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Title	Singaporean fighter in IS global strategy : shift from core to periphery
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Citation	Rohan Gunaratna. (2017). Singaporean fighter in IS global strategy : shift from core to periphery. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 175). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2017
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/43823
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Singaporean Fighter in IS Global Strategy: Shift from Core to Periphery

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

In anticipation of their return to their home countries and regions, IS fighters in Syria and Iraq are calling for global support to strengthen IS bridgeheads in their own regions. For the first time, a Singaporean features in IS propaganda.

Commentary

WITH SHRINKING space in Iraq and Syria, the self-styled Islamic State (IS) is developing a grand strategy of global expansion. IS' al-Hayat Media Centre released on 23 September 2017 a propaganda video with the Singaporean Megat Shahdan bin Abdul Samad, urging Muslims to emigrate to East Asia for jihad. The three-minute video, the fourth episode in the "Inside the Caliphate" series, identified Shahdan as "Abu 'Uqayl" rallying fighters in East Asia and then calling on Muslims elsewhere to join them, if not in that territory, then Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya or West Africa.

With its decline in Iraq and Syria, IS is entering a new phase where the group is focusing on building its provinces in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Caucasus. The East Asia Division of IS in the Philippines suffered a setback when they besieged Marawi, the Islamic city in southern Philippines. With IS creating a capability in the ASEAN member state, with a view to targeting states elsewhere in Southeast and Northeast Asia, the next phase of the IS threat can be managed by enhancing cooperation among regional governments and national security agencies.

The Southeast Asian Context

With the creation of the East Asia Division in the Philippines and its siege of Marawi, IS plans to deepen its ideological and operational influence in Southeast Asia. To

destabilise the region, IS strategy is to radicalise and militarise Southeast Asians including Singaporeans.

Speaking in English with a Southeast Asian accent, Shahdan said: "O mujahidin in East Asia, you have raised the structure of the Khilafah, brought joy to the hearts of the believers, and angered the enemies of Allah. Bear in mind that right now you are grasping very hot coals and marching on the path of the prophets. Show Allah what He loves from you, for He has promised you one of the two great outcomes - victory or shahadah [martyrdom]."

The IS video in English is designed to reach out to Singaporeans and others in the region who speak or understand English.

Shahdan went on to urge "the believers in the four corners of the world, hijrah [migration] and jihad will not cease until the Hour. Join the ranks of the mujahidin in East Asia, and inflict black days upon the Crusaders. Otherwise, make your way to Sham, Khurasan, Yemen, West Africa, or Libya. By Allah, the fighting there is only beginning to intensify".

Singapore a Target

The 39-year old Singaporean Shahdan was recruited in the Middle East by IS and serves in IS Syria today. Shahdan then challenged Britain's Prince Harry, a former Apache pilot in Afghanistan who visited Singapore in June 2017, to come and fight IS. Shahdan directed a message to Prince Harry, stating: "To Harry, you come to Singapore and tell such stories to gain sympathy for the London terror attacks? Why don't you come here and fight us if you're man enough, so that we can send you and your Apaches to Hellfire."

This is the first time a Singaporean has been featured in IS propaganda. The Ministry of Home Affairs has confirmed in a statement on 24 September that security agencies have been monitoring his activities and had briefed community leaders about him. He left Singapore in 2014 to work in the Middle East, where he is believed to have been radicalised. "He subsequently made his way to Syria to join ISIS' ranks. He is believed to still be with ISIS in Syria," said the ministry.

The news should be a warning to the region of the future intentions of IS, also known as ISIS. The IS propaganda video will not alarm Southeast Asians but make them vigilant of the threat to their home countries and regions. It will strengthen the resolve of regional governments to work together to secure the region. Unlike some leaders in the Middle East, Southeast Asian leaders have taken a firm stand against IS. In addition, the home affairs and defence ministries are preparing the intelligence and direct action capabilities to counter and eliminate the IS threat.

Growing Shift from Core to Periphery

There is a shift in threat from the core to the periphery. The IS is suffering in its heartland, but it is expanding in the regions especially those with significant Muslim populations. IS strategy has always been to use locals to recruit locals and entice them into joining IS. The nationals who have travelled to theatre are persuaded to reach out

to their own nationals with the intention of either facilitating their travel to conflict zones to fight or precipitate attacks at home.

Singapore is a prized target of both IS and Al Qaeda-centric terrorists. Nonetheless Singaporeans, who are raised to treasure harmony, are resilient to IS propaganda. IS message has no wide appeal among Singaporeans who value moderation, toleration and coexistence. Having understood the harm IS has caused elsewhere, the Singapore government and community leaders, especially Muslim leaders, have responded decisively to the threat.

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