



## **THE ISLAMIC STATE AND ITS ALLIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The threat of the Islamic State (IS) in Southeast Asia has loomed heavily over recent months. Over 100 people from Indonesia and Malaysia and from the southern Philippine region are fighting in Iraq and Syria, and the IS has started to move into the region in an effort to make Southeast Asia part of its caliphate. The regional radical Islamic movement, Jamaah al Islamiyah, and the Philippine Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, have officially pledged allegiance, or bai'at, to the Islamic State. The countries of Southeast Asia must join forces in order to protect the region and prevent the destructive influence and radical doctrine. It is necessary to upgrade operational and intelligence coordination in order to defeat the IS in the region.

\* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

## **The Islamic State and its Allies in Southeast Asia**

**Dr. Shaul Shay**

**(October 2014)**

The threat of the Islamic State (IS) in Southeast Asia has loomed heavily over recent months. Security services believe that over 100 people from Indonesia and Malaysia and from the southern Philippine region have left to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and that thousands have sworn oaths of allegiance to the IS in the region. According to security officials, this phenomenon has disturbing implications for the region, especially when battle-hardened fighters return home from the Middle East.

Admiral Samuel Locklear, who heads the U.S. Armed Forces' Pacific Command, said that around 1,000 recruits from India to the Pacific may have joined the IS to fight in Syria or Iraq, though he did not specify the countries or provide a time-frame. "That number could get larger as we go forward," Locklear told reporters at the Pentagon.<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic State (IS) group's power is focused in Iraq and Syria, but a look at Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's declaration of an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria reveals that the group has much wider ambitions and that there are groups far beyond those borders who have aligned themselves with the Islamic State.

On June 29, 2014, the group announced the formation of the caliphate and stressed the following:

"We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilafah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah Ibrahim and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas".

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Francisco and Stuart Grudgings | Reuters, Manila, 26 September 2014.

Al-Baghdadi's speech is addressed to all Muslims, and refers to his fighters as "your Mujahideen brothers"; nowhere in the speech does he mention geographical locations or limits for the caliphate or the jihad.<sup>2</sup>

The IS magazine includes remarks from al-Baghdadi, in which he broadly defines the group's ambitious as well as its enemies. The world, he says, is now divided into two camps, "the camp of Muslims and the mujahideen everywhere, and the camp of the Jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions...all being led by America and Russia and mobilized by the Jews."<sup>3</sup>

The group's enemies include the leaders of Iran and Al-Qaeda, "the crusaders in Washington" and the "secularists" leading Turkey. Followers are said to be found in Algeria, Sudan, **Indonesia and the Philippines**. In recent months, the IS has started to move into the region in an effort to make Southeast Asia part of its caliphate.

## **Philippines**

The Philippines is a mostly Christian country but has a significant Muslim minority in the southern islands. The region is the site of a long drawn-out rebellion by local Muslims against Manila's rule.

Several hardline Muslim guerrillas in Mindanao announced their allegiance to the Islamic State. Clips have been uploaded to YouTube showing both southern Philippines-based Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Abu Sayyaf rebels pledging support to the Islamic State (IS). However, moderate rebel groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which recently signed a peace deal with the Philippine government, has condemned the IS.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lundquist, The Islamic State's global reach, The Long War Journal, September 5, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Why the Islamic state represents a dangerous turn in terror threat, The Wall Street Journal, August 18, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Breakaway Philippine rebels align with IS, Al Jazeera, September 14, 2014.

The MILF portrayed its moderate leadership as vital to stopping the savage ideology of the IS from infecting the southern Muslim regions of the mainly Catholic Philippines. "The MILF condemns barbarism and savagery whether done by other groups including the ISIS or even by its (MILF's) own members," the MILF said in an editorial posted on its Web site ([www.luwaran.com](http://www.luwaran.com)). The MILF also said that a planned Muslim autonomous region that is the centerpiece of the peace deal would be a bulwark against the ideology of the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)**

"We have an alliance with the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," BIFF spokesman, Abu Misry Mama, told AFP by telephone. Misry confirmed that a YouTube video showing a purported BIFF leader flanked by armed men and reading a statement of support for the IS, had come from his group. Abu Misry said that his group had no plans to impose the radical IS brand of Islam in the Southeast Asian nation. He claimed that BIFF had not sent any fighters from the Philippines to help the IS, nor was it recruiting people to join the IS, adding "but if they need our help, why not?".<sup>6</sup>

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters split in 2008 from the Philippines' main Muslim rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). BIFF, which is believed to have a few hundred fighters, rejected the peace agreement between MILF and the Philippine government, and pursued the decades-old armed campaign to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines, which was initiated by the MILF.

### **Abu Sayyaf**

The Abu Sayyaf group claims to be fighting for an independent Islamic state in the Philippines but it has mainly served as a kidnap-for-ransom gang operating in the lawless interiors of southern Philippine islands. Abu Sayyaf burst into prominence in 2000 after

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<sup>5</sup> Philippine Muslim rebels oppose Islamic State 'virus', AFP, August 28, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> BIFF, Abu Sayyaf pledge allegiance to Islamic State jihadists, GMA News, August 16, 2014.

kidnapping 21 tourists and workers from a diving resort in nearby Malaysia. Abu Sayyaf is blamed for the worst militant attack in the Philippines, the sinking of a ferry in Manila Bay in 2004, in which 100 people were killed.

The group has declined in recent years, with top leaders either killed or aging out. Abu Sayyaf has suffered dwindling support and military setbacks over the past decade, and is now believed to have only about 300 followers based on remote islands off the southern Philippines.

A purported Abu Sayyaf video was uploaded to YouTube showing one of the group's most senior leaders, Isnilon Hapilon, as he read out a statement that pledged allegiance to the IS.<sup>7</sup>

He was filmed linking arms with more than a dozen men, some with faces swathed in fabric, as they stood at a forest clearing to pray and listen to his statement. Speaking in Arabic, he read a statement swearing “loyalty and obedience in adversity and comfort” to the IS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, before a prayer and shouts of ‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is [the] Greatest).<sup>8</sup>

The United States has placed a \$5 million reward on Hapilon’s head and considers the Abu Sayyaf group to be a "foreign terror organization" engaged in beheadings, bombings, and kidnappings.

Abu Sayyaf threatened to kill one of the two Germans being held hostage by the group by October 10, 2014, according to messages posted on Twitter, but they later extended the ultimatum until October 17, 2014. The German man and woman, who were reportedly seized from a yacht in the South China Sea in April 2014, were thought to be held on southern Jolo Island by Abu Sayyaf fighters loyal to Radullan Sahiron. His group is also

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Rosemarie Francisco and Stuart Grudgings | Reuters, Manila, 26 September 2014.

believed to be holding a Dutch and a Swiss hostage seized in May 2012 as well as a Japanese man.

The group demanded that Germany halt its support for the U.S.-led bombing campaign launched against the IS as well as \$5.6 million in ransom.

On October 17, 2014, Abu Sayyaf released the German hostages. Abu Rami, the spokesman of the group, told a commercial radio station based in Zamboanga city in South Philippines that the hostages had been freed after Abu Sayyaf had received the ransom amount in full. According to German government sources, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had sent a special envoy to the Philippines to negotiate a deal with the rebels.<sup>9</sup>

## **Indonesia**

In July 2014, jailed Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual leader of the Indonesian terrorist network Jamaah Islamiyah, officially pledged allegiance, or *bai'at*, to the Islamic State. Bashir made his *bai'at* to the IS along with 23 other prisoners in a praying room of what was supposed to be the highly secured Pasir Putih penitentiary on Nusakambangan Island off Cilacap, Central Java.<sup>10</sup>

Abu Bakar Bashir called on his followers to lend their support to the Islamic State, which Indonesian police have since outlawed.<sup>11</sup>

On August 11, 2014, the Detachment 88 counterterrorism squad arrested Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid leader, Afif Abdul Majid, who was added to the U.S. global terrorist list in 2013. Majid, who recently returned from Syria, pledged support to the Islamic State

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<sup>9</sup> Philippine militants free German hostages: police official, Reuters, October 17, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Kennial Caroline Laia and Dyah Ayu Pitaloka, Jailed Terrorist Convict Ba'asyir Pledges Oath With ISIS on the Rise, Jakarta Globe, August 4, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> James Hookway, Asian Security Officials Fear Spillover From Islamic State as U.S. Ramps Up Attacks, The Wall Street Journal, September 11, 2014.

along with Abu Bakar Bashir. Groups supporting the IS held meetings in Jakarta, Solo in Central Java, and Bima in West Nusa Tenggara.<sup>12</sup>

General Ansyad Mbai, the head of the counter-terrorism desk at the Ministry for Security, Legal and Foreign Affairs, warned that the IS was drawing scores of sympathizers from Indonesia who already left the country to wage jihad with Sunni militias in Syria and Iraq with the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Middle East. According to the General, those who returned home founded a similar group in the provinces of Jakarta and East Nusa Tenggara (NTB).

According to officials, at least 30 Indonesians have already left the country to join the IS, and 56 other people have applied for a visa for Syria.<sup>13</sup> Indonesian and Malaysian militants have discussed forming a 100-strong Malay-speaking unit within the IS in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

The Central Java government recently discovered that a local branch of the IS has been active in Sempu, Malang, for at least one month. Calling themselves Anshar ul Khilafah, the cell has reportedly been using a village mosque as its headquarters. The militant group's influence has reportedly spread to several other areas of Central Java, particularly Solo. A number of media portals have reported scores of Surakarta Muslims pledging their oath to the IS.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Habib Rizieq Shihab of the Muslim hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) denied that his organization had denounced the IS. "The FPI has yet decide whether it will support or refuse the establishment of IS [in Indonesia]," he was quoted as saying by

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa Lundquist, The Islamic State's global reach, The Long War Journal, September 5, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Mathias Hariyadi, More than a thousand Indonesian supporters "ready to fight" for ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Asianews.it, July 22, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Rosemarie Francisco and Stuart Grudgings | Reuters, Manila, 26 September 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Kennial Caroline Laia and Dyah Ayu Pitaloka, Jailed Terrorist Convict Ba'asyir Pledges Oath With ISIS on the Rise, Jakarta Globe, August 4, 2014.

Kompas.com, adding that FPI leaders would assess the rapidly growing Iraqi movement to decide whether it has deviated from Islamic teachings.<sup>16</sup>

The central government of Indonesia officially banned the IS and emphasized the importance of putting a stop to the militant outfit's damaging influence. Djoko Suyanto, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, said that "the government will not allow IS to develop in Indonesia, because it goes against the ideology of our Pancasila, which promotes pluralism. Every attempt to promote IS should be prevented. Indonesia should not be the place to spread [their ideology]." The announcement came after a limited cabinet meeting on the IS, led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.<sup>17</sup>

The National Police and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) were appointed to lead a joint law enforcement effort against IS activities across the country, according to Djoko.

## Malaysia

Malaysian police revealed that at least 50 Malaysians are currently believed to be in Syria, fighting alongside IS forces. Fifteen Malaysians were allegedly killed in Syria after taking part in terrorist and jihadist activities with the IS, according to the Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations in New York.<sup>18</sup>

Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki had the dubious honor of being Malaysia's first suicide bomber linked to the Islamic State. He is credited with blowing up 25 elite Iraqi soldiers at Iraq's SWAT headquarters in al-Anbar Province on May 26, 2014.<sup>19</sup>

Reports state that Maliki, who received militant training in Port Dickson at the end of 2013, drove a military SUV filled with tons of explosives into the SWAT headquarters,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Wisma Putra: 15 Malaysian ISIS militants allegedly killed in Syria, Malay mail online, June 24, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> ISIS and the first Malaysian suicide bomber, Nation, June 14, 2014.



blowing himself up in the process. The bombing preceded an attack on the headquarters by IS terrorists.

Maliki's exploits were published on the IS official Web site titled, "Mujahideen Malaysia Syahid Dalam Operasi Martyrdom", along with his photograph. The site described Maliki as the first Malaysian suicide bomber in Iraq. From Facebook postings, it is learnt that he first went to Syria via Turkey before finally ending up in Iraq, where he became a suicide bomber.

Three Malaysian women, apparently sympathetic to the Islamic State, reportedly travelled to the Middle East to offer themselves sexually to militants. "These women are believed to have offered themselves in sexual comfort roles to IS fighters," a Malaysian intelligence official said in an interview, adding, "This concept may seem controversial but it has arisen as certain Muslim women here are showing sympathy for the IS".<sup>20</sup> The concept of 'Jihad al-nikah', in which extramarital sexual relations with multiple partners is permitted, is considered a legitimate form of holy war by fringe hardline Sunni Muslim Salafists.<sup>21</sup>

Between January and June 2014, Malaysian police arrested 19 people, including two women, for involvement in militant activities. The Malaysian police foiled plans for a wave of bombings drawn up by radical Islamic militants and inspired by the IS, according to a top counter-terrorism official. The suspects were formulating plans to bomb pubs, discos and a Malaysian brewery, said Ayob Khan Mydin, Deputy Chief of the Malaysian police counter-terrorism division. The suspected militants had visions of establishing a hardline Southeast Asian Islamic caliphate spanning Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, and planned to travel to [Syria](#) to learn from the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup> The suspects included professionals and two housewives. They were only

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<sup>20</sup> Report: Malaysian women join ISIS to comfort militants, Al Arabyia, August 28, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Malaysia 'foiled' attack plots by ISIS-inspired militants, The Daily Star Lebanon, August 20, 2014.

in the early stages of discussing their plans and did not have heavy weapons or bomb-making knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Malaysians Ahmad Salman Abdul Rahim and Mohd Lotfi Ariffin are part of a group of Malaysians in Hama, Syria, who claim to be engaged in jihad, fighting against Bashar al-Assad. They have released numerous videos to give Malaysians a glimpse into their lives of jihad. They were even interviewed by the Malaysian mainstream media via Facebook.<sup>24</sup>

There were two postings on the 'JIM-Jamaah IS Malaysia' Facebook page calling for the beheading of Dayaks because they are non-Muslims. Dayaks are a peoples located in Sarawak.<sup>25</sup>

## Singapore

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean, told the Parliament that a [handful of Singaporeans had gone to fight in Syria](#), adding: "The presence of former foreign fighters in our region - whether they originate from Southeast Asia or elsewhere - is a security threat to us."<sup>26</sup>

One Singaporean fighter was identified as Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, a naturalized citizen, who left his wife and three children for Syria. Another is a Singaporean woman who joined her husband and two teenage children. Several others were stopped before leaving.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> [Asean must get rid of ISIS in Southeast Asia](http://www.establishmentpost.com/asean-must-get-rid-isis-southeast-asia/#ixzz3FeE1WWhR) <http://www.establishmentpost.com/asean-must-get-rid-isis-southeast-asia/#ixzz3FeE1WWhR>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Islamic State's support spreads into Asia, Al Jazeera, July 19, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Singapore has condemned the IS and called their actions “barbaric”. The government is detaining those flying off to Syria.<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on August 19, 2014 that the current turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa has had an impact on Singapore and its neighbors. And as a result of this, the work of Singapore’s Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) continues to be important in helping to maintain harmony in society and keeping Singapore safe. Prime Minister Lee said that the organization's work has been invaluable, not just in fighting the extremist ideology, but also in maintaining religious and racial harmony in Singapore. He added that the group’s role is especially vital in the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq. He said the conflict feeds a terrorist narrative, drawing thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world, the effects of which are not just felt globally, but closer to home as well.

The Prime Minister said: “Our neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia are also concerned that a number of their citizens have joined in the fight and even carried out suicide attacks. A few Singaporeans have gone there too, and others (who were planning to go) have been intercepted. The danger is that they learn the techniques of terrorism, they are infected with this radical ideology and forge an international brotherhood of fighters and produce a new generation of terrorists.”<sup>29</sup>

## Summary

In June 2014, the ISIS capitalized on its early military advances by declaring the creation of a new caliphate, or Islamic state, in territory it controls in Syria and Iraq. To expand this base, it also has begun a serious program to recruit Muslims worldwide to join the

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<sup>28</sup> [Asean must get rid of ISIS in Southeast Asia](http://www.establishmentpost.com/asean-must-get-rid-isis-southeast-asia/#ixzz3FeE1WWhR) <http://www.establishmentpost.com/asean-must-get-rid-isis-southeast-asia/#ixzz3FeE1WWhR>

<sup>29</sup> Religious Rehabilitation Group ‘invaluable’ in maintaining harmony: PM Lee, CHANNEL NEWSASIA, August 19, 2014.

effort. Its literature specifically calls on military officers, engineers and doctors to move to the caliphate and join the cause.<sup>30</sup>

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the IS and self-declared "leader of Muslims everywhere", fell out with Al-Qaeda in 2013 over his decision to expand into Syria, where his followers carried out beheadings, crucifixions, and mass executions.

For some militants, the Islamic State's creation of a jihadi bastion spanning western Iraq and eastern Syria, and its strong online presence, are more attractive when compared with Al-Qaeda's failure to carry out a major attack in the West for almost a decade.

For now, IS's ambitions far outweigh its limited military capabilities but it still is considered a significant threat for the following reasons:

First, the foreigners being recruited by the IS recruiting can easily return home as battle-hardened fighters to execute terrorist attacks.

Second, other extremist groups are capable of extending their operational capabilities far beyond Iraq and Syria.

Third, Al-Qaeda may soon feel compelled to mount operations to prove that it remains relevant.

The countries of Southeast Asia must join forces in order to protect the region and prevent the destructive influence and radical doctrine of the Islamic State. It is necessary to upgrade operational and intelligence efforts in order to defeat the IS in the region.

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<sup>30</sup> Why the Islamic State Represents a Dangerous Turn in the Terror Threat, The Wall Street Journal, August 18, 2014.