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IS Attacks Southeast Asia During Ramadan

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

IS directed, instigated and inspired attacks in four continents including in Asia. In Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia, where IS infrastructure is intact and growing, IS groups, cells and personalities mounted attacks during the holy month of Ramadan.

Commentary

ISLAMIC STATE's global campaign during the holy month of Ramadan included Southeast Asia. The scale, magnitude and frequency of attacks worldwide from Turkey to Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia during Ramadan (6 June-5 July 2016) was driven by the call of IS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani: "Get prepared, be ready to make it a month of calamity everywhere for the non-believers!" He also oversees the external operations wing of IS.

The spate of attacks during the Ramadan period was driven by the erroneous belief that to be good Muslims they must join, support and participate in the activities of Islamic State (IS) that is purportedly fighting for Islam and Muslims. As Ramadan is a month dedicated to piety and good deeds, the call by IS to attack the enemies of Islam and Muslims during Ramadan is not only misguided but also revitalised the threat.

The Context

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar during which Muslims around the world engage in prayer, devotion, charity, fasting and refrain from sinful behaviour. However, by launching a Ramadan jihad, IS has distorted both the holy

month and jihad. Muslim threat groups driven by a politico-religious ideology perceive that the reward for afterlife is greater if they attack and even sacrifice their lives during Ramadan. It is not a belief shared by most Muslims who adhere to moderation, tolerance and coexistence.

Southeast Asia has been the preserve of al Qaeda until 2014. However, today, al Qaeda- influenced threat groups notably Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is challenged. The IS-centric threat is supplanting the Al Qaeda-JI centric threat in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian recruits that travelled to Syria and Iraq were directing the attacks in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

This Ramadan, Malaysia suffered its first IS attack in Selangor, Philippines suffered multiple attacks in Mindanao, and Indonesia suffered a suicide bomb attack in Solo, where only the attacker perished. Both Indonesia and Malaysia pre-empted other attacks. A major attack in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, was also pre-empted.

The mastermind of the first IS attack in Malaysia, the Syria-based Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, recruited Malaysians to attack places in Malaysia on 27 June 2016. Two IS operatives recruited by him threw a grenade into the Movida Bar and Lounge in IOI Boulevard in Bandar Puchong Jaya in Selangor at 2.15 a.m. injuring eight patrons, one seriously.

Initially the Malaysian police ruled out that the attack on the Puchong entertainment venue was a terrorist work. The Malaysian media quoted the nightclub owner as saying that the attack may be due to a personal dispute between two patrons. Claiming the attack, however, IS central located in Syria issued a statement saying two of its supporters “from the wilayat of Malaysia” conducted the first attack in Kuala Lumpur, “the heart of Malaysia” by targeting a nightclub with a bomb. The statement said the nightclub was attacked for not respecting the month of Ramadan “by conducting sinful activities”.

On 2 July 2016, IS announced that its fighters have engaged in combat with the Philippine Army. The fighting between local groups and the Armed Forces of the Philippines escalated especially in the island of Basilan in the southern Philippines where Abu Sayyaf Group Basilan leader Isnilon Hapilon was accepted as the IS leader by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the self-appointed Caliph. In Southeast Asia, IS is strongest in the Philippines where they can hold ground and fight.

IS in Indonesia

The terrorists had suffered in Indonesia after Jakarta was hit in January 2016 but they reorganised to strike back during Ramadan. The attack in the police station in Solo on 5 July 2016 was conducted by Nur Rohman, a terrorist on the run. He was part of the Aref Hidayatullah network that planned and prepared operations to decapitate the Indonesian counter terrorism leadership.

Both Aref Hidayatullah and Nur Rohman reported to Bahrun Naim, the IS external operations wing leader for Indonesia based in Syria. Nur Rohman knew that his arrest was imminent and was told that Ramadan is the best period to wage jihad. His

target was the police station in Solo, the nerve centre for counter terrorist operations in central Java. On the last day of Ramadan, Nur Rohman wore a suicide jacket and rode a motor cycle into the police station in Solo.

While Bahrun Naim was his IS controller in Syria, the IS controller of the Surabaya cell that was disrupted was Abu Jandal, another Syria-based IS controller also linked to Bahrun Naim.

The IS Surabaya attack cell was linked to the IS Thamrin attack cell that hit Jakarta on 14 January 2016. Both were suicide cells linked through Shibgotuloh, who was seen at the scene when Jakarta's Thamrin bombing occurred. IS cell members Priyo Hadi Purnomo, Jefri Rachmawan, and Feri Novendi, who are all Surabayans were once imprisoned in Porong Penitentiary in Surabaya, where they shared a common ideology.

While in the prison in Porong, Priyo was often seen together with Maulan Yusuf Wibisono and Shibgotuloh. Maulan Yusuf Wibisono alias Kholis is a former member of the Jamaah Islamiyah network led by Abu Dujana.

While Priyo was imprisoned for a drug crime and released in April 2014, Jefri was on the Porong Police's wanted list for gang violence and domestic violence. Police monitored Priyo in particular after he often visited Shibgotuloh — a former convict responsible for an attack on a CIMB Niaga Bank in Medan, North Sumatra, in 2010.

Like the Jakarta bombing, the Surabaya bombing was a suicide attack where the attackers believed that they will go to heaven. They had prepared three bombs as well as 20 other devices recovered from homes. According to Indonesia's elite counter terrorism force D88, the three devices were ready for use and the remaining 20 were in various stages of assembling. The attack in Surabaya was planned for the 17th day of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which falls on 22 June 2016. The cell was disrupted on 8 June.

Need for Robust Counter Ideology

The extremists and terrorists driven by rewards afterlife believed that attacking during the last ten days would bring greater rewards. Some of the worst attacks during Ramadan was staged within the last ten days of Ramadan which is the climax of spirituality.

From another perspective, the Ramadan attacks suggest that religious authorities and scholars must continue to develop a robust counter ideology to prevent future generation of Muslims from justifying terrorism using Islamic concepts and misreading Muslim history.

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