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The Tri-Border Area: Jihadi Epicentre in Southeast Asia

By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

Synopsis

The spectre of Islamist terror groups has resurfaced in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) adjoining the southern Philippines. The supposed Islamic State (IS) is the latest iteration of the threat in an area of competing territorial claims, regional politicking and complacent security.

Commentary

THE SELF-PROCLAIMED Islamic State's (IS) designation of a wilayah (province) in southern Philippines is a strategic move by the terrorist organisation to establish its presence in the region. IS has proven that the hoisting of a radical utopian symbolism is enough, both as a rallying call and a mode of terror.

IS welcomed Southeast Asian terrorists into its fold, forming a Southeast Asian brigade known as Katibah Nusantara (KN). It accepted the bai'at (pledges of allegiance) of distant supporters and promised to announce a new wilayah in the Philippines once conditions were favourable. It selected an Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) leader Isnilon Hapilon as its emir in the Philippines. In a video Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus (The Solid Structure), Southeast Asian fighters in Raqqa, Syria called for their countrymen to migrate to Al-Filibin, IS' latest province. IS provides regular coverage of the soldiers of the Islamic State in the Philippines in updates by A'maaq News Agency (ANA) and the An-Naba' newspaper.

New Brigade: Katibah Al-Muhajir (KaM)

Already, IS has formed a new brigade for migrants, the Katibah Al-Muhajir (KaM) or The Brigade of the Migrant. For approximately 500 Malaysian Ringgit, a prospective foreign jihadist can secure his travel arrangements, from Malaysia to the Philippines, and be given a complimentary weapon. IS has ostensibly accumulated 10 battalions in six locations in southern Philippines according to the ANA. This has turned the Tri-border maritime area between Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia along the Sulawesi Straits into a new epicentre of jihadis loyal to IS.

IS thrives when its opponents are disorganised despite their individual strengths. Littoral states of the TBA – have dealt with the threat of terrorism. However, geographical and sovereignty issues, competing territorial claims and regional politicking – such as the Philippines' reiteration of its claim on Malaysia's Sabah – seem to be hindering regional co-operation.

Despite five separate kidnap-for-ransom attacks in the TBA conducted by ASG from March to July 2016, littoral states still have yet to set clear standard operating procedures to reduce piracy in the highly unregulated maritime area. Explicit support of IS meant that ASG is not just filling its coffers but demonstrating the financial viability of Al-Filipin as a wilayah to the distant caliphate. The 12 million Malaysian Ringgit ransom alone, for the Malaysians released on 7 June 2016, amounts to almost 3 million US dollars.

The TBA allows IS to capitalise on the historical smuggling networks, arms caches, jihadism and tribalism in the area. Although the TBA is peripheral to each littoral state, it is an ecosystem in itself. It has central significance to those who live in the network of trade and social relations across colonial boundaries. As a weapons-smuggling corridor, the TBA allowed the now peaceful Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of southern Philippines to receive weapons from Libya, and the IS-aligned Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) of Poso to receive firearms from the Philippines. When Jemaah Islamiyah was active, the TBA was a rear sanctuary for jihadists, being part of its mantiqi three (province) under Nasir Abbas.

Lastly, it is also highly probable that social structures in the TBA help IS enlist pockets of support by securing tribal or ethnic interests. The Suluks or Tausug diaspora, linked to the Moro people of Southern Philippines, want Sabah to be returned to them. The 2013 invasion of Lahad Datu, Sabah by followers of Jamalul Kiram III and the forewarnings of impatient factions transferring support from MILF to the ASG, demonstrate that ethnic interests and historical social structures play a significant role in the organic support of political violence in the areas immediately surrounding the TBA; a mechanism of political support familiar to IS in the Middle East.

TBA: the FATA of Southeast Asia?

With current operations to flush out terrorists from Poso in Indonesia, and Malaysia, Philippines' portion of the TBA is the ideal haven for transnational terrorists in SEA. The littoral states of the TBA and the Southeast Asian states cannot let the TBA deteriorate to become the FATA (tribal region) of Southeast Asia. With billions of

dollars of cargo - \$40 billion according to Stratfor and The Diplomat – travelling through the TBA annually, IS-affiliated non-state actors will not have a lack of targets.

IS has already successfully leveraged a local struggle for autonomy in southern Philippines to a wilayah with fighters from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Middle East. A young follower from the Philippines claimed on Facebook that IS-aligned fighters in the Philippines are awaiting the arrival of fighters from Australia. The deaths of Indonesian fighters and a Moroccan bomb expert in southern Philippines further demonstrate the international dimension of Jihadism in the Philippines and the security implications not just for territories around the TBA but also beyond the littoral states.

There are many issues that can have a long lasting impact on the future of TBA and Jihadist activity in Southeast Asia. Chiefly, the Philippines must not lose the opportunity to secure peaceful relations with the MILF with the passing of the Basic Bangsamoro Law. This will rescind the hopelessness that encouraged militants to join IS-linked groups and to resort to terror. Next, while the kidnappings may have occurred in the TBA, they are not mere acts of banditry, but also Jihadism. IS and jihadists in the TBA are but one “interpretive community” that ascribes religious overtures to acts of savagery and murder, piracy and robbery.

It is worth noting that very early on ASG had already found ways to justify everything from slavery to sexual slavery, viewing robbery as fa'i or religiously justified fundraising for jihad. Lastly, the defeat of IS-inspired groups in the Philippines is of regional benefit and TBA states should not delay any further in sorting out the modalities for co-operation and co-ordination. A new danger that the region should brace itself for is the return of jihadis from Wilayah Philippines.

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