gives him a strong position when it comes to counterterrorism and the peace process in Mindanao.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF JIHAD IN THE PHILIPPINES**

On 6 January 1995, a fire in an apartment in the Malate district in Manila led to the discovery of one of the most complicated and ambitious terror plots in history when it comes to both the targets and the number of victims, the so-called Bojinka plot. Together with Khaled Sheikh Mohammad who is considered to be the mastermind of the 9/11 2001 terror attacks in Washington and New York, Ramzi Yousef, a Kuwaiti-born Pakistani, were planning a three-phase terror plot: first the assassination of Pope John Paul II during a visit to Manila in January 1995; second to blow up 11 airliners in flight from Asia to the USA killing more than 4,000 people, and third crashing a plane into the headquarters of the CIA in Virginia, USA. While in Manila, they constructed and tested bombs. Ramzi Yousef had already detonated one bomb in December 1994 on Philippine Airlines Flight 434. He assembled it in the airplane toilet before placing it under a seat and then left the plane on a stopover in Cebu. The bomb exploded over Japan, one was killed and ten injured. When the Philippine investigators searched the apartment, they found materials to construct bombs, various fake passports and other documents as well as the laptop of Ramzi Yousef that contained files about the plot and communication with Khaled Sheikh Mohammad.

Ramzi Yousef was well known to the American authorities, as he was the mastermind of the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City in 1993. Before that he had been fighting together with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Bojinka plot was approved and financed by al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. After the fire at his apartment in Manila, he escaped to Pakistan where he was arrested a month later in Islamabad. He is today incarcerated in Florida serving a life sentence. The mastermind of the 9/11 plot, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, escaped but was arrested in Rawalpindi in Pakistan in 2003 and transferred to Guantanamo prison.
While fighting in Afghanistan Ramzi Yousef met jihadists from the Philippine Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and later he went to Mindanao to establish an AQ stronghold in the Philippines. In 1992 he travelled to New York where he organised the 1993 attack on the World Trade Centre then disappeared, re-emerging in Manila in 1995.

The story of Ramzi Yousef and the Bojinka plot proves that AQ and transnational jihadist networks have a long-term interest in the Philippines and in establishing a base for operations there. It also indicates that so-called foreign fighters sometimes continue their operations and organising of terrorism after leaving the conflict zones. After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 the foreign fighters from Asia and the Middle East appeared as trained terrorists in many places around the globe such as Egypt, Algeria, the Balkans, Caucasus and also in Mindanao as members of local insurgency groups. Many worry that this history will repeat itself today after the dissolution of IS caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2018. Due to the long history of Islamic insurgency in Mindanao that has attracted transnational jihadists, there are good reasons to worry that Mindanao and in a broader sense the Philippines will attract fighters from the former IS caliphate. It is also part of this story, though, that the Philippine authorities supported by the US has a long experience with counterinsurgency and counterterrorism that as well as law enforcement, intelligence, police and military operations and military presence in Mindanao also includes negotiations and a peace process that seems to have a high priority under the Duterte presidency.

In other words, while there is no doubt that interference in the jihadist insurgency in Mindanao is attractive for IS fighters in order to continue their fight for IS by organising militant jihadism; the question is how well prepared the Philippines is for this situation and to what degree the peace process will create resilience in the Philippines against the IS threat of involvement in the conflicts in Mindanao? A second question is whether foreign fighters and transnational jihadists are able to operate in Mindanao on a larger scale or if the social, economic and political and cultural web is too complicated for foreigners to cope with. Experiences from Somalia in the mid-1990s, where AQ tried to establish a stronghold and an operational base for conducting attacks, showed that the social structure in Somalia and the almost absent infrastructure made the country too difficult for AQ to establish a base in. Despite this, AQ was still able use Somalia as a transit route in organising the terror attacks on US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. However, AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri concluded that Somalia was not a suitable place for AQ to establish a base. Another example is Anbar province in Iraq where AQ jihadists tried to control the cities after the US invasion of the US war in Iraq, but were shortly met by opposition to their Salafist ideology and resistance from the local Sunni Muslims, who in 2006 aligned themselves with the US troops and the new Iraqi government. Perhaps IS will face similar challenges in Mindanao?

**MORO NATIONALISM**

‘Moro’ means Muslim of which there are 13 ethnic groups in Mindanao. The Moro insurgency can be traced back to Spain’s colonisation, but in its modern form goes back to the early 1970s. The most known groups are the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and a series of minor groups that are often created by splitting offs from the larger movements. Fragmentation of the groups, often because of disagreements about strategy, divided loyalties related to tribal relations, economic interests and criminal activities, or different positions in negotiations with the government, seem to be the rule of the day; new groups emerge, and others disappear. The conflict between Moro insurgents and the Government is one of the longest-running and most deadly in Asia as it is estimated it has claimed the lives of 120,000 people and displaced approximately two million.

In order to provide an overview of the development of the conflict, Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, suggests dividing this protracted conflict into three periods, which we will adopt here. They are, the first period, from the 1970s to the 1980s, in which Moro nationalists dominated; the second period, from the 1990s to around 2006, in which extreme Islamism - jihadism - made significant inroads into the Moro struggle, and the third period, from 2007 to the present [2016], when a more moderate Islamism gained clear ascendency. In 1996, in the second phase, the first peace agreement was negotiated between the secular MNLF and the government. At that time the MNLF had it in for years been engaged in heavy fighting with the AFP and at the same time, the leadership was at risk of being outmanoeuvred by the Islamists and therefore tried to gain control by accepting a peace deal that obviously did not work and that probably contributed to the rise of the Islamists’ strength in the following years.

Quimpo adds that ‘at least for now’ jihadism has waned, but this was written before the Marawi siege in 2017 and the Jolo bombgings in 2019. Despite these events, many still agree with Quimpo on his point about a waning jihadism. However, as we have seen, many also disagree and see the jihadist threat as increasing, especially after the dissolution of the Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2018.
During the regime of Ferdinand Marcos (president from 1965-1972 and then dictator till 1986 after he declared a state of exemption) resistance groups were established as early as the late 1960s in an insurgency against the government, which they accused of conducting an ignorant and oppressive policy that marginalised the Muslim communities. MNLF was established in 1969 with the political aim and a rhetoric similar to those of many of the other liberation movements around the world in postcolonial areas in Latin America, Africa and Asia from the 1960s onwards. MNLF accused the Marcos government of continuing the colonialism of Spain and America and fought for an independent Bangsamoro republic - Bangsamoro can be translated as ‘the nation of the Muslim people’. The insurgency developed into a bloody war with the government forces, and brutal fighting between the Moros and the Christian families and landowners in Mindanao who, likewise, established militias and conducted attacks. A Christian resistance movement with contacts and influence among politicians in Manila and senators in the parliament lobbied against negotiations with MNLF. Thus, a peace agreement brokered by Libya and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in 1976 that would have given autonomy to the Moros in 13 provinces was never implemented. It was not until after Ferdinand Marcos was forced into exile in 1986 that negotiations resumed and, in 1987, the new president Corazon Aquino signed a law on the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The Christian landowners worked against the implementation of it, as did MNLF which, at that time, objected to the establishment of an ARMM, at least in the form that the Aquino law stipulated. Disagreements, fighting and conflict continued until 1996 when MNLF accepted a new peace agreement, which did not settle the conflicts but instead led to internal clashes in MNLF.

**MORO ISLAMISM**

Already in 1976, leaders from MNLF had broken away from the party line and in 1977 established an Islamic front inside the MNLF. While the MNLF as a group was inspired by and endorsed a secular-nationalistic ideology, often influenced by leftist Marxist rhetoric, the Islamic leaders subscribed to the Islamist ideology that developed in Egypt in the 1970s in opposition to the Western-oriented policy of the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat who not only opened the door to the USA but also, in 1979, made peace with Israel. Inspired by Islamic thinkers like Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) in Egypt, Syed Maududi (1903-1979) in Pakistan and Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) in Saudi Arabia, a politicised interpretation of Islam flourished in the Middle East and Asia and became the ideological basis for militant groups like al-Qaeda and also for insurgent groups in many conflict zones like the ASG in Mindanao. The aim of this Islamic movement was to re-establish what they called the Islamic Umma, a Muslim society based on a fundamentalist reading of the Quran and, ultimately, a caliphate. For the Islamic leaders in Mindanao the aim was to establish a Bangsamoro emirate and the tool to obtain it was jihad.

This transformation from a secular-nationalistic dominated insurgency to an Islamic one, which as indicated could be seen in many areas of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, was boosted by the war in Afghanistan: the success of the Islamic groups in fighting the Soviet occupation attracted many foreign fighters including from Asia and the Philippines. For many Islamists it confirmed their belief in Islamist ideology, and that jihad was the best way to obtain their aims. The jihadists in Mindanao rode on this wave and provided training camps and safe havens to jihadists, especially from the Southeast Asian region. Through the years, ASG in particular became infamous for hostage-taking to generate income. The Philippine jihadists developed close relations to groups in Malaysia and in Indonesia to the Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) that trained cadres in jihadi camps in Mindanao. JI was responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002 that killed 202 persons and some of the perpetrators were trained in Mindanao. Mindanao and the camps have, for years, been easily accessible from Malaysia and Indonesia by sea and the camps provided a safe haven for terrorists engaged in operations both in the Philippines and in the wider region. In 1984 the Islamic Front in MNLF broke with the movement and continued under the name ‘Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)’ and were, together with other jihadist groups, deeply involved in militant insurgency.

This situation continued and intensified until 2003/2004 when the leaders of MILF decided to break with ASG, abstain from the use of violence and hostage-taking, and start negotiations with the government in Manila. This change of policy and strategy was partly promoted by the War on Terror that the George W. Bush administration initiated as a response to the 9/11 terrorism. With the threat of being placed on US and international lists of designated terror organisations, which would deprive MILF of the position as a legitimate partner in the negotiations with the government on peace and autonomy for Bangsamoro, the leaders decided to abstain from militancy, break with ASG, and instead of militant insurgency adopt a strategy based on negotiations with the government in Manila in the struggle for Moro autonomous rule.
IJHADISM AND THE BATTLE OF MARAWI

History repeated itself as the MILF got boosted by the MNLF settling of a peace deal with the government in 1996. The policy shift of MILF that turned the group into being the most important actor in the peace process negotiations with the government was met with opposition from jihadists who insisted on continuing jihad. ASG continued with militancy and hostage-taking, contact to AQ and, from 2014, to IS. Since 2014 has ASG unofficially been known as ‘IS Philippine province’. Some groups broke out while others were expelled from MILF. In 2011 the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) were expelled and the following year another breakaway group was established by the Maute brothers under the name Dawlah Islamiyah (Islamic State) in Lanao del Sur. The group, which is generally called the Maute Group (MG), was headed by Abdullah and Omar Maute, who belonged to a wealthy and influential family under the leadership of Ominta Romato Maute who runs a construction company and owns properties in Manila and Mindanao and who has been accused of funding the Maute group.26

A significant problem in understanding these groups’ activities and agendas is related to the complex situation in Mindanao that is afflicted by many different conflicts, which are more related to the economy and to competition for local power than to the struggle for protecting the rights of the Moros. Criminality, hostage-taking, gang fights and drug crime are mixed up with jihad and political struggles with the government. Until 2016 when MG adopted the flag of IS, it was more considered as a private militia of the Maute family, fighting other clans and families in order to protect and expand the family’s business interests. Thus, as pointed out in a policy brief from Australian Aid, much of the violence in Mindanao is related to the shadow economy: “These so-called "shadow economies" include the proliferation of illegal firearms, kidnapping for ransom, informal land markets, cross-border trade, informal credit provision and illegal drug markets”.27 Many of the jihadist groups are in one way or the other embedded in this shadow economy, which is at least as important a factor in the violence as jihad for the right Islamic society and the involvement of transnationalism are. That also means that conducting counter-terrorism operations, e.g. by capturing jihadist leaders, runs the risk of becoming involved in and running up against a complicated network of informal and illegal economic power relations. What seems to be a rather clear-cut and simple terrorism operation, e.g. by capturing jihadist leaders, runs the risk of becoming involved in and running up against a complicated ghostly network of informal and illegal economic power relations. What seems to be a rather clear-cut and simple operation can turn out to be a complicated nightmare for the security forces, which AFP has experienced several times, most recently in the battle of Marawi.28

Marawi, the capital in Lanao del Sur, is a city of more than 200,000 citizens and home to universities, Islamic institutions and cherished mosques. Lanao del Sur was the stronghold of MG with a presence in Marawi. In the beginning of May 2017, the AFP received intelligence that activities related to the MG were consolidating their presence in Marawi. To validate this information, AFP together with Philippine National Police (PNP) investigated and discovered that the leader of ASG, one of the most wanted terrorists in the world, Isnilon Hapilon, was hiding in the city. AFP decided to capture Hapilon in what they considered a clear-cut simple operation. Instead, AFP was met by armed MG fighters that also soon gained support from ASG and other jihadist groups. During the siege the flag of IS was flown and IS media platforms compared the siege to the IS takeover of Mosul in Iraq in June 2018. It is reported that a few foreign fighters were involved in the battles, but it is not clear how many or the extent to which IS was involved; if at all probably not very much. The fighting lasted for five months and left Marawi in ruins. Almost 1,000 jihadists, 168 security force personnel, and 87 civilians were killed and the city almost emptied resulting in up to 200,000 displaced persons.29

It was of course a shocking surprise for the Philippines that the operation to capture one terrorist turned into a warlike, five-month long battle. Clearly, AFP and PNP underestimated the complexity of the operation and the resistance they would meet from the jihadists, which of course led to debates about the preparedness of the counterterrorism policy and strategy. The city of Marawi was bombed to ruins and the plans for its rebuilding have also led to many debates and much mutual criticism among the Philippine politicians and the displaced citizens of Marawi. Furthermore, the Marawi battle raised questions about the status of the Bangsamoro peacebuilding process.30

BANGSAMORO

As already mentioned, the nationalist struggle of the Moros has a long history in Mindanao and following extremely bloody fighting the first attempts at initiating a peace process by establishing an autonomous Moro region in areas in the western part of Mindanao began with an agreement brokered by Libya and signed by the government and MNLF in Tripoli in 1976. Due to resistance from Christian landowners and families and internal disagreements in MNLF that led to the establishment of an Islamic front within the group in 1977, it was not implemented. In 1984, the Islamic front left the MNLF and took the name Moro Islamic Liberation
and MILF despite the assurances from the leadership of commitment to the process. Most doubt in the process is related to MNLF, some of whose members perceive the group to have been sidelined in the process by the Manila government. Clearly all stakeholders in the process need to be willing to compromise on difficult issues like leadership and governance, distribution of land, public services to four million people, disarming and resocialisation of fighters etc. Most doubt in the process is related to MNLF; some of whose members perceive the group to have been sidelined in the process by the Manila government and MILF despite the assurances from the leadership of commitment to the development and political inclusion.

Shortly after the government-initiated negotiations with MILF. After having abandoned the militant struggle and jihad, MILF and the government reached an agreement in 2008, but it was not until March 2014 that they signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. The predecessor to Duterte, Benigno Aquino III, failed to have the law passed that legalised Bangsamoro but Duterte redrafted it and succeeded in having it passed as the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2018. The law stated that a region with the name Bangsamoro and with a bigger territory and another structure of government than ARMM should be created as an autonomous region in the western part of Mindanao. The supreme sovereignty of Bangsamoro would still be within the control of the Philippine state, but the autonomous government could have some control over the resources in the area, including the newly-discovered oil and gas resources. The law also stated that the ARMM should be dismantled and replaced by the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Two plebiscites in January and February 2019 have, with significant majorities, ratified the law and the transition from ARMM to BARMM is now in the hands of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), whose composition has been ratified and whose members have sworn an oath to the state. It will be responsible for the transition until 2022 when elections for a Bangsamoro parliament and government are scheduled to take place.

**BUMPS ON THE ROAD AND COUNTERTERRORISM**

These developments all seem promising for a peaceful resolution of the conflict: apparently the government and the main groups in Muslim Mindanao are agreeing on a process that has been ratified both by plebiscites in the region and by the parliament and government. Clearly all stakeholders in the process need to be willing to compromise on difficult issues like leadership and governance, distribution of land, public services to four million people, disarming and resocialisation of fighters etc. Most doubt in the process is related to MNLF; some of whose members perceive the group to have been sidelined in the process by the Manila government and MILF despite the assurances from the leadership of commitment to the transition process. In February 2019 a splinter group headed by a lawyer, Firdausi Abbas, criticised MILF, whose leaders he called ‘tyrants’ who were not able to chair the transition. The official line is, though, that MNLF is committed to the process, which is very important for its success as MNLF represents other and more secular constituencies than MILF.

There are many challenges and bumps on the road to peace. As pointed out by the Australian Aid policy brief, there are tremendous problems with the shadow economy that creates spaces for fraud, criminality, proliferation of firearms and clashes between clans and families that can destabilise the process and open spaces for jihadists to fit in. There are Christian landowners and others with strong relations to the policy establishment in Manila that will stubbornly work against BARMM and might be able to exploit the corruption in the Philippine political system. Moreover, there are jihadists that - maybe under the influence of transnational jihadist networks like IS - will do what they can to sabotage the process. Finally, there are states like Saudi Arabia that are interested in fulfilling their dubious foreign policy interests by supporting Islamist movements.

The Philippine authorities, the government, and the BTA need to consider these aspects and develop a strategy to handle them. However, Bangsamoro does seem to be the best strategy although it needs to be supplemented by other initiatives from the government like a sustainable development policy in Mindanao including a strategy to reduce the shadow economy and corruption as well as the informal power of clans and wealthy families. Perhaps this policy would be even more important than a hardcore counterterrorism strategy. In October 2018 the chairman of MILF Alhaj Murad Ebrahim, unveiled ten priorities in the transition period that highlighted exactly these points, so they clearly are on the agenda in the peace process, which of course is not a guarantee they will be addressed properly.

As also summarised by Sam Chittick, it is important that the transition addresses the social and developmental issues in the region where up to 70% live in poverty and where disputes over land and resources have been the key reasons for conflicts, fighting and criminality. In terrorism research it has been common to point to the so-called ‘Crime-Terror Nexus’ indicating that terrorism is funded by criminal activities, but terrorism and criminality in areas like Mindanao are probably expressions of the same root causes that need to be addressed by economic development and political inclusion.
COUNTERTERRORISM FRAMEWORK

Many commentators and analysts who focus on counterterrorism point out that the Philippines needs a new approach and new legislation as the existing ones date back to 2007. So far counterterrorism has followed two tracks: negotiations, and hardcore military operations with the aim of pre-empting jihad (and communist) groups from caring out militancy and terrorism. Another problem has been the access to Mindanao from the sea that has made it easy for jihadists and kidnappers to travel between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In 2016, the three countries agreed to boost maritime security in a coordinated strategy, but it is difficult to have full control over the traffic on the sea. That speaks for the need for regional cooperation in a broader sense, maybe under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This point was underlined at the ASEAN summit in Bangkok, 23 June 2019.

Recently, a countering violent extremism (CVE) program has been implemented primarily based on so-called ‘counter narrative efforts’, which enlists imams and community leaders on the ground to tell an alternative narrative than that of the jihadists. The experience in Mindanao and elsewhere is, though, that neither military operations nor counter narratives work effectively in fighting terrorism unless followed up with just law enforcement, economic and social development, and political inclusion. The framework of BARMM is a first step to initiate such a strategy but only the first. Another obstacle are the conflicting interests and interpretations of the jihadist threat in Mindanao, including the threats from transnational jihad networks, among AFP, PNP, agencies (NICA), authorities, politicians, and the Office of the President. These different and sometimes opposing interests can make it hard to develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy and even harder to have it implemented.

BANGSAMORO IS THE BEST PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

In the introduction we mapped three different narratives on the threat from transnational jihad networks and in particular IS. The first, the alarmist one, warns of an increasing threat from IS and a real risk of the establishing of an IS Emirate in Mindanao. After having investigated the developments in Mindanao, including the battle of Marawi, we do not see much evidence for this assessment. IS has shown interest in supporting the jihadists in Mindanao and it has accepted ASG as a member of its network. IS also posted statements and videos on its media platforms supporting MG and ASG during the battle in Marawi and threatening the government in Manila. So far we have not seen much evidence that IS was directly involved either with logistical support or with resources. Foreign fighters with IS affiliation were identified but in small numbers. Not much points in the direction that IS leadership has, besides political and rhetorical support, so far engaged itself in Mindanao.

The second narrative, the downgrading of the threat and the claim that NICA and the authorities are in control of the jihadist threat from IS and transnational jihadist networks seems to ignore the fact that IS foreign fighters actually have operated in the conflicts in Mindanao and been involved in insurgency and militant jihadism in the Philippines. Asking sources in Manila why NICA has this downgrading and self-confident attitude, the answer was that the agency wants to avoid creating fear and disturbance among citizens living in the Manila area. This is of course understandable, but it downplays the experience of terror attacks (e.g. the Sri Lanka attacks in Easter this year) that only a very few dedicated terrorists with limited international support can do a lot of harm and violence. Perhaps NICA and other authorities have a more balanced assessment that they want to keep classified? Even if this is the case, it seems that the third narrative in the form of the assessment of the Office of the President that there are links between jihadists in Mindanao and the core of IS and that there is a real threat from IS infiltration in local jihadist groups in the Philippines that has to be taken seriously is a more balanced assessment given the current situation in the Philippines than the two other narratives. This assessment is supported by recent events in the Philippines where authorities have arrested at least seven foreign jihadist fighters and confirmed that they were training local militants for suicide attacks, which is a new and serious development in the Philippines.

There are many drivers for transnational jihad networks to infiltrate conflicts around the globe. One is the presence of local jihadist groups involved in insurgency in violent escalating conflict zones, which we have seen with AQ in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 and with IS in the current conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon. If the peace process fails in Mindanao it will open for further conflict and become an attractive battlefield for IS thereby raising the threat of suicide attacks in the Philippines. A successful peace process, the Bangsamoro, seems to be the best strategy both to avoid this scenario and to create a more sustainable future for the Moros. As seen in other in other peace processes it might in the short run increase the risk of terrorism by minor groups in opposition to the process, but in the longer-term it seems to be the best path to create a stable conflict resolution.
NOTES


4 This chapter is based on academic literature, think tank and government reports, news articles, and interviews conducted during a one-week research trip to Manila in March 2019. During the trip I met and had interviews with representatives from NICCA, (Stratbase ADRI for Strategic and International Studies, the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, Miriam College, Quezon City, De La Salle University, Delegation of the European Union to the Philippines, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines, Mr. Jose Custodio, defence analyst and military historian, Australian Embassy, US Embassy, Royal Danish Embassy, MNLF and the Bangsamoro Transition Commission. A meeting with MLF was unfortunately cancelled. The programme was organised by the Danish Embassy by the Danish Ambassador Jan Top Christensen and Ms. Christina Suzana Lazaro. I want to express my sincere thanks for this valuable assistance. Student of Political Science and political & administrative assistant at the Danish Embassy Abirsha Srivathanan accompanied me to most of the meetings and took helpful notes, which I am thankful for.


6 Banlaoi identifies the Lamanit bombings, which was the first suicide attacks in the Philippines and with links to ISIS, as the turning point for the jihadist thread: Rommel C. Banlaoi: ‘The Lamanit bombing and terrorist threat in the Philippines’, Counter Terrorist. Trends and Analyses 10(9), September 2018, RSIS, Singapore.


16 Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro & Vahid Brown, ‘40-Galads (MtAdventures in the Horn of Africa)’, Report Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2 July 2017.


19 Quimpo ibid.


21 Quimpo op. cit.
INTRODUCTION

Why can transnational jihadist movements gain a foothold in a democratic country like Indonesia that has long been known for its inclusive and liberal interpretation of religion? One of the five pillars of Indonesia’s so-called founding principle of ‘Pancasila’ stresses unity in the face of a diverse archipelago, stretching 5000 km across the sea, including thousands of islands and around 350 distinct ethnic groups.  

Indonesia is a country that, since 1998 when Muhammad Suharto’s dictatorship was overthrown, has often been portrayed as a democratic model state for Muslim countries. Unlike Thailand or the Philippines, Indonesia has not gone back to embracing authoritarianism, and during the past decades elections have proceeded without significant violence or irregularities. Though the vast majority of the 260 million population identify as Sunni Muslims, the country is at the same time very fragmented due to the over 17,000 islands that it is composed of. Whereas pluralism is part of the very DNA of Indonesia because of its territorial composition, and the diverse ethnic and provincial identities, there is a growing concern about a creeping intolerance towards other faith traditions and other religious interpretations.

While the country has earned the reputation of being a model Muslim state, it has also been the stage for terrifying terrorist attacks previously associated to al-Qaeda and more recently to the Islamic State movement. According to the Jakarta-based...
Habibi Center, in the past years terrorism has generally been increasing in Indonesia in terms of incidents, but declining in terms of casualties. Some of the most well-known terrorist attacks in the Indonesian context are the 2002 attacks on the tourist island of Bali that killed 202 people, and the attacks at the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta the year after. While the role of al-Qaeda has diminished over the years, the presence of the Islamic State Movement, or more precisely pro-IS groups and supporters, has been notable during the past years. In May 2018 Islamic State peaked and local followers were behind the so-called ‘Surabaya blasts’ that targeted three churches in Indonesia’s second largest city of Surabaya, which is also the capital of the East Java province. The following day, the same city was the stage for a terrifying suicide attack on the police headquarters.

The case of Indonesia is interesting to look closer into, because of the dual developments of democracy (and the overall prosperity of the country) and violent jihadism. The case of Indonesia raises a debate that we know from the Middle Eastern context after the Arab Spring, which is about the linkages between democracy and the rise of conservatism. Indonesia is experiencing the emergence of a new right on a par with developments in many other parts of the world, and concerns about identity and values are taking centre stage in societal and political discourse. These are for example manifest through the implementation of local (democratically-backed) Sharia provisions and what several observers that I have interviewed in Jakarta describe as ‘a growing intolerance in society’, challenging the very peaceful co-existence of the different religious groups that Indonesia has been known for.

Indonesia is also interesting because of several other of its characteristics. Firstly, political tensions in Indonesia are not so much characterised by a split between secular versus religious visions of the state - like for instance the cases of Bangladesh or Pakistan - but is more about one version of (liberal) Islam versus another version of (conservative) Islam. Secondly the case of Indonesia displays jihadism in a form where family groups and study groups have been central in organising and carrying out clandestine acts of violence. Moreover, where foreign fighters are concerned, it is also remarkable that the ‘threat’ from deportees (i.e. those who were stopped from going to Syria) rather than the actual returnees is considered much more significant. A third interesting feature about the case of Indonesia is that it is not involved in conflicts with neighbouring states, nor is it subject to international interventions: two factors that are often linked to the occurrence of transnational jihadism.

This chapter will describe these trends in an attempt to understand the seemingly growing presence of Islamic State in Indonesia. The chapter is based on secondary literature (including think tank reports and news reports), but also on a series of interviews conducted in Jakarta with experts, NGOs, government institutions that work on counterterrorism, and religious organisations. My travel to Indonesia took place in the immediate wake of the Sri Lanka attacks in 2019, when a series of bombings struck churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday killing more than 250 people. The interviewees are not cited directly, since the analysis is based on trends that I have identified through a process of triangulation, and not only the observations of a few experts. My questions to the local experts and community representatives centred on the identity and impact of AQ and IS in the country, the drivers of radicalisation i.e. what is pushing or pulling people towards extremist movements, and the effects of the CT efforts of the state. These questions were posed in order to understand the overall question of why transnational jihadist movements gain a foothold in a democratic country like Indonesia where there are many opportunities for voices to be heard, also for groups with Islamist aspirations.

I will proceed as follows. First, I provide a brief backdrop in order to provide an understanding of the political context and local tensions in the country. Then I describe the presence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State, particularly the local movements that have pledged allegiance to the transnational movements, followed by a description of the special characteristics of contemporary jihadism and Counter Terrorism (CT) efforts in Indonesia. Finally, I sum up the lessons that I find relevant to the overall question of why transnational jihadist movements can gain a foothold in a country like Indonesia that has long been known for its inclusive and liberal interpretation of religion.

AN ARAB SPRING DILEMMA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Two local factors have seemingly created space for transnational jihadist movements in Indonesia. The first is the growing socioeconomic gap between different segments of the population, and second is the phenomenon of a growing intolerance, both of which I describe below. Indonesia has, since the fall of Suharto, made steady progress towards becoming a full and functioning democracy, even though political transitions and governance at the provincial and local levels have not always been as democratic as those at the national level. Yet the country is also struggling with corruption, as well as the unsettled role of the Indonesian military: though they have
not overtaken power from the civil government, they are often accused of a continued interference in political campaigns (in favour of Islamist ideas), including party candidate selections and elections. Indonesia hence faces many of the same problems as other developing countries. Despite a massive reduction in poverty, there is a gap between rich and poor which is growing, and the question is whether the economic crisis in the lower levels of society will lead to a social crisis. Some observers see the turn towards Islamist movements as a reaction against the failed promises of democracy, since their living conditions have not been improved. While poverty rates have been cut in half over the last twenty years, 10% of the population remains below the poverty line; another 40% is described by the World Bank as vulnerable to falling below that line. Transnational jihadi movements such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State hence have an opportunity to exploit the resulting social inequality to destabilise the democratic process in Indonesia. The concern among CT authorities (interviewed by the author) is that this will expand the mobilisation base for movements like AQ and IS, even though, as I will describe below, the organisers and perpetrators of terrorist plots in Indonesia have until now mainly proven to hail from the middle classes.

Aside from Indonesia being a relatively well-functioning democratic country, Indonesia is also one of the world’s most diverse countries. Yet, it is not the principle of secularism that has defined the state, but rather the principle of separation between religion and politics, pluralism has been the defining trait of the state. For example, while religious education is mandatory in Indonesia, students can choose between lessons in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Roman Catholicism or Protestant Christianity. It is precisely this principle of pluralism which is being contested in contemporary Indonesia, where the traditional tolerance is being challenged by the emergence of local Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front, which is a violent and vigilante movement that aims to ‘fight vice’ through destroying, for example, music shops and nightclubs, and the non-violent Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), which aims at establishing a caliphate in Indonesia. The Indonesian military is often criticised for supporting these groups or letting them possess. For example, during the widespread street violence that preceded the 1998 downfall of the Suharto regime, organised in part by elements in the Indonesian military, Chinese communities were specific targets.

Recent governments have also accommodated the Sharia aspirations and by-laws of Islamist movements (generally Sharia provisions are on the rise in Indonesia), and human rights organisations have been worried about the impact these have on women, homosexuals and religious minorities. Sectarian movements such as Lashkare Jihad, which was established at the turn of the century when sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians broke out in Maluku, have also added to the tensions. Though Lashkare Jihad is banned, there are still reports that they are carrying out military training (without firearms) in camps based in West Papua (aside from Papua they used to be active in Aceh). This has, in some places, instilled fear of open worship. Interestingly, in recent years the AQ supporters in Indonesia have sought to influence society by rallying for voting for particular candidates at the provincial level. Even IS supporters have argued that although democracy is unlawful according to their understanding of religion, the system should nevertheless be influenced to shorten sentences given for charges of terrorism.

The intrusion of religious and ethnic intolerance into Indonesian politics appears to be escalating. Many of the interviewees for this chapter have noted that Indonesia’s history of tolerance towards other sectarian interpretations and non-Muslims, based on Indonesia’s founding principle of Pancasila, is diminishing. The growing intolerance has been manifesting through propaganda against Christian doctrines, Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims and the so-called Kebatinan (a hybrid mix of Hindu and Buddhist faith and rituals). A recent event that triggered the concern about the growing intolerance in Indonesia was related to the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (aka Ahok), who in 2017 was defeated in a re-election bid. This was widely seen as the result of his Chinese-Christian lineage, but also due to the release of a video of an Ahok speech that had been altered to make it appear as though he was insulting Islam. The winning candidate, Anies Baswedan (described as a Muslim Brotherhood follower and inspired by the chief Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb), ran an explicitly sectarian campaign, and shortly after his defeat Ahok was convicted of blasphemy. One spectacular dimension of these events has been the rise of the so-called 212 movement that drew hundreds of thousands to central Jakarta in December 2016 to rally in ‘defence of Islam’.
The intolerance, however, seems to be a parallel development to the opportunities for free expression that came with democracy after the fall of Suharto's New Order Regime. A new generation of Muslim intellectuals, locally referred to as the Anak Muda NU who were young cadres of the country's largest traditionalist Islamic organisation, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), began to respond to the ideas and politics of their predecessors. The unprecedented openness of the so-called 'Reform Era' after the fall of Suharto and the plurality of voices in the public sphere also led to increased polarisation. Proponents of more conservative agendas started challenging and rejecting the progressive Muslim discourses which were accommodating towards secularism, liberalism and pluralism as 'un-Islamic'.

Another factor that has contributed to a more sectarian interpretation of religion relates to foreign interference. In the latter years of Suharto's reign, foreign funding for the establishment of boarding schools and other Islamic institutions grew significantly. Most of that funding came from Arab Persian Gulf states and has promoted the ultraconservative Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism. The Suharto dictatorship controlled the archipelago's religious, ethnic and racial diversity by enshrining Javanese dominance. Leading traditionalist Islamic organisations, notably Nhadlatul Ulama (NU), played a central role throughout the Suharto era in creating space for religious tolerance among Indonesia's Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. In Java – one of the areas where Islamist movements find followers – there is also a dominant presence of Arab Indonesians, the Hadhrami, who are sometimes simply called 'the Jamaah' (due to their sympathy to JI). Aside from Java, they are also based in south Sumatra. At the very beginning of the preparations for Indonesian independence (from the Dutch) in 1945, there was a rebellion led by a then coherent Darul Islam (meaning Islamic State) movement that arose in west Java. They rebelled against the new Indonesian constitution and wanted to enforce Islamic law/Sharia for Muslims. The foundational rejection of Sharia has been used as a constant justification for rebellion by Islamic groups throughout Indonesian history.

The growing intolerance threatening social cohesion is widely regarded as the climate that has made space for movements like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. While some explanations point in the direction of a recent rise of a global tendency towards conservatism (for example campaigns not to vote for non-Muslim leaders) and the influence of social media on access to propaganda, others point in the direction of a lack of renewal of religious teachings. Research on religious textbooks conducted by the State Islamic University, for instance, shows that there are dominant references to Middle Eastern intellectuals (all dead and gone) and a lack of contextual interpretation. Finally, the democratic development has made it possible for hardline organisations to more comfortably speak out in public than they could under the Suharto regime, again pointing to the same sort of ‘existential’ dilemma that we know from the Arab Spring, when Islamist movements were elected to power after the fall of authoritarian states i.e. can democracy survive the voices of those who want to dismantle democracy?

THE LOCAL FACES OF ISLAMIC STATE AND AL-QUEDA

In Indonesia, al-Qaeda is currently not considered to be an active challenge in contrast to the Islamic State movement or pro-IS movements/individuals as they are more precisely described. Observers disagree about whether al-Qaeda is dormant or irrelevant today as a competitor to IS, since they have not taken responsibility for any large-scale attacks during the past decade, or whether they are waiting to conduct a spectacular attack when the time is right. Al-Qaeda’s traditional allies in Indonesia have been the locally oriented Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) – sometimes called the Southeast Asian wing of al-Qaeda – which despite its local concerns is also considered to be a transnational movement with sister organisations in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. JI was responsible for carrying out the 2002 Bali bombings of nightclubs (as well as the 2003 Marriott, 2004 Australian Embassy, 2005 Bali again, and the 2009 Jakarta bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton), and has since then been linked to al-Qaeda’s organisation through the use of AQ training facilities and funding. The group experienced a serious pushback from 2009 to 2014 due to death of key leaders and the arrest of active members. Today there are an estimated 2-3,000 core JI members in Indonesia with many more sympathisers and supporters.

Neo-JI is a younger cell of Jemaah Islamiyah and is used to describe the organisation after it recovered from near destruction in 2007 after an armed clash with police in Poso, central Sulawesi. An observer from the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS, Charles Valle, has argued that JI’s inactivity is not a sign of organisational or ideological decay. On the contrary he argues that JI’s shift should be interpreted in light of AQ’s global strategy and hence points towards a close relationship between AQ’s central leadership and its Southeast Asian branches. So, even though there is an observable shift from 2008 onwards with JI embracing proselytization more than military operations, and JI supporters have been rallying for voting in some of Indonesia’s provinces, the future of AQ in Indonesia is unsettled. The neo-JI sympathises with AQ in Syria, and some of the interviewees for this chapter noted

...
that if there were training facilities provided by AQ then JI would reactivate its operational wing without hesitation. There are recent cases where sympathisers have been arrested for stockpiling arms, and there are still devoted followers of the Yemeni AQ leader Anwar al-Awlaki, who died in 2011 following a US drone attack, particularly among segments of the Arab Indonesians of Yemeni decent.

The story of IS in Indonesia goes back to 2014, almost the same moment when al-Qaeda was at its most weakened point. The formation of IS was, as described by Sidney Jones, driven by inspiration from Europe (through online sources), more precisely the British al-Muharrijirun movement. The network that called itself Sharia4Indonesia was one of the so-called pro-IS movements that defended what IS was doing in Syria and Iraq. Other Indonesian linkages to IS were made on the Syrian battlefield, when an Indonesian-Malaysian unit was established to facilitate the non-Arab Malay-speaking fighters in Syria due to communication problems. The fighters also united around the objective of establishing an Islamic State in Southeast Asia (Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara). This has made observers argue that IS in Indonesia is more a product of international events and drivers than of local drivers.

While the IS phenomenon in Indonesia has been characterised by oaths of loyalty given by individuals, specific local movements have also pledged allegiance to IS. One of these is the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur/the East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) that has mostly been active in Poso, central Sulawesi and Java. The group was led by Abu Wardah (also known as Santoso) until he was killed by Indonesian police on 18 July 2016. Santoso was, in fact, one of the first Indonesians to swear allegiance to IS in 2014. The MIT consists of veteran fighters, some formerly part of the JI and others part of the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT). JAT was founded by Abu Bakar Baasyir in July 2009 (and was a splinter cell of the Jemaah Islamiyah) in order to implement an Islamist caliphate in Indonesia in the form of, or in support of Islamic State. The group originated from JAT, which split into two groups (JAD being one of them) when Baasyir declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS in August 2014. Baasyir’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS initiated internal turmoil and ended in the split of the group due to different interests as many members of the group believed they should be an ally of al-Qaeda. JAT had, as described above, origins in JI, hence the strong loyalty to AQ among many of its members.

Santoso utilised the post-conflict Poso community that tends to defend the Indonesian jihadists because they are considered to have assisted the Poso Muslims and defended them against attacks by the Christians. Santoso and MIT assembled and recruited combat veterans locally from JI and JAT. In comparison to JI, which was funded by al-Qaeda, MIT is allegedly funded by bank robberies and other criminal activities, including hacking, e.g. hacking foreign exchange websites. In 2012 the group consisted of approximately 30-50 fighters located in Poso.

Although the group is, in fact, rather small, Santoso, especially, had considerable symbolic power because he could constitute and implement Sharia law in a hill area near Poso, which he controlled. MIT has been involved in several attacks at Poso in central Sulawesi, including the shooting of police officers in 2012, a bomb attack in northern Poso and at a police station, and the 2016 attacks in Jakarta. All of these were targeted specifically at the police.

In September 2015, MIT was proscribed by the UN for being associated with al-Qaeda and IS for, ‘participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of Islamic State’. In contrast to JI, the members of MIT are not deeply involved in transnational networks. For instance, MIT has connections with IS, but only a few members of MIT have travelled to fight with IS in Syria. Santoso died in a shootout with Indonesian authorities in 2016, and sometime after it was reported that MIT was reduced to only 11 fighters.

Another of the main IS movements in Indonesia is the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which carried out the Surabaya bombings in May 2018. It was established in October 2014 by Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakar Baasyir in an effort to bring together all pro-IS organisations in Indonesia with the aim of making Indonesia an official province of the Islamic State. The group originated from JAT, which split into two groups (JAD being one of them) when Baasyir declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS in August 2014. Baasyir’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS initiated internal turmoil and ended in the split of the group due to different interests as many members of the group believed they should be an ally of al-Qaeda. JAT had, as described above, origins in JI, hence the strong loyalty to AQ among many of its members.

JAD is probably the largest pro-IS group in Indonesia, and functions as an umbrella organisation with many subgroups, and the collaboration and merging of different groups gave JAD a huge boost as it enabled them to be active in several of Indonesia’s regions. JAD is hence the also the affiliation of those who have until now been the most prominent figures within the IS movement in Indonesia: Abu ‘Santoso’ Wardah, leader of Eastern Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT); Bachrumysyah, leader of the Western Indonesia Mujahidin/Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (MIB); Bahrum Naim, mainmind behind the Jakarta attacks in January 2016; Salim Mubarik at Tamimi (also known as Abu Jandal) who joined ISIS in Syria. The group was identified as a terrorist organisation by the US Department of State in 2017. It was further outlawed by a south Jakarta court on 31 July 2018, which allowed the arrest of its members.
## THE SPECIAL TRAITS OF VIOLENT JIHAD IN INDONESIA

Local Islamist movements like the Islamic Defenders Front have local concerns: like other similar movements such as the Pakistani Taliban, they have been oriented towards ‘Islamising’ society and been sectarian in their outlook (for instance through attacks on the Ahmadiyya community). Lashkare Jihad, another local Islamist movement, which in fact has been the deadliest movement in Indonesia in recent years, have oriented their attacks towards the local Christian community. So while these movements have not had linkages to the transnational Islamist movements nor had any transnational Islamist agendas, they have contributed to a climate of sectarianism and to the ‘takfiri’ trend (proclaiming others to be infidels), which nonetheless makes it easier for AQ and IS to recruit in Indonesia. Indonesia has also had an influential anti-Shia movement (for example the ANNAS – Aliansi National Anti Syiah, but also a faction of the traditionalist NU), which makes it easier for a movement like IS to promote their anti-Shia agenda.

### SPECTACULAR IS-ACTIVITY IN INDONESIA IN RECENT YEARS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JANUARY</td>
<td>Explosions and gunfire outside of the Sarina shopping mall in central Jakarta. The attacker targeted a Starbucks and a police station. Eight people were killed (four attackers and four civilians), 24 were injured.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUGUST</td>
<td>A 17-year-old IS sympathiser planned to make a terrorist attack but failed. He tried to kill a Catholic priest and detonate a self-made bomb at the Sunday service in a church in Medan, north Sumatra.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARCH</td>
<td>Eight terror suspects arrested and one shot dead when resisting arrest. The terror suspects were alleged IS supporters who had been involved in attacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Attack on bus station in Jakarta. Three policemen died and eleven others injured.</td>
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<tr>
<td>JUNE</td>
<td>Two police officers attacked at a mosque near the national police headquarters in south Jakarta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUNE</td>
<td>A police officer stabbed to death at his post in Medan, north Sumatra. Other officers responded and killed one attacker while arresting the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEBRUARY</td>
<td>A church congregation attacked in Yogyakarta with a sword. Four civilians were wounded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Prisoner uprising at a detention centre in Depok – all terrorist detainees. Five guards were killed in an attack conducted by IS followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>The Surabaya bombings: three related/coordinated attacks in Surabaya and Sidoarjo over two days in East Java, all of which had links to JAD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Suicide bomb attack against the Santa Maria tak Bercela Catholic Church in Jalan Ngagel, Surabaya. Carried out by two brothers respectively 17- and 15-years-old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Attack on the Protestant Christian church in Surabaya. Carried out by a 42-year-old and her two daughters aged 12 and 9. The 42-year-old is also the mother of the two responsible for the above attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Attack at the Surabaya Central Pentecostal church in Jalan Arjuna, Surabaya carried out by a 46-year-old, the husband of the 42-year-old female from the previous attack and father of the children. He was the leader of JAD's Surabaya cell.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Homemade bomb accidentally explodes while its creators (a father, mother and eldest son) assembled it in Sidoarjo. The three were killed in the explosion. The father was friends with the father from the previous attacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Suicide bombing at the entrance of the Surabaya police headquarters. Carried out by a family of five, four of them died in the attack and ten bystanders were injured. The first three (church) bombings claimed the lives of 14 people including the six attackers and 43 were injured in the attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>Police station in Riau was attacked by five individuals who arrived in a car where one drove and hit and killed a police officer, while the four others attacked using swords, injuring two police officers. The four attackers were killed while the driver was captured by the police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JULY</td>
<td>Three bombs exploded in a house in the village of Pogar in Bangil in east Java province. A child was wounded. The owner of the bombs escaped while his wife was arrested.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from HTI to IS. Some observers who were interviewed for this chapter argue that when it comes to IS recruitment in Indonesia, there are no so-called push factors; there are no considerable local grievances, but mainly influence from international events (the war in Syria/Iraq). Others point to socioeconomic inequality as a local driver along with the free speech opportunities, and hence also the growing intolerance, that came with democracy.

Family jihadism

In one sense, the direct impact of the foreign conflict in Syria and Iraq has been limited. This is because, the concerns have not evolved so much around the returnees as they have around the deportees, i.e. those who never arrived at their destination but were stopped at the border. In the period between 2014 and 2017 many of these returnees were stuck in Turkey and the Indonesian authorities prosecuted them in Indonesia when they returned.40 To what degree these persons are harmless due to their lack of fighting skills/experience from combat, and whether or not they will at some point redirect their attention due to the unrealised ambitions of conducting armed jihad, is yet to be seen. However, in terms of the attacks that have been carried out on Indonesian soil, there have been no direct commands from Syria. An estimated 800 Indonesians are thought to have travelled to Iraq and Syria since Islamic State declared the caliphate in 2014. About half have since returned and become part of the government’s de-radicalisation programmes or been jailed (some figures from the counterterrorism authority BNPT estimate there are 500–600 returnees from Syria/Iraq, most of them deportees).41

Some of these people, who were later interviewed by Indonesian authorities and think tanks, went to Syria for economic reasons. However, one remarkable trend stands out in the case of Indonesia. In spite of the fact that MIT, JAD and JAT followers and leaders have been involved in the attacks described above, the organisation of both fighters to Syria and some of the most spectacular attacks has been carried out by a few families questioning the operational role of local jihadist movements. For example, when the Indonesian schoolgirl Nur Dhania went to Syria in 2015, 25 of her relatives followed her shortly after.42 The series of Surabaya attacks that shook the country in 2018 was also carried out by families, including children. Surabaya had nothing to do with the foreign fighter phenomenon. This points towards the fact that Islamic State recruitment in Indonesia has been family-oriented and taken a more individualised form than we see in other places, where local movements and their collective pledges of allegiance matter more when it comes to the planning of terrorist attacks.

Even though the inspiration for a movement such as Sharia4Indonesia came online from Europe as described above, the actual planning and motivation to carry out attacks happens in a ‘face-to-face’ environment, including in small study group settings. However, it is challenging to boil Indonesia down to one dominant recruitment trend, since different areas of the country have been characterised by different trends. Though some of the fighters that went to Syria allegedly travelled for economic reasons (e.g. one finds impoverished people attracted to jihad in central Sumatra, east Java, west Nusa Tenggara islands), the case of Surabaya points to the middle class. Java is, however, also known as the area from where the military and political elite hails. Some of the radicalisation debate therefore centres on well-off families, rather than the poor segments of society. Others again, are concerned about the scholars who study abroad, more than work migration to countries where the influx of conservative religious ideology is dominant (as is, for example, the case of Bangladesh).43

The ideological traction should however not be underestimated either. Some scholars have described IS as the second or third generation of the so-called Darul Islam (DI) movement, which is not really a cohesive movement anymore, but consists of at least 32 different factions.44 Many families in west Java, however, identify with the movement. The political idea of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia is most closely associated with DI, which appeared as an anti-colonialist movement against the Dutch imperialists. DI, as described by Alamsya and Hadiz (2010), has appeared in different forms over the last half century, and the AQ-sympathetic JI emerged out of DI networks. In the post-colonial state, DI aimed at establishing a rival Islamic state, and branches of the movement in Java, south Sulawesi and Aceh sought to control swathes of territory in competition with the new Republic of Indonesia. If we look at the areas where we find most followers of IS today, these areas also stand out.

Jihadism vs. CT policies

AQ-related terrorism in Indonesia has been aimed at targets or symbols of the West and Western influence (hotels, embassies, nightclubs etc.) as is also the global trend, when it comes to the violent activities of local and regional AQ movements. IS-related terrorism in Indonesia, on the contrary, has had both a sectarian dimension (e.g. the targeting of churches), and an anti-authoritarian dimension (the targeting of the police/law enforcement and police headquarters particularly reflect that).
There is hence an overall shift in the period between 2009 and 2019 where most attacks went from being aimed at symbols of the Western world to most attacks being targeted at the police. Experts at Indonesian think tanks and observers have pointed out that revenge against the police remains a big motivation for IS-related violence.

Since the Bali attacks, the police have replaced the military and taken charge of the country’s CT efforts (although intelligence-gathering is still the domain of the military). The rise and guerilla activities of MIT, however, have raised the question of whether the military should be involved again (generally they were weakened after 1998). Whereas the police are stigmatised by Islamists, the military is considered to be more pro-Islamist.

A factor that has contributed to the Islamist critique of the police is the revised CT act that was passed by the government one month after the Surabaya attacks in east Java (2018), which gives the law enforcement authority the power to arrest and prosecute on the basis of suspicion. Before that, prosecution could only happen on the basis of terrorist acts. Along with this, Indonesia has adopted legislation like Singapore’s, with so called preventive detention without trial. This has also raised human rights concerns since there have been instances where suspects have been killed during arrest, raising the spectre of extra-judicial killings. Indonesia is debating to what degree they should punish criminal incitement.

The attacks and events of the past years (including the release of prisoners who have gone back to extremist networks) have sharpened the authorities’ focus on prison management (due to cases of radicalisation and planning taking place inside prisons), protection of infrastructure, and rehabilitation, whereas earlier CT efforts were characterised by crisis management.\(^4\) CVE efforts are also aimed at cyber-patrolling, addressing grievances in relation to the government, the mobilisation of charismatic preachers, and the education system (through an evaluation of religious textbooks).

The overall narrative of the decade-long CT efforts is positive, not only when it comes to AQ sympathisers, but also when it comes to IS activities. The larger movements have been broken, through a more offensive arrest and prosecution strategy and this success is first of all explained with reference to the efforts of the special police unit, Detachment 88. Some of the main ideologues and leaders of the local manifestations of IS and AQ have all been either killed, imprisoned or sentenced to death. Abu Bakr Bashir, the main AQ/JI leader (allegedly also the mastermind behind the 2002 Bali bombing) is in jail, as he was convicted in 2010 under anti-terrorism laws for links to militant training camps in Aceh province. Abu ‘Santoso’ Wardah, the MIT leader was killed in July 2016 after a manhunt by the Indonesian authorities (3,500 troops from the Indonesian military and police were deployed to search for Santoso).\(^4\) The JAD leader Aman Abdurrahman, who is also considered to be the main leader for IS supporters in Indonesia,\(^7\) was sentenced to death on 22 June 2018 for his role in inciting others to commit terror attacks in Indonesia (the Jakarta bombings of 2016).\(^4\) Abdurrahman lured people into his group in prison, and it was especially this influence that triggered the debates over radicalisation taking place in Indonesian prisons.

The successful containment of AQ and IS during the past year can secondly be explained with reference to a form of political accommodation of Islamist viewpoints (for example through the implementation of local by-laws/Sharia provisions). Whereas accommodation is in some ways looked upon as prevention, it also raises human rights concerns in relation to women and minority rights as described above.\(^6\) Ultimately it raises a foundational question about whether democracy can be upheld in the long-term in a climate where extremist and sectarian views are increasingly finding legitimate democratic platforms for garnering popular support.

With the arrest or death of key leaders of the larger movements the question however remains whether the individualised and family-dependent jihad will continue to thrive, disconnected from the larger movements. While intelligence-wise it might be easier to keep an eye on the activities of institutionalised movements and outspoken charismatic leaders, it is a more challenging task to follow the informal study circles (halaqas) and the activities of a few families with loyalties to IS.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

**WHAT EXPLAINS TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISM IN INDONESIA?**

This chapter has tried to find explanations for why AQ and IS have been successful in gaining a foothold in a democratic country like Indonesia, where there are political opportunities for Islamist parties to have a voice. Unlike the Middle East (e.g. Syria/Iraq) or neighbouring states in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has not been characterised by authoritarianism since 1998. And unlike South Asia (e.g. Pakistan and Afghanistan), Indonesia is not haunted by the regional interference of proxies or resistance against foreign, Western-led intervention. The case of Indonesia has displayed that neither democracy nor economic development are safeguards...
against the spread of violent jihad. As one of Asia's fastest-growing economies, and a democratic model state in Southeast Asia, Indonesia clearly testifies to that. So, what are the reasons that movements like AQ and IS have been able to gain a foothold in Indonesia? This chapter has sought to identify both external explanations, but also locally-conditioned factors that could explain the counterintuitive presence of IS and AQ in a thriving democracy.

Whereas Indonesia has, since its very inception, had movements such as Darul Islam, which advocated the creation of an Islamic state, the contemporary ideological influence and networks linking to external movements came both through Europe (the Muhajiroun movement in UK), and through the Syrian battlefield, where a special Malay-speaking unit was established. Global IS propaganda focusing on the creation of Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara (an IS province in Southeast Asia) also reinforced these dynamics. It appears that these 'external' factors, in combination with the local climate is the exact constellation that has fertilised the ground for the extremist visions and violence of AQ and IS.

As this chapter has illuminated, relevant local factors that can explain the presence of IS/AQ supporters include the historical existence of sectarian movements, both those who have shown intolerance towards Shias, Christians and the Ahmadiyya communities, but also the existence of Islamist movements, which from the very beginning have contested not only the idea of a state based on Pancasila (rather that Sharia), but also the liberal (pluralism-embracing) Muslim identity of the state. Adding to this, these movements have been embedded in communal conflicts. JI, the main AQ-supporting movement in Indonesia for example grew out of pre-existing movements, and some of them have been engaged in local conflicts for decades. As described in a report by the IPAC, IS has also been able to draw on ‘a web of contacts going back decades for recruits, ideological reinforcements and occasionally financial support’.14

Other ‘local’ factors that this chapter has drawn out include the socio-economic grievances of some segments of society, the thriving democracy that, since the fall of Suharto, has provided a platform for Islamist ideas, and the implementation of local by-laws/Sharia provisions (and with this a climate of intolerance). Whereas the ethnically fragmented archipelago has been characterised by tensions between the Arab Indonesians and those of Chinese heritage (reinforced by overlapping cleavages between the political, military and economic elite on one side, and the less privileged on the other side), religion has, in recent years, taken a clear centre stage in the identity politics of the country.

Global developments, however, do also have a say. One could argue that the new right and concerns about identity (and the growing intolerance that derives from this) is a global phenomenon, and the presence of IS and AQ in Indonesia reflect that this development has now reached the Southeast Asian states. A final phenomenon that has impacted the development of IS and AQ in Indonesia relates to another dimension of globalisation: exposure to conflict imagery propagated by groups all over the world through the borderless online access. In the case of Indonesia, where inspiration came from, among others, a European state, this shakes the geographical image of jihadism being a phenomenon spreading from the Middle East. Technological developments hence challenge the very effort of finding causal explanations where the arrow only points in one direction. Hence the debates about what matters more, the global/external or the local, the strategy of the movements, or local dynamics on the ground, require a redirection towards acknowledging the mutual reinforcement and two-way dynamics.

NOTES
2 My interview with researchers who have been recording incidents in Indonesia. The database is not available on their website, but upon request.
3 See fn. 2
6 I especially want to thank the Human Rights Watch (Jakarta) experts at the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), State Islamic University, and the Habibie Center. Also, I want to thank the BNPT (The National Agency for Combating Terrorism), and the Danish Embassy in Jakarta for facilitating the research interviews in 2019.
8 Ibid.
9 The main traditionalist organisations in Indonesia, that have been reflective of a tolerant and inclusive interpretation of Islam and state ideology are the Nahdlatul Ulama and the mainstream Muhammadiyah movement.
GLOBAL JIHAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
40 See for example the description of the historical development of the anti-shia movement in Indonesia: IPAC (2016): The Anti-Shia Movement in Indonesia. IPAC Report no. 27.
47 Abdurrahman and Bashir collaborated to form a joint terrorism training camp in Aceh in 2010 that united different factions of terrorism groups. They first received 9 and 15 years respectively in prison for this.
49 See for example the description of the historical development of the anti-shia movement in Indonesia: IPAC (2016): The Anti-Shia Movement in Indonesia. IPAC Report no. 27.
51 See for example the description of the historical development of the anti-shia movement in Indonesia: IPAC (2016): The Anti-Shia Movement in Indonesia. IPAC Report no. 27.
IS manifested itself in Malaysia almost entirely via a cyber-existence, be it in social media platforms, chat groups, or blogs.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia enjoys a reputation of relative security from terrorist attacks. High-casualty attacks such as those that have struck its neighbours such as the 2002 Bali bombing, the 2015 Bangkok bombing and the more recent 2018 Surabaya bombings are absent in Malaysia. Even Singapore had its close shave when well-developed plans by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to attack six different targets were uncovered in 2001. Given that the Muslim majority country was a prominent location for the activities of the JI/al-Qaeda network, Malaysia’s relative tranquillity has been a subject of admiration and debate. A combination of two factors is said to underline this. Firstly, the efficiency of its counter-terror apparatus, and secondly, that its usefulness as a ‘safe haven for organisational building activities’ for terrorist groups has spared it from attack. However, with the rise of the (once) territory-holding and ideologically potent Islamic State (IS), this outlook is due for a revision. Indeed, the first recorded terrorist attack in Malaysia since the early 2000s took place in 2016, an IS-affiliated grenade attack on a bar, which resulted in eight non-fatal injuries. The police also claim to have foiled 23 terror attacks since 2013.

The intensification of terror threats within Malaysia occurred within the broader context of IS’s expanding influence within Southeast Asia, which it eventually declared as one of the provinces (Wilayat) of the caliphate. Groups and militias have pledged allegiance to the caliphate and carried out attacks in its name, striking Jakarta (2016), Surabaya (2018), and Marawi (2017) that led to a five-month siege.
Sophisticated operations such as these were coupled with the threat of lone wolf attacks by the self-radicalised. For example, one day after the Jakarta attack on 14 January 2016, the Malaysian authorities arrested a man in Kuala Lumpur allegedly ‘planning a suicide attack in Malaysia after receiving orders from a foreign IS member in Syria’.5

This chapter is written with the less-explored transition through which IS overtook JI as the dominant terrorist threat in Malaysia in mind. Unlike in Indonesia, where the pro-al-Qaeda and pro-IS split animated the disagreements between the Islamist militant groups,7 in Malaysia IShas dominated the scene to the extent that even former Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) members who were once part of the JI network went on to join IS in Syria. Yet, unlike its well-documented rise in Indonesia,8 details about IS’s penetration into Malaysia are sketchy at best.9 This chapter argues that IS’s relatively quick surge in Malaysia occurred within a vacuum after the crippling of JI in Malaysia in the early 2000s. Malaysia’s unique socio-political setting enabled IS to gain influence as a potent discursive ideal for mobilising disparate individuals yet never allowing it the space to evolve into something that is as organisationally and ideologically coherent as JI. Much of this can be attributed to the counter-terror apparatus in Malaysia, which will be discussed in the second half of this chapter. This chapter does not claim to be a comprehensive account of terrorism in Malaysia, which will be discussed in the second half of this chapter. This chapter will take the following structure. It will begin with a brief overview of the history of militant Islam in Malaysia, tracing its origins in offshoots of the nation’s increasingly radicalised religio-political sphere that, for the greater part of Malaysian history, has been largely shaped by the political tussle between Malaysia’s largest Islamist party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and the long-ruling ethno-nationalist party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the hegemon of Malaysia’s ruling coalition from its independence in 1957 up until 2018. The IS phenomenon is then discussed with reference to the transition from JI by outlining significant differences in organisation, operations, and membership between the two. Lastly, Malaysia’s counter-terror policies are critically reviewed in light of the ‘postmodern’ nature of IS. Given the dearth of detailed research on IS in Malaysia, this research will draw heavily on publicly available information such as news reports, commentaries, transcripts and government papers.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MILITANT ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

While militant Islamism in Malaysia has never reached the level of prevalence it has in Indonesia, such movements are not alien to Malaysia. Though hardly mainstream, Islamist militancy is part and parcel of Malaysia’s political tapestry. Mohd Mizan Aslam documents the presence of up to thirteen such radical groups, with their common denominator being the interest in shaping some form of ‘Islamic state’ via means of force.10 Most of these groups stemmed from the increasingly confrontational exchange between PAS and UMNO during the Islamisation race from the 1980s up to the 2000s.11 This explains why many of these militants from that period were linked to PAS, with members or former members of the party establishing, if not joining these groups;12 although there is no evidence that the central leadership of the party has ever explicitly advocated or directed militant activities. Occupying the fringes of Islamist politics in Malaysia, these groups shared a similar goal with PAS in their ambition to establish some form of Islamic rule - an idea that is vaguely defined and nothing like IS’s global caliphate - though divergent in the methods to achieve it.

As the product of competitive party politics rather than any virulent anti-state ideology, these groups naturally did not share al-Qaeda’s penchant for spectacular violence. This can be seen from the fact that the two major violent episodes involving Islamist militants, the Memali siege in November 1985 and the Al-Maunah heist in July 2000, did not involve any indiscriminate attacks against civilian targets, nor were there any coherent ideology that called for some form of transcendent Islamic statehood.13 Precipitated by localised hostility against an alleged kafir (infidel) government, these episodes were mainly standoff situations between a charismatic leader (Ibrahim Libya and Mohamed Amin Mohamed Razali respectively), his loyal followers, and the security forces. Their fates were immediately sealed after the sieges in Kampung Memali and Bukit Jenalik respectively, as most of their members were killed or captured. This suggests that there was no long-term strategy or widespread support at all behind these groupings. The scale achieved was nowhere close to the 1979 Grand Mosque seize in Mecca where the militants armed with sophisticated weaponry were numbered in the hundreds.

A major turn came with the formation of the KMM in 1995. The group was founded by Malaysians that were trained or involved in the Afghan-Russia war as mujahidins, with some of them claiming to be the first Malaysian mujahidins such as Zainon Ismail and Zulkifli Mohammad. Its membership included students who studied in...
Malaysia such as Dr Azahari Husin and Noordin Mat Top would go on to be the names that would soon be well-known to security practitioners of the region. The mujahidin experience not only enabled KMM to break away from the localised, ‘cultish’ and ad-hoc strategies of the past, but also endowed its members with better military training, ideological frameworks and organisational capabilities through the transnational connections cultivated. KMM’s ascension towards national prominence (at least within the jihadists’ circles) is highlighted by its inclusion in the regional radial network Rabitatul Mujahidin as Malaysia’s representative. In any case, a discussion of the Rabitatul Mujahidin will necessitate a discussion of JI.

**Jemaah Islamiyah and Malaysia**

Malaysia was indispensable for JI’s development because without it serving as an asylum for ideologues such as Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bala’asyir, the establishment of JI as Southeast Asia’s foremost violent jihadist movement would not have been possible. While the struggle to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia (Darul Islam) remained the main agenda of JI, an urgent meeting held in Kampung Serting Ulu, Jempol Negeri, Negeri Sembilan in 1993 also committed JI to a larger struggle that was more extensive than Darul Islam, as the ‘Islamic state’ envisioned was one that spanned the Malay archipelago and beyond. The aspiration led to the convening of the Rabitatul Mujahidin in 1999, following a meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2000 attended by representatives from KMM (Malaysia), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines), JI Singapore Cell (Singapore), Patani Islamic Liberation Front and Wa-Ka-Rae (Thailand), Gerakan Aceh Merdeka and Sulawesi Muslims Organisation (Indonesia), and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (Myanmar) to explore the prospect of establishing an Islamic caliphate that covered the region. Nevertheless, the meeting did not solidify any concrete partnership, nor were any concrete plans for violence discussed.

JI’s presence, enabled by the ease of entry into Malaysia before September 11, had lasting impacts on Malaysia’s jihadist landscape. First, it contributed to the militarisation of local and regional recruits as physical and military training was given to its members in the states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, and Perak. Second, as alluded to above, JI introduced its legacy of armed struggle into Malaysia through appeals for Muslim solidarity beyond nation-state boundaries. Some success can be found here, given that renowned JI operatives recruited from Malaysia such as Dr Azahari Husin and Noordin Mat Top would go on to be the engineers of prominent bombings in Indonesia, such as the two Bali attacks (2002 and 2005), the JW Marriot bombing in Jakarta (2003), the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta (2004) and the bombings of the JW Marriot and Ritz Carlton hotels (2009). Third, JI established a Pesantren Al-Mukmin clone, the Luqmanul Hakiem Islamic School (LHIS) in Ulu Tiram, Johor, to act as a centre for Islamic learning as well as recruitment and ideological indoctrination for its Darul Islam struggles. Mukhlas, one of the co-conspirators of the Bali bombings in 2002, was the first headmaster of the school. Figures such as Abdullah Sungkar, Abu Bakar Bala’asyir, Dr Azahari Husin, and Noordin Mat Top all taught or worked at the school. Not only that, LHIS served as a transit centre for JI in that, as one researcher put it, ‘every Mujahidin who came back from Afghanistan, especially Indonesians, were placed in LHIS.’ In fact, Magouirk and Atran (2008) traced almost all the Bali bombers of 2002 as visitors, teachers, or students of the school.

Lastly, key figures from JI such as Hambali and Abu Jibril had such an influence in KMM that its Selangor splinter, the infamous K3M group led by Marwan, would take orders from JI leaders. K3M would go on to be the only faction in KMM that was involved in violent operations, including the assassination of a state assemblyman and the armed robbery of a police station. Ironically, it is the K3M connection that led to JI’s downfall in Malaysia. K3M’s botched bank robbery attempt in May 2001 led to the accidental discovery of KMM and its affiliates by the police. The crackdown that ensued completely paralysed the KMM-JI network in Malaysia. Nevertheless, with Hambali as the connector, the global jihadism of al-Qaeda (and its funds) had trickled into the region. The unfavourable circumstances in Malaysia propelled Malaysian operatives from both JI and KMM to continue their struggle in Indonesia and the wider region despite the fact that both groups did not enjoy ‘apparent structural links’ initially.

It is important to note that JI’s establishment of a base in Malaysia does not necessarily signify any pervasive appeal for the movement. If anything, the immediate crippling of the JI-KMM network after the 2001 crackdown demonstrates the group’s inability to penetrate the general Malaysian populace, unlike in Indonesia where decades of struggle since the Darul Islam period had fostered outstanding resilience amongst Indonesia’s Islamist militants. JI’s hierarchical, close-knit, and insular structure that was effected through kinship and quasi-kinship ties of ‘blood, marriage, discipleship and fraternity’ made it difficult for it to evolve into a movement of mass appeal. This is even more evident when we consider that, contrary to the unsubstantiated claims of some security analysts, none of Malaysia’s Muslim parties or civil society organisations were proven to have any concrete ties...
with it. JI’s educational programmes that demanded strict ‘religious purity and ideological discipline’ further cemented its exclusivist and secretive nature. The fact that none of LHIS’s students came from the district where it was located, Ulu Tiram, bears testament to this. While JI as the secretive pioneer failed to break ground in Malaysia, IS as its more nebulous successor would go on to make unexpected gains.

The Islamic State (IS) in Malaysia

Since the 2001 crackdown and the onset of the War on Terror, Malaysia has been relatively safe from terrorism to the extent that the former prime minister could tell his party members in jest to be ‘brave like ISIL fighters’. However, the threat posed by IS became apparent with the fast escalating number of people detained in association with it. The numbers increased remarkably from 107 in the period between February 2013 to 2015 to 464 in March 2019. In the years 2016 and 2017, the annual number of arrests was up to the 100s, far surpassing the arrests made during the JI years. Close to three-quarters of such arrests involved Malaysians. It is undeniable that IS had supplanted the JI-KMM network as the dominant terrorist threat in the country. Yet, very little research has been done to understand how the IS phenomenon unfolded in Malaysia. The following section will examine IS in Malaysia in terms of its origin, key personalities, network, ideology, and influence through an exhaustive examination of the evidence.

What Do We Know about IS in Malaysia?

There is no conclusive research as to how IS established a presence in Malaysia. This is primarily due to the lack of any key personality, groups, or platform that may point to a definitive origin story. Nevertheless, it is known that former KMM militants were attracted by the civil war situation in Syria. As early as 2014, former KMM member and religious teacher Lotfi Ariffin travelled to fight in Syria for a militant group called Ajnad al-Sham that distanced itself from both the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and IS. Other KMM members who made the trip include Rafi Udin, Zainuri Kamaruddin (killed 2017), Samad Shukri and Zid Saharani Mohamad Esa (killed 2015). After Lotfi was killed in 2014, it is understood that under the leadership of a relatively young former NGO worker, 27-year-old Muhammad Fudhail Omar (killed 2017), the Malaysians went on to join IS. Rafi Udin later became the most senior Malaysian IS member and even appeared in one of IS’s propaganda videos. However, no key Malaysian ideologue, translator, or cleric whose work was instrumental to the support and spreading of IS’s ideology was ever identified. There were no influential figures in Malaysia whose charisma, gravitas, and religious authority within the jihadist circles could rival that of Indonesia’s Abu Bakar Ba’asyir or Aman Abdurrrahman (spiritual leaders for JI and JAD respectively). In fact, it is very telling that in a case where a former graduate student was arrested for the possession of 12 so-called ‘terrorist-related’ books, all the books were written by Middle Eastern authors and published in Indonesia. In spite of this, it is worth looking at the figures of two high-profile members of IS to see how diverse IS’s Malaysian recruits are.

The first is Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, born 1990 and killed in an airstrike in Syria in 2017. Wanndy first ‘migrated’ with his wife to Syria in 2015 and later cultivated a ‘celebrity jihadist’ online presence in social media using the nom-de-guerre Abu Sayyaf Malizi and Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh. By establishing a cult-like following, Wanndy started recruiting Malaysians online and was known to operate cells from afar via Telegram groups. One of such groups named Gagak Hitam (Black Crow) was linked to the only IS-related attack in Malaysia, ostensibly under the direction of Wanndy. Despite his notoriety as the most well-known Malaysian IS member, Wanndy was not engaged in active combat and was actually under tremendous pressure from IS leadership prior to his death due to his failure to engineer more attacks within Malaysia.

The second is Dr Mahmud Ahmad, born 1978, a former lecturer of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya. Dr Mahmud underwent training at an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan in the late 1990s while studying in Pakistan. He started recruiting and fundraising for IS as early as 2014 (his recruits include the aforementioned graduate student), eventually escaping to the southern Philippines with two other Malaysians, university stationary shop owner Mohd Najib Husen (killed in Basilan in 2015), and municipal council worker Muhammad Joraimee Awang Raimee (killed in Marawi city in 2017). They were later identified in a propaganda video proclaiming an IS branch (the first in Southeast Asia, in fact) in the Philippines, with Mohd Najib Husen as the leader of one of the four battalions. Dr Mahmud was poised to become the next regional ‘emir’ following the death of senior figures such as Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Khayyam Maute when Filipino security forces moved in to recapture Marawi but he was killed in late 2017.
The IS–al-Qaeda split that happened in Indonesia and Syria did not occur in Malaysia.\(^{46}\) As mentioned above, veteran KMM fighters who went to Syria all shifted allegiance to IS. The overwhelming majority of terrorism-related arrests since 2013 in Malaysia were linked to IS, with the rest being suspected Abu Sayyaf members. The only publicly known pro-JI group, the Tanzim Al-Qaeda Malaysia, was operated by Yazid Sufaat, a former JI member who was detained from the years 2002 to 2008 under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and was detained again and sentenced to jail in 2013 under terrorism charges. The prolonged incarceration of Yazid and the lack of reported activities suggests that JI, if there is any substantial presence at all, is at best in a dormant state within Malaysia.

While the ideology of IS is not unknown,\(^ {47}\) its localised manifestation within Malaysia is fairly limited. Unlike in Indonesia where there were known pro-IS news portals and magazines, publications by Malaysians are practically unheard of. This inability to locate specific charismatic preachers or bespoke materials involved in the radicalisation of Malaysians represents a difficulty for researchers who are trying to understand if IS’s appeal in Malaysia lies in its localised narratives or its (once) status as a global caliphate. Operations-wise, there were indeed plots to perpetrate attacks within Malaysia. The many plans uncovered (none of them believed to be at an advanced phase), include kidnapping the prime minister, suicide attacks, as well as attacks on breweries, entertainment outlets, and ‘strategic and important government buildings’.\(^ {48}\) Most of them were hatched by chat groups operating as cells, with members dispersed across different states in Malaysia.

Unlike the Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) in Indonesia, there were no groups in Malaysia that openly declared their support for IS. Even Hizbut Tahrir, a group committed to the cause of the caliphate, renounces IS.\(^ {49}\) Nevertheless, surveys have suggested some appeal of IS to the populace. A survey by Pew has shown that 11% of Malaysians saw IS as ‘favourable’.\(^ {50}\) Another survey of undergraduates in Malaysian universities shows that, amidst a low awareness of IS’s affiliation and ideology, there was a significant minority, close to 15%, that ‘respected’ its ideology.\(^ {51}\) Nevertheless, the overall ‘popularity’ of IS can be attributed to its online fame, which does not guarantee translation into actual support. This is unsurprising given that IS manifested itself in Malaysia almost entirely via a cyber-existence, be it in on social media platforms, chat groups, or blogs. Seventy-five per cent of IS militants in Malaysia were said to be recruited through social media.\(^ {52}\) There were even cases where the ba’iah (the pledge of allegiance) to IS were given online.\(^ {53}\)

**THE LEAP FROM JI TO IS: BUILDING FROM SCRATCH?**

So, what can be concluded about IS in Malaysia from the information above? This section argues that, instead of a seamless transition, the discontinuity between JI–KMM and IS in Malaysia has afforded IS supporters the opportunity to embark and experiment on new recruiting strategies with markedly different (and diversified) messaging campaigns and target audiences, even if its ideological underpinnings remain consistent with JI. However, despite establishing a presence since 2013, it would appear that IS is still in its early phase of expansion within Malaysia. Its incipiency can be seen from a few points.

First, the radicalisation and recruitment processes happened in an atomised and unstructured manner, with social media as the primary conduit supported by a loose coalition of returning fighters and proxy agents.\(^ {54}\) This is unsurprising given that the human networks and relative freedom JI enjoyed up until 2001 is no longer available. IS-affiliated actors can only compensate through the pervasiveness of social media in Malaysia, which has been ranked within the top five globally.\(^ {55}\) Instead of having geographic hotspots of activities, a scattered pattern of recruitment is observed throughout the nation with those recruited and radicalised mostly in the youth demographic, the group that spends the most time on social media. In a statistic cited by El-Muhammedy, 80 out of the 107 IS-related detainees from 2013 to 2015 were between the ages of 18 and 40.\(^ {56}\)

This scattered nature of recruitment in cyberspace, however, allows for the penetration of demographics that were previously untapped by JI. The successful recruitment of women and exceptionally young individuals as operatives is a differentiating feature of IS from JI in Malaysia. There is even a reported case of a 51-year-old lady who planned to run over voters using a car during polling day, making it the first plot in Malaysia involving a female attacker.\(^ {57}\) Two cases of violence involving teens include a 16-year-old taking a woman hostage at knifepoint in a supermarket and a 19-year-old student due to take his A-level equivalents within days, arrested for attempting to build a pipe bomb to attack a beer festival.\(^ {58}\)

Second, none of the key recruiters identified was known to have a militant past. Even the more committed members were practically novices. This is the case for ‘celebrity’ figures such as Wanny and Akel Zainal.\(^ {59}\) The senior figures arrested have no history of prior affiliation with jihadist activities, as seen in this case of a 37-year-old Energy, Green Technology and Water Ministry senior assistant director.
arrested for funding, promoting, and recruiting for IS, or of a 49-year-old contractor who was sentenced to three years’ jail for promoting IS membership. In other words, jihadist newcomers who do not have any experience of overseas training (which was the case for many JI operatives that were active in the early 2000s) are the prime movers of the movement, making figures like Dr Mahmud the exception instead of the norm.

Third, there is a notable absence of national or regional support structures for the integration of its members. Instead, a ‘start-up’ type of culture is observed, where individuals participate through variegated pathways. These trajectories of action include travelling to Syria and Iraq to join IS; self-organising into cells to conduct terrorist operations; joining up with counterparts in a neighbouring country (the case of Dr Mahmud); or even a juvenile hostage-taking attempt to ‘prove IS membership’ (see above). Most of these actions were notably based on individual will and ingenuity, typical of the so-called ‘lone wolf’ phenomenon. Fourth, the dire lack of local leadership had to be compensated by leadership from afar. Wanndy and his putative successor, Akel Zainal, for example, were identified as key recruiters and coordinators and instigators of attacks within Malaysia.

Social media not only offers a platform for formerly less penetrable groups such as women and youth, but enables new messaging strategies that straddle both religious didactics and aesthetics of the cyberspace. One good example of this would be the 26-year-old Malaysian female doctor famously known as the ‘Bird of Jannah’. Her carefully curated social media presence, albeit defunct now, was filled with writings of elegant and accessible prose and masterfully edited photos that were not unlike those conventionally posted on picture sharing platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr. Nevertheless, these narratives came with a jihadist twist, all tailored to portray a glorified, empowering vision of jihadi feminism.

In other words, operating in a setting that is not rooted in local networks of pesantrens or social organisations such as in Indonesia, IS in Malaysia was largely sustained by social and digital imaginaries of the pan-global caliphate which, for a short period of time, was a concrete polity to which Malaysian sympathisers could migrate (hijrah) towards. This unrooted existence enables the group to take up a postmodern ethos, which as Akbar Ahmed puts it, is defined by its,

Scholars have argued that IS’s universalistic goals that are shorn of references to the local milieu may dampen its recruitment amongst Malaysians, which may be true given that the absolute numbers of recruitment in Malaysia are low when compared to Muslim majority states such as Indonesia, Tunisia, the Philippines or Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, it is important not to draw too early a conclusion. As argued, IS is still in its incipient phase in Malaysia. It has, after all, outperformed JI in terms of number, gender, and occupational diversity of its recruits, as well as in its aggressiveness in hatching domestic plots (including one that has been successful). Also, according to Joseph Liow, Malaysia actually has a higher number of IS fighters per capita when compared to Indonesia, indicating strong ‘push’ factors operating within the country. In the upcoming section, we will look at how counter-terror policymaking and practices in Malaysia respond to these challenges.

COUNTER-TERRORISM IN MALAYSIA: HEAVY HANDS AND HEARTS AND MINDS

IS prompted a transformation of Malaysia’s security landscape as it blurred foreign/domestic distinctions and multiplied the avenues for action for its members and sympathisers. At its most benign end, an IS supporter could promote, fund, influence, and recruit for the organisation; whereas at the less benign end, they could be involved in violent plans both within and outside of Malaysia. In addition, until the fall of Raqqa in 2017, Malaysians have attempted to travel to Syria; some chose to do so to live in the caliphate, while others aspired to take on combat duties as soldiers and suicide bombers. In confronting this scenario, Malaysia’s counter-terror policies operate in three dimensions:  
  ■ Legislative  
  ■ Operational  
  ■ Discursive
The legislative dimension

The IS threat came at a time when the modus operandi of Malaysia's counter-terror operations had experienced a major shift. The ISA, which was used to combat a plethora of 'enemies' of the state including the Communist insurgents, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), political dissenters, and even JI members, was repealed in 2012, about a year before the first IS-related arrest in Malaysia was made. Even though it contains a specific provision that defines the 'terrorist', the ISA is fundamentally a preventive detention law, whereby anyone deemed 'acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia' by the Home Ministry can be detained for up to two years, which theoretically can be renewed indefinitely.

Its replacement, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA), allows for detention without trial up to 28 days, but from that point onwards the suspect will have to be either freed or prosecuted. The repeal of the ISA in 2012 constitutes a landmark change as it compels terrorist suspects to be charged in court whereas they were detained without trial and released only upon the Home Minister's approval during the ISA days, despite the fact that the penal code had already incorporated a slew of terrorist-related statutes since 2007 (see below). Indeed, information from the police revealed that as of January 2019, amongst the 453 people detained for terrorist activities, 199 were charged and 173 convictions were secured.

Comparatively, Malaysia's counter-terror laws are more comprehensive than most countries, including Indonesia that only made joining IS, either at home or abroad, a crime in 2018, and those of the United Kingdom which recently criminalised, inter alia, giving support to terrorist groups and the viewing or dissemination of terrorist materials. The Malaysian Penal Code defines terrorism as acts of harm and intimidation 'made with the intention of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause' committed 'within and beyond Malaysia'. In other words, the law encompasses the foreign fighter situation by definition. Possession, display, or dissemination of terrorist materials, membership of proscribed terrorist groups and the facilitation of terrorist acts are all acts that are criminalised with long sentences. Given the preventive nature of the counter-terrorism laws, seemingly mundane acts, such as the possession of books, videos or images, have been taken as proof of a terrorism-related offence. The breadth of the legal framework invited criticism that the government was policing ‘thought crimes’, a criticism raised most prominently in the aforementioned case in which a graduate student was charged for the possession of 12 ‘jihadist’ books.

Yet, despite the coverage provided by the penal code, the Malaysian government still passed two more laws that were highly controversial. The first is the Prevention of Terrorism Board Act (POTA), which like the ISA, allows for detention without trial for periods of two years, with the only difference being that a 5–8 member board is the one that makes the decision. The second is the National Security Council Act (NSC) that enables the prime minister to declare an area, with no geographical limits prescribed, to be under emergency rule, in which the council can exercise unrestrained powers of search, arrest, and destruction. It is interesting to note that despite being branded as an anti-terror bill, the NSC carries no mention of the term ‘terrorism’ at all. After a new government was elected in 2018 (the first regime change Malaysia has experienced), calls were made to repeal the security laws such as SOSMA, POTA and the NSC but, as of writing, only minimal changes have been made. Ultimately it would appear that the abolition of the ISA has had no effect on the counter-terror capacity of the police, given the wide coverage provided by the aforementioned trio of laws.

The operational dimension

As indicated by the numbers above, the Malaysian police, especially the Special Branch, has been rather active in its counter-terror operations. The effectiveness of police operations and intelligence, augmented by strict laws, is widely seen as the reason behind Malaysia's relative success in counterterrorism. However, it is also important to note that not all those detained were charged. A telling statistic from the year 2016 showed that of the 200 Malaysians detained, 59 were released without charges. There were also cases of acquittals by the court, although their appeals mostly favoured the prosecution. The availability of preventive laws means that even acquitted individuals can still be monitored by the police, either through further detention or electronic monitoring devices. In fact, POTA and the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) were used to detain a significant minority of terror suspects, close to 70 by the year 2017. The police have also acted on a substantial number of foreigners suspected of involvement in terrorist activities, many of whom were deported. Nevertheless, the definition of what amounts to a terrorist group became contentious when members of the Gulen movement and the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested and deported in the name of counterterrorism.

Malaysia's hard measures have been coupled with a deradicalisation programme that has enjoyed global recognition, although its claim of a 97.5% success rate is unverifiable, even if recidivism has been confined to a very small number of cases. An integrated module that encompasses ‘various aspects such as social skills,
self-management, patriotism, financial management and psychology’ for POTA detainees was published in 2016 to serve as a guideline for rehabilitation officers, further playing to the strengths of the multifaceted nature of Malaysia’s deradicalisation programme. Its effectiveness on a systematic level remains to be seen, although, for the first batch of POTA detainees released, no case of relapse is known so far.

Nevertheless, two matters complicate Malaysia’s deradicalisation programme. First, as the government began to charge its terrorist suspects in court, their detention period is now decided by the court instead of a committee deciding if the individual has been sufficiently rehabilitated. As most terrorist crimes in Malaysia do not have minimum jail terms, the time available for the detainee to complete the four-phase deradicalisation programme becomes an issue of concern. Second, the rehabilitation programme places an undue emphasis on religious rehabilitation, in which the goal is to ‘extricate any negative ideology or twisted Islamic perceptions’. Doing so exposes the deradicalisation programme to intra-Muslim narratives, correcting religious interpretations remains the preoccupation of Malaysia’s discursive campaign, with the religious authorities and especially the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) playing a major role in counter-radicalisation efforts.

The discursive dimension
At first glance, counter-messaging appears to be a priority of the Malaysian government’s counter-terror strategy given that it has invested in three centres, the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre (RDC3) run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Counter-Messaging Centre (CMC) operated by the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), and the Ministry of Defence’s Malaysia Institute of Defence and Security (Midas) that took over from the now-defunct King Salman Centre for International Peace. Nevertheless, if one examines the content of such narratives, correcting religious interpretations remains the preoccupation of Malaysia’s discursive campaign, with the religious authorities and especially the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) playing a major role in counter-radicalisation efforts.

On 21 October 2014, the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia released a fatwa (religious edict) outlawing IS, claiming that, its brutal ways and tendency to label other Muslims as heretics are against Islamic teachings. The council also cautioned Malaysian Muslims against misguided calls for jihad and martyrdom. This focus on hermeneutical correctness about jihad can be seen in the formation of the six-agency Jihad Concept Explanation Action Committee. If the title itself is not telling enough, the fact that three out of the six agencies are Islamic institutions (the rest being the Home Ministry, the NSC, and the police) reveals the government’s dependence on religious expertise in countering violent extremism. JAKIM also published a booklet to explain the ‘real’ meaning of jihad in 2015, while ensuring such messaging were spread through the ‘mainstream media and Friday sermons’. In addition, until the change of government in 2018, the concept of Islamic moderation (wasatiyyah) was promoted through the Global Movement of Moderates and National Institute of Wasatiyyah — both of which are now defunct — for the ostensible purposes of countering violent extremism. Critics, however, have questioned the effectiveness of such top-down dissemination of narratives. Moreover, this preoccupation with (misguided) religious understanding as the reason for receptivity to IS’s ideology may risk masking complex historical, social, political and economic realities that encourage violent extremist ideas to fester at the expense of more moderate ones.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has thus far highlighted two major changes in Malaysia’s counter-terror landscape. First, the change in the nature of terrorism following the usurping of JI by IS as the dominant terrorist group in Malaysia. Second, the change in Malaysia’s counter-terror policies after the abolishment of the ISA. Replacing the obscure nature of the ISA is a more visible counter-terror campaign waged in courts, mosques, the media, and schools, with frequent reports of arrests, trials and prosecutions. A case of ‘catching-up’ is also observed as legal and security apparatus expands in conjunction with IS’s sprawl across the globe. Far-reaching laws and solid intelligence may explain the security forces’ relative success in containing the IS threat, although, as I have highlighted in this chapter, being in its incipient phase, the amateurish background and antics of its supporters could have botched greater ambitions of IS’s expansion within Malaysia. The fact that IS lost its last territory in Baghouz, Syria in early 2019 and that a great number of Malaysian
militants in Syria were killed, including ‘mastermind recruits’ like Wanndy and Zainuri Kamaruddin, has led to a decline in the number of IS-related arrests in Malaysia in 2018, after years of increase.34

Yet, another change may complicate Malaysia’s counter-terror efforts: its first change of government since independence in 1957 which has left the country’s two largest Malay-Muslim parties in the federal opposition. This culminated in an alliance between PAS and UMNO that claims to represent the ‘disenfranchised majority’ of the country, a sentiment that is perpetuated by the low (and declining) Malay support for the ruling coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope).35 As the PH government is perceived to be too liberal and secular, Islam is increasingly employed as a symbol of legitimacy and resistance in grievance narratives targeting Malay-Muslims. Through hardly revolutionary or global in content, such grievance discourses at the national level help sustain and normalise certain elements of IS’s exclusivist ideology within an identity politics framework that can easily be superimposed on the supranational discourses of sectarian and civilisational cleavages IS peddles. For example, a ‘Buy Muslims First’ campaign was invigorated following heightened intercommunal tensions saw the use of religious solidarity instead of the usual racial lines as the signifier for (by and large) Malay-Muslim mobilisation. The involvement of Zakir Naik, an Indian preacher seeking refuge in Malaysia, within the polemic effectively transposes the global onto the local, resulting in ‘Muslimness’ being made the marker of in/out-group boundaries.36 These developments may benefit enterpreneurs of Islamist militancy that are also capitalising on discourses of pan-Muslim victimhood. Indeed, an arrest in May 2019 has linked an IS-related plot to communal tensions that unfolded following riots at a Hindu temple in Subang Jaya, Malaysia.37 While addressing micro-challenges such as Malaysia’s porosity as a transit hub and the return of foreign fighters will be the major challenge for the authorities, it will be within the macro-historical and local debates of state, Islam and politics that Malaysians’ vulnerability to anti-state groups such as IS can inherently be resolved.

NOTES
1 The foiling of the attack had a fortuitous turn, as it was based on intelligence uncovered by United States forces in a senior Al-Qaeda leader’s home in Afghanistan, see ‘Operation against Jemaah Islamiyah Singapore Begins’, HistorySG, 8 December 2001, http://resources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/00207855-71f4-4629-8f6f-6039a6086cda.
2 The most prominent example is the Al-Qaeda Kuala Lumpur summit in January 2000 attended by two of the September 11 hijackers.
8 Ibid.
9 Even a research paper commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has remarkably little to say about IS in Malaysia; see Greg Fealy & John Funston (2016). Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State, Management Systems International, Arlington.
15 Darul Islam is an armed movement in Indonesia that emerged in the late 1940s with the intention of establishing Islamic rule in Indonesia. While the group was disbanded with the execution of its leader, Kartosuwirjo, its various offshoots continue to remain active in Indonesia, and seek to establish the Islamic State of Indonesia. See Quinton Temby (2010). ‘Imagining An Islamic State In Indonesia: From Darul Islam To Jemaah Islamiyah’, Indonesia 89: 1–36.
37 Muhammad Haziq bin Jani (2016). ‘Malaysia’s ‘jihadist-celebrity’: Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed

36 Court of Appeal’s Ground of Judgment, Public Prosecutor vs Siti Noor Aishah binti Atam, p. 3.

35 Aman Abdurrahman was sentenced to death in June 2018 by the South Jakarta District Court. He

34 ‘Treasury Sanctions Three ISIS Recruiters from Southeast Asia’, 24 August 2018, US Department of


31 Such sweeping analysis can be seen in, for example, Rohan Gunaratna (2002). Inside Al-Qaeda: Global

29 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star

28 Elena Pavlova (2007) ‘From a Counter-Society to a Counter-State Movement: Jemaah Islamiyah

27 Such sweeping analysis can be seen in, for example, Rohan Gunaratna (2002). Inside Al-Qaeda: Global

25 Kamarulnizam Abdullah (2009). ‘Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI):

24 Hambali was the head of JI’s operations and a member of Al Qaeda’s shura (consultative council). It

23 Ibid. p. 157.


21 Justin Magouirk & Scott Atran (2008). ‘Jemaah Islamiyah’s radical Madrassah networks’, Dynamics of

20 Mohd Mizan Aslam, ‘A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia’, p. 188.

19 Pesantren Al-Mukmin is an Islamic boarding school established in the village of Ngruki, outside Solo,

18 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star


16 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star

15 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star

14 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star


9 ‘IS leaders “infuriated” over Wanndy’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia’, 26 April 2017, The Star


3 ‘Treasury Sanctions Three ISIS Recruiters from Southeast Asia, 24 August 2018, US Department of


GLOBAL JIHAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA


83 Ibid. p. 151.


90 ‘Jihad dan Konsepnya, 2015, JAKIM and Prime Minister’s Department of Malaysia, Putrajaya, ibid.


The Muslim insurgents in the southernmost part of Thailand have never described themselves as an ally of any of the many transnational jihadist organisations.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2004 the armed conflict in the southern border provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and several districts of Songkhla province has claimed nearly 7,000 lives and more than 10,000 have been injured, most of them civilians. It is seen as one of the deadliest conflicts in Southeast Asia. Due to the fact that most of the violent incidents have been staged by local Muslim insurgent groups against the Thai state, which has Buddhism as its dominant religion, the conflict is commonly understood as being religious in nature. However, as will be explained in the following, the conflict is essentially a nationalist struggle between Malays and Thais/Siamese. This chapter first explains why the influence of transnational jihadism promoted by organisations such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has been very limited and unsuccessful in encroaching into Thailand so far. Secondly, it explains the armed conflict since 2004 in the southernmost part of the country called Patani. Although this conflict is seen as a jihad by the Muslim insurgents, it has never contributed to the promotion of transnational jihadism. In the final part of the chapter, risk factors which might lead to the expansion of transnational jihadism in Thailand in general and in Patani in particular shall be discussed.
LIMITED IMPACTS OF AL-QUEDA AND IS / ISLAMIC STATE IN THAILAND

Every time a transnational jihadist organisation has appeared in the mainstream media of Thailand, it has been followed by the emergence of ‘supporters’ among Muslims in the country. After the September 11 attacks, in the Muslim-dominant area of the southernmost provinces, pictures of Bin Laden appeared practically everywhere: on t-shirts, car stickers, and posters in tea shops, for instance. However, this phenomenon did not last long, and gradually these pictures disappeared. In the same fashion, after the rise of ISIS, the black flag began to adorn the profile pictures of young Muslim users of social media, especially on Facebook. However, within the space of a few weeks all these ISIS flags were replaced by different pictures, especially after the atrocities committed by them were widely reported.

This kind of temporary acceptance of the pictures related to the transnational jihadist movement should not be interpreted as staunch support for them from local Muslims, because this phenomenon only happens when the information on these organisations (al-Qaeda and ISIS) was extremely limited, and disappears after more information about them became available.

The author of this article, for example, interviewed one local Muslim teenager in Pattani province who used the ISIS flag for his Facebook account. He explained that Muslims must support fellow Muslims who were fighting against ‘evil infidels (kafir)’. He thought ISIS was fighting against the US (which he and many local Muslims regarded as a hostile, anti-Muslim country). However, he had no idea about who they were, and what they were fighting for. Within a couple of weeks of the interview, he changed his profile picture like many other Muslim youths who had done the same thing.

In 2014, the author of this article observed a group of villagers watching a video clip of beheadings by ISIS on a mobile phone in a local coffee shop in Pattani province. When asked if they might support ISIS, they immediately denied that, arguing that it was too much and Islam could not be this cruel. During the conversation, they uttered the term ‘zalim’, a Malay word which means ‘cruel’, several times.

The above observations illustrate that the impact of the transnational jihadist movement on the Muslims in Thailand only happened at its initial stage, and that its nature has been superficial. When more information about them became available, the support from local Muslims gradually vanished.

LACK OF TRANSNATIONAL JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

The majority of Thailand’s population are Buddhists, while Muslims form the largest religious minority of the country, numbering several millions. The exact number of Muslims in the country is difficult to give, because it greatly differs from one source to another, even among official sources. There have never been active propaganda efforts of transnational jihadist movements aimed at Muslims in Thailand. The only exception has been some video clips with Thai subtitles released by the ISIS media wing, al-Hayat, in late November 2015. However, these clips were not followed by any other propaganda materials, which might indicate either that their propaganda efforts were not as successful as had been expected, or that Muslims in Thailand were not among the main targets of ISIS recruitment, or both.

In the four southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun) Muslims are the regional religious majority at around 80%. They are ethnically Malays and speak dialects of Malay. ISIS issued a propaganda newsletter in Malay called Al-Fatihin that claimed to be ‘a newspaper for Malay speaking migrants in the Islamic State’. Although some news agencies reported the publication of the propaganda material, hardly any local Muslims bothered to acquire a copy of it online when it first came out. Access to the newspaper was thereafter immediately blocked by the authorities. Even if this had not happened, it would have been highly unlikely that this could have reached the local Muslims in this region because the language used in the newspaper is Indonesian, not Malay, and written in roman script, not in the jawi script that the local Malay Muslims in this region are more familiar with.

ACCOMMODATING POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENT

Buddhism plays an important role in the country, and is integrated into its centralised administration system. The latest constitution even strengthens the position of Theravada Buddhism as ‘the religion observed by the majority of Thai people for a long period of time’. However, religious freedom is still guaranteed by the same constitution, and the government policy for the Muslims in Thailand can be described as accommodating. After World War II, Thailand issued three legal regulations in relation to Islam, i.e. the Royal Act concerning Islamic Masjids (1947), the Royal Decree concerning Religious Patronage to Islam (1945) and the Royal Decree concerning Religious Patronage to Islam (1947). These regulations were abolished after the proclamation of the Royal Decree Concerning the Administration of Religious Patronage.
of Islamic Organisations in 1997. Under this legal system, the Thai state integrated Islam into the official system. The head of the Muslim community in Thailand is called the Sheikh al-Islam (or Chularachamontri in Thai). He is a royally-appointed leader, who is also the president of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand. About 40 provinces with significant numbers of Muslims have provincial Islamic councils. In the four southern border provinces where Muslims are the regional religious majority, the Act on the Enforcement of Islamic Law in Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun is enforced. Under this law, legal affairs related to marriage and inheritance of Muslims can be resolved according to Islamic law. For this purpose, in the law courts of these provinces there is a position called Dato’ Yutitham, who acts as a legal advisor to the judges for cases related to Islamic affairs.

Moreover, compared to its Islamic neighbours in ASEAN such as Malaysia or Indonesia, Thailand guarantees a relatively high level of religious liberty for Muslims. Practically every type of Islam can be practiced in Thailand, including Shia, Tabligh, Salafi (or, derogatively, called ‘Wahabi’), Tarikat, eclectic traditionalism and so on, as long as they are not oriented to extremism and not threatening national security.

Under such circumstances, even for Salafists who are ideologically closer to Islamic fundamentalism than other groups, it is far more beneficial to cooperate with the state than to oppose it. In fact, compared to other Muslim groups, the Salafists in Thailand could be seen as the most cooperative partner to the state. Four satellite TV channels are run by them. The College of Islamic Studies at Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani Campus, and Fathoni University are known as the strongholds of the local Salafists in the southernmost part of the country. Where the state policies are accommodating for Muslims and religious freedom is guaranteed, in order to promote the religion per se, cooperation with the state is the most feasible and convenient option.

THAI STUDENTS WHO STUDY ABROAD

Muslims from Thailand studying in Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa might be seen as easy targets for recruitment by the transnational jihadist movement. Around three thousand Muslim students are presently pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies of mainly Islamic studies in Muslim countries. The most popular destination is Egypt (where Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest universities in the Middle East is located), followed by Indonesia. Hundreds of Thai students also study in Malaysia, Sudan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and many other Muslim countries also host small numbers of Thai students.

These students are well taken care of (as well as monitored) by the Thai embassies in these countries. The Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC) is one of the most significant distributers of scholarships for these countries, and students to these countries are overseen by this administrative organisation too.

In a personal interview with a student from Pattani Province who recently finished his BA and MA in Indonesia he explained that as far as he knew there was no sound reason for Thai students abroad to join transnational jihadist movements because doing so might jeopardise their status as foreign students. Like in Thailand, Thai students in Indonesia were also active in student associations, which enabled them to take care of each other. If there was someone suspicious, senior students could advise junior students not to approach this kind of person. In Indonesia there were far more opportunities to acquire information about the transnational jihadist movement than in Thailand, available in the form of articles, public forums, TV programs etc. According to the informant, none of this information was supportive of Islamic fundamentalism. This, rather, helped them to understand al-Qaeda, ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah more clearly. The informant said it would be helpful for them to have this kind of information rather than having no idea about these organisations at all, because students could then judge for themselves whether or not the ideologies promoted by the transnational jihadist movement were really ‘Islamic’ or not.

On top of that, according to the same source, the strongest reason for not joining such movements was that it would do no good for the students to cause suspicion of the host country (Indonesia) by approaching the transnational jihadist movement, especially Jemaah Islamiyah. Basically, he said, the students came to Indonesia to complete their studies, and so far, he had never seen any fellow students from Thailand who had ever shown any enthusiasm for joining such movements.
THE ARMED CONFLICT IN THE SOUTHERNMOST PART OF THAILAND

The conflict area of the southernmost provinces of Thailand, i.e. Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and several districts in Songkhla province, where the majority of the local population are Malay Muslims, is often seen as one of the parts of Thailand most vulnerable to the influence of transnational jihadism. The influence of transnational jihadism, especially that of ISIS, is among the most frequently asked questions from diplomats when they visit the conflict area. Such misguided concerns are mainly due to the lack of proper understanding of the armed conflict which has been going on since the beginning of 2004. This conflict is not driven by religious antagonism between the Buddhist state of Thailand and Muslim insurgents but is an ethno-nationalist struggle justified by religious discourse. The Muslim insurgents in the southernmost part of Thailand have never described themselves as an ally of any one of the many transnational jihadist organisations. On the contrary, they present themselves as the ‘Patani Liberation Movement’. The only similarities are that they are both Muslim movements, waging a jihad and using violence. In the following section, explanations of these three concepts (Muslim, jihad and violence) in the context of Patani are provided, in order to highlight the differences between the two movements mentioned above.

MALAY MUSLIMS IN PATANI

Although there are a certain number of Salafists in Patani, the majority of Malay Muslims in this region are eclectic traditionalists. This region has a strong tradition of religious teaching based on the religious boarding school system called pondok. A pondok is usually established or run by a headmaster, locally called babo, who teaches religious subjects by using religious textbooks written in 19th and early 20th centuries by ulamas (religious scholars) from Patani. These textbooks are written in Malay in the jawi script. At present many pondok schools have changed their status from a traditional school into a private Islamic school following the government policy of forcing these schools to register to receive the government subsidies. These schools, that teach both religious and academic subjects, are far more popular than government schools in Patani.

For the majority of Malay Muslims in Patani, the concepts of ‘Malay’ and ‘Islam’ are inseparable. It should be noted that in the local context of Patani, the term ‘Islam’ can be used for any ethnicity, but the term ‘Melayu’ (or locally pronounced as ‘Nayu’) that clearly refers to an ethnicity, is also used to refer to ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims’. In the same way, the term ‘Siam’ (or locally pronounced as ‘Siye’) is used not only to mean ‘Siamese’, but also to mean ‘Buddhists’ or even ‘non-Muslims’. Therefore, when Patani Malays ask if someone is ‘Siye’ or ‘Nayu’, they do not necessarily ask about the person’s ethnicity, but it could be a question about their religion (whether the person is a Muslim or otherwise). Unlike in Malaysia where non-Muslim population also speak Malay, in Patani, if someone speaks Malay, he or she will be likely regarded as a Muslim.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN PATANI

Patani’s geopolitical uniqueness of having Malay Muslims as its regional majority is related to the historical background. The Malay kingdom of Patani thrived during the 16th and 17th centuries as an important entrepôt in Southeast Asia. It was a vassal state of Siam before it was finally defeated by the Siamese troops in 1785. The fall of Patani was followed by a series of resistance wars waged by Patani Malays against the Siamese occupation. Later Patani, which had been a single Malay kingdom, was divided into seven small states by Siam, respectively ruled by regional rajas with a certain level of autonomy. In 1909, following the signing of the Anglo–Siamese treaty which demarcated the border between the Kingdom of Siam and the British colony of Malaya, Patani was annexed into the direct administration of Siam by abolishing the regional rajas.

The struggle of Patani Malays never stopped even after the annexation. At the initial stage this movement was led by aristocracy, made up of the local rajas’ descendants. Later, since the 1940s, religious leaders began to play an important role in bringing the demands of the local Malay Muslims to the government. However, this came to an end after the most influential religious leader, Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir, was abducted and killed by the Thai police in 1954. In 1960s underground military groups were established, such as BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, the National Revolutionary Front in 1960), BNPP (Barisan National Pembebasan Patani, the Patani National Liberation Front in 1959), and PULO (the Patani United Liberation Organisation in 1968). The armed struggle has been committed since then, with its main actor changing from time to time. At the initial stage in the 1960s and 1970s, BNPP was the most influential organisation. It was followed by PULO, which was dominant in 1980s until the early 1990s. The decade after that was relatively calm, partly due to the success of the counter-insurgency measures of the government, and finally the military struggle has resurfaced again on an unprecedented scale since 2004.
Given this historical background, Malay Muslims with nationalist tendencies in Patani see the Siamese (and later Thai) administration as the colonisation of their motherland. Therefore, the jihad waged by the insurgents is essentially a nationalist struggle with the aim of achieving liberation of their motherland from the Siamese occupation or colonisation as is set out in the teaching of BRN described below.

THE IDEOLOGIES OF THE PATANI LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Although Patani is geographically very small (around 15,000 km²), there have been disproportionately high numbers of insurgent organisations. On top of that, organisations sometimes split into smaller factions. Therefore, the exact number of Patani insurgent organisations is difficult to verify. However, such disunity among the insurgent organisations is not caused by any significant ideological differences, but rather is the consequence of political power struggles. Even though there are small differences in their ideologies, they do have common pillars in the struggle that can be represented by three Malay words starting with the first three letters of Arabic alphabet: alif, ba and ta.24

The first letter, alif, represents agama which means ‘religion’, i.e. Islam in this context. Ba refers to bangsa, a Malay word which can mean ethnicity, folk, people and nation. Therefore, bangsa Melayu (Malay) can be meant as Malay ethnicity as well as their nation. The last letter, ta, is for tanah air, which means homeland or motherland, and in this case it means Patani as a whole.

In 2016 and 2017 the author conducted a series of interviews with members of insurgent organisations, including BRN, PULQ, BIPP and GMIP (Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani, the Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement, established in 1989) who lived in Malaysia. In an interview with the political leaders of GMIP, they firmly denied any connection with transnational jihadist organisations. Instead, the president of the organisation explained that the jihad waged by juwaes, the term used to refer to those who are involved in the struggle for liberation of Patani, was only of the local Malay Muslims, with the purpose of liberating their homeland. Therefore, ‘for instance, we will never claim Bangkok. It’s theirs [i.e. it is Thai]’.

Similarly, a political leader of BRN stressed that the conflict in Patani was not a religious war. Ideologically speaking, it was against the principle of the organisation to define any ethnic or religious group only by of their ethnicities or religions. When asked about who their enemies were, he immediately replied, ‘the colonisers’. Because they are waging a jihad whose purpose is to liberate their motherland, the colonisers and their collaborators are seen as the enemies. Siamese are seen as their enemies solely because they have occupied the homeland of Patani Malays. Therefore, ‘as soon as they stop colonising us, we will have no reason whatsoever to see them as enemy anymore. They are our enemies not because they are Buddhists or Siamese, but because they are our colonisers. Those Siamese who have no role in the colonisation of Patani are not our enemies too’.27

An ex-combatant of BRN said that although there was no written rule, members of the organisation must be Malay Muslims born in Patani. In Patani, the terms ‘Melayu’ and ‘Islam’ are inseparable. Therefore, newly converted Muslims (of inevitably different ethnicity from Malay) or non-Malay Muslims are excluded from the recruitment. This account points to the ethno-nationalist (Patani and Malay) nature of the struggle.28

In an interview with a senior member of BIPP, the author asked whether the ideologies of the Patani liberation movement could be influenced by transnational jihadism or not. The informant immediately expressed dissatisfaction at such a perception. He argued that the ideologies of the Patani liberation movement had been established based on the historical experience of Patani Malays in fighting against Siamese colonisation since many decades ago. In his opinion, this was the best form of ideology to justify the struggle, and there was no need to borrow any foreign ideologies, including those of transnational jihadism.29

THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE IN THE ARMED CONFLICT IN PATANI

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of the armed conflict in Patani can be observed in the ways in which violence has been used by the insurgents. Compared to other conflict areas in Southeast Asia such as the Bangsamoro region in Mindanao or Aceh in Sumatra, the degree of physical devastation in Patani is much less serious, mainly because of the low intensity of the conflict. Apart from the numerous military checkpoints which are set up every few kilometres of practically every road, hardly any sign of the existence of a conflict can be spotted in Patani. The insurgents do have military forces, but these forces are mainly used for hit-and-run shootings and bombings, which are their main modi operandi. Military encounters have been rare, and when they happen, it is almost always on a small scale. The military encounter which has claimed the largest number of insurgents’ lives took place on 13 February 2013, when 16 insurgent fighters were shot dead.
Although the conflict has already claimed nearly 7,000 lives and injured more than 12,000 people since 2004, this large number is not caused by the intensity but rather by the frequency of violent incidents. If two or three civilians are killed in an incident, it is already regarded as a big one, and might be reported by the mainstream media. However, a number of incidents are under-reported or not reported at all in mainstream or international media. This can be observed in the use of the term het kaan pracham wan (daily incidents) by Thai mainstream media.20

During the first few years of the conflict, the insurgents committed atrocities which clearly aimed at intimidating the local population, such as beheadings or burning of corpses in certain cases. However, the insurgents have not applied any use of violence which might cause mass destruction such as suicide bombings or indiscriminate mass shootings. In fact, those incidents which have claimed a large number of lives were caused by the security forces of Thailand, i.e. the brutal crackdown on the insurgents in the Krue Se Mosque in Pattani province and eleven other military posts that killed 107 people, and the massacre of the demonstrators in front of the Tak Bai police station that claimed 87 lives. Thus, it can be surmised that the use of violence by the insurgents in this armed conflict is mainly political in essence. The BRN political leader mentioned above explained that the purpose of using violence is ‘to cause disturbance among the enemies until they are ready to negotiate with us’.

Therefore, even though in Patani the local Muslims are waging a jihad by using violence, the nature of the insurgency is utterly different from that of transnational jihadism.

RISK FACTORS

In Thailand Muslim insurgent movements are still several steps away from the influence of transnational jihadism. However, there are several factors which potentially could exacerbate the circumstances.

From a religious point of view, at the national level there is an alarming tendency towards Islamophobia and radicalisation of Buddhists which became visible after the military coup, since around 2015.21 There were protests against the building of mosques in such provinces as Bueng Kan, Khon Kaen and Nakhon Si Thammarat.22 In Chiang Mai, locals and monks from 25 districts protested against a plan to set up a halal food industrial estate in September 2017.23 Among the most alarming incidents was a social media post by a radical monk called Maha Aphichat. In his Facebook post on 4 November 2015, he stated that ‘If a [Buddhist] monk in the three southern border provinces dies from an explosion or being shot at the hands of the “Malayu bandits”, a mosque should be burned, starting from the northern part of Thailand southwards’.24 Finally this monk was disrobed by the authority.25

So far, none of these strings of Islamophobia has developed into a systematised anti-Islam movement or a violent incident between Buddhists and Muslims. However, such a tendency surely casts a threat over the integration of the country, if not properly dealt with by the authorities. For instance, social media could play a corrosive role in disrupting social integration as has happened in Myanmar. Thailand needs to be careful so as not to let social media be used as the tool for spreading religious hate speeches.26

As was explained above, although the Muslim insurgents, according to their political leaders, do not regard the conflict as a religious war, the local Buddhists might see it in a different way. Michael Jerryson explains that, ‘The declining number of Buddhists in southern Thailand has led to a decline in the number of Buddhists who will ordain as monks. This dwindling number, coupled with the violence against Buddhist monks and laity, has led many Thais to believe that Buddhism is under threat’.27 Accordingly, the use of violence against monks could lead to the justification for violence. He cites a local police officer in the conflict area, ‘murdering a Buddhist monk was the very worst thing a person could do - and if they caught the perpetrators, they would kill them’. Such sentiments of being under the threat, and of seeing such as a justification for violence, if accumulated for a long time without being treated carefully, might bring about further radicalisation of Buddhists in Thailand, which, in turn, also might radicalise their Muslim counterparts.

In the case of the armed conflict in Patani, the peace dialogue process that has been so far unsuccessful in guaranteeing safety of the local population has certainly caused dissatisfaction. In an interview with a Buddhist activist, the author was told that some local Buddhists were supportive of Maha Aphichat. They also found speeches delivered by the radical monk in Myanmar, Wirathu, to be acceptable.28 Such reactions indicate strong dissatisfaction among the local Buddhists, and any failure or delay in the peace process might exacerbate the circumstances even more.

At the same time, this protracted conflict might radicalise the military cells which have been staging the violent incidents. It is still highly unclear to what extent the armed forces of the insurgent organisations abide to their political ideologies, and
how tightly leaders of these organisations (most of them are in exile) can control the armed forces. At this moment, the military forces of the insurgent groups still use violence in a political way rather than for mass destruction. This indicates that the military operations are conducted under certain frames set by the ideology and the leadership of the insurgent movements. Although those who have been exposed to the organisations’ ideology are highly unlikely to be influenced by transnational jihadism, there is no guarantee that the younger generations will not be influenced by it in the future. For this reason, in order to solve this armed conflict, just adopting counter-insurgency (COIN) is not enough to ensure a sustainable peace. The authority must make the strongest effort to find political solutions.

The Thai government needs to protect the tourism industry of the country which indirectly contributes more than 20% of Gross Domestic Product. Thailand has an open-door visa policy in order to encourage tourism. This combined with an active market in fraudulent identification documents, has made Thailand a useful destination for non-state actors. Consequently, ‘Thailand’s role as a convenient place for non-state actors to lay low and transact business serves the country’s security interests’, citing the Thai police that they had obtained information from a leaked document from the Russian Federal Security Service. This news piece was bought (or copied) by many international media and spread all over the world. However, on 7 December, the Nation, a Thai English language paper, reported that the Thai police ‘yesterday questioned three Syrians in the presence of Russian Ambassador Kirill Barsky and found they have no connection to Islamic State’, although one of these Syrians might have to face a legal action due to his expired visa. This was reported by local media, but hardly any international media did so.

Similarly, on 18 April 2018, Channel News Asia reported that a Narathiwat resident called Awae Wae-Eya, who was questioned for several days in a military camp in Patani was accused by Malaysian authorities of being a member of an Islamic State cell. But it was later dismissed by the Thai authorities. ‘After several days of questioning, Thai security officials concluded that Awae Wae-Eya, 37, was an Internet troll who had found himself in trouble with the authorities in the past because of his online posts’.

It should be noted that international media only cover this kind of news when an allegation that someone or some plan is connected to ISIS, but they hardly ever report the result of the investigations that are usually only covered by the local media. Even though these news reports related to alleged relations with ISIS should not be discounted, they have not to date proved that any of these allegations are true. Thus, the following reports on such cases, mainly from the domestic media, also must be carefully monitored.

**CONCLUSION**

At this moment, the influence of transnational jihadism is not a major threat to the security of Thailand. It only has limited and passing impacts on the Muslims in the country. The armed conflict in the southernmost part of the country is an ethno-nationalist conflict, and religion (Islam) plays the role of justifying the struggle. The insurgents call themselves as the ‘Patani Liberation Movement’, and their ultimate ideological purpose is the independence of Patani, not the establishing of a global caliphate. However, there are several risk factors which might bring about unwanted societal changes, particularly signs of nascent Islamophobia or Buddhist radicalism. The Thai government should pay serious attention to these developments and must engage in the peace process to solve the armed conflict in Patani.

In 1980s BNPP changed its name to Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, the Patani Islamic Liberation Front.

For personal interview with an ex-BRN member, Narathiwat, Thailand, October 2016. For more discussion on this issue, see Hara, Shintaro. Ibid.

Personal interview with GMIP leaders in Terengganu, Malaysia. December 2016.

When talking about Thais, Patani Malays, especially those who are involved in the movement, hardly used the term ‘Thai’. Instead, they refer Thais as ‘Skye’, which was the local pronunciation of the term ‘Siamese’.

Personal interview with a political leader of BRN in Terengganu, Malaysia. December 2016.


Personal interview with a senior member of BRP in Kelantan, Malaysia. November 2017.

For instance, see a news report from Manager Online. 22 October 2018 by Wann Lintthongka. ราชันได้ ถูกคุมพิทักษ์ ศึกษานิเทศก์ไม่ได้รับการ รับรอง https://mgronline.com/detail/national/30327296 [accessed on 29 August 2019]


Prachatai. 5 November 2015. ‘Radical monk shuts down Facebook account at authorities’ request’. https://prachatai.com/english/node/5590 [accessed on 31 May 2019]


A personal interview with a Buddhist activist in Yala, Thailand. April 2017.

In 1980s BNPP changed its name to Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, the Patani Islamic Liberation Front.

For more detailed information about the religious school system, see Madmarn, Hassan. 1999. Pondok & Madrasah in Patani. Bangi: Penerbit Universit Kebangsaan Malaysia.

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Elbohly is a street artist who works in the space between graffiti and calligraphy. His art displays the colourful culture of North Africa and the Arab world, street culture from Denmark and spiritual dimensions of life. Calligraffitti such as this is an artform born in the Middle East and rapidly spreading all over the globe. Combining the traditional anchor of calligraphy and the postmodern notion of a global village, it allows a remix of culture and a hybridity of past rituals and traditions with contemporary art and expressions.

Elbohly has created this work especially for the cover of ‘Global jihad in Southeast Asia’. He is born and raised in Tripoli, Libya, and based in Copenhagen, Denmark.