Ignored in Asia: The ISIL Threat

By David L. Edwards

Journal Article | Jan 21 2015 - 11:11pm

Ignored in Asia: The ISIL Threat

David L. Edwards

Introduction

In February 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of a caliphate, known commonly as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was a significant pronouncement in the Islamic faith, as a caliphate is traditionally known as the formation of a sovereign state to lead the devote Muslims. Since February 2014, ISIL has acquired large swaths of Iraq and Syria, killed and misplaced thousands of people, forged alliances, obtained substantial numbers of recruits and financing, and wreaked havoc across the globe. In September 2014, then Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew G. Olson, stated that “ISIL views itself as the new leader of the global jihad” (2014). While ISIL supporters are emerging across the world, absent is a focus on the organization’s presence and activities in Asia. As a result, particular attention should be paid to the Asia Pacific.

The Asia Pacific region possesses a significant Muslim population, to include the world’s most populous Muslim nation-state: Indonesia. Additionally, between 1979-1989, Asia observed its citizens travel to the Middle East to participate in terrorist activity during the Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan. Furthermore, a substantial number of organizations and individuals within the Asia Pacific region have pledged allegiance to ISIL. The most notorious of the allegiance pledging organizations include Abu Bakar Bashir, a leader of Jemaah Islamamah; Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, two Filipino terrorist groups. Therefore, a strong connection exists between Asian extremism and ISIL.

What role will ISIL play in the United States Pacific Command area of responsibility? Asian support for ISIL will largely be based in Southeast Asia, which possesses the largest Muslim population in the region and will manifest through Asian nationals traveling to the Middle East, the secondary effects of these travels, and finally through a resurgence of terrorist activity in the Asia Pacific region. To suppress the Asian-ISIL influence requires the formation of a combatant command coordinating council, an increase in regional partnerships, and an increase in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and intelligence sharing.

Asian Nationals Travel to the Middle East

The most immediate reality of Asian support for ISIL is the traveling of its citizenry to the Middle East. These individuals are providing sizeable contributions to the organization’s activities. As this activity crosses various geographic combatant commands, the formulation of a combatant command coordinating council is necessary to properly address and combat this issue.

Many from Asia are traveling to support ISIL in the Middle East. In July 2014, Veryan Khan, editorial
director of Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, reported that approximately 500 fighters had traveled to the Middle East from the Asia Pacific region (Regencia 2014). In September 2014, Admiral Samuel Locklear, Commander of the United States Pacific Command (PACOM), estimated that 1,000 fighters had traveled to Iraq and Syria from the Indo-Asia Pacific. He continued, “That number could get larger as we go forward” (Locklear 2014). In the span of only two months, the number of fighters from the Asia Pacific doubled. Since September, ISIL has received numerous pledges of allegiance from both individuals and organizations, to include Nigeria’s Boko Haram, Egypt’s Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Libya’s Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, and the Philippines’ Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. In late October 2014, the United Nations (UN) published a report that declared, “Numbers since 2010 are now many times the size of the cumulative numbers of foreign terrorists fighters between 1990 and 2010 – and are growing” (Ackerman 2014). Given the expanded nature of public support across the globe for ISIL since September, and this most recent UN report, it may be assumed that the number of Asian fighters traveling to the Middle East continues to climb.

The Asian ISIL fighters are actively engaged in the organization’s activities. In May 2014, Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, a Malaysian member of ISIL, led a suicide bombing mission in Iraq that killed 25 Iraqi soldiers and himself; another Malaysian died while fighting in Syria and was proclaimed a martyr by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party; three Malaysian women allegedly traveled to Syria to provide sexual support to the ISIL fighters; Robert “Musa” Cerantonio, an Australian, traveled to the Philippines to recruit for ISIL. Cerantonio is also very active on social media and as of July 2014 he had over 6,700 followers on Twitter and YouTube. He also maintained a Facebook page, which, prior to its deletion by Facebook personnel, had over 3,000 likes - making Cerantonio the “third most ‘liked’ person online among ‘western jihadists in Syria’” (Regencia 2014). Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, a Singaporean, left his family and traveled to Syria to join ISIL, while another Singaporean, traveled to the region to join her husband and two teenage children already in the Middle East (Ibid.). Numerous accounts identify Asian nationals fighting alongside ISIL from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Australia.

These developments cause consternation for the United States Pacific Command (PACOM) and Central Command (CENTCOM). ISIL has engendered the support of organizations across the globe, which crosses all of the geographic combatant commands. To properly combat such an issue requires the formation of a combatant command coordinating council, which will at a minimum include the geographic combatant commanders and will fall under the auspices of the National Command Authority. This body will serve as a forum to bring the combatant commanders together to discuss transnational issues, such as terrorism, piracy, illicit trafficking, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and others that span multiple combatant commands. Additional organizations or agencies can be brought in as necessitated topically. For example, for countering terrorism, the National Counterterrorism Center; Special Operations Command, which has the operational lead for combating terrorism; Transportation Command; and Strategic Command, would be likely members of the coordinating council. This council would ensure a holistic approach to each transnational issue and access to all Defense Department assets.

**Secondary Effects**

Historicity paints a daunting picture of the Asian landscape upon the return of the ISIL experienced Asian fighters. The emergence of a single enemy to the Asian Pacific community provides a unique opportunity for partnership building to placate the region of this existential threat.

The Asia Pacific region is rightly concerned about the number of fighters traveling to the Middle East, as these individuals will return with unique firsthand knowledge of terrorist activities, logistics, recruiting tactics, economic support, networking, and methodologies. Between 1979-1989, Asia supplied the
Middle East with nearly 800 fighters during the Soviet occupation. Subsequent to the 800 fighters’ return, those combat experienced Asian fighters, “form[ed] extremist groups of their own, including the notorious al Qaeda-linked organization Jemaah Islamiyah,” stated Southeast Asian expert Joseph Chinyong Liow (Liow 2014). Jemaah Islamiyah was responsible for the Bali bombing in 2002 and the Australian Embassy bombing in Indonesia in 2004. Additionally, Filipinos that traveled to the Middle East in the 1980s for the same purpose returned to the Philippines and formed the terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf, which is known for its violence (Regencia 2014). These terrorist organizations remain active to date and are the by-product of a mere 800 fighters. As of September 2014, the estimated number of Asian fighters that have traveled to support ISIL was in excess of 1,000—with numbers likely rising. What will be the by-product of this generation of Asian fighter?

This threat provides fertile soil for the growth of partnership building. In his most recent posture statement, Admiral Samuel Locklear, Commander of PACOM, stated, “A sustained effort to build and enhance the capacity of our allies and partners is the cornerstone of our counter terrorism strategy in South and Southeast Asia” (2014). Recent PACOM activity has demonstrated the importance of leveraging existing forums for partnership building, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The most important proposed activity for partnership building is a follow-on to the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) Counter-Terrorism Exercise, which was conducted in September 2013 and brought together the ten ASEAN nations and the eight “Plus” countries. This engagement served as a substantial leap forward in partnership building, yet the formal realization of ISIL did not occur until February 2014. As such, a follow-up engagement that highlights existing realities is necessary. Furthermore, an increase in International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) where ISIL threats exist, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore will demonstrate U.S. support to the region and inculcate combating terrorism expertise in the region. The ADMM Counter-Terrorism Exercise, IMET, and FMF will concurrently provide the greatest opportunities to build partner capacity in Asia Pacific and lead to combating secondary effects of Asian ISIL fighters returning to the region.

**Resurgence in Asia Proper Terrorist Activity**

In addition to the threat of Asians traveling to the Middle East and those returning home with newfound skill sets, ISIL has experienced support from Asia proper. Many nations have witnessed their citizens supporting ISIL while remaining in-country. This presents an interesting dilemma where ISR and intelligence sharing prove salient solutions.

Dr. Rodger Shanahan, an international relations expert at Lowy Institute for International Policy, stated that ISIL poses a serious threat to the democratic governments of Indonesia and Malaysia (2014). In addition to Asian jihadists traveling to the Middle East, there is a large contingent of local Asian supporters that have pledged their allegiance to ISIL, to include Abu Bakar Bashir, a leader of Jemaah Islamayyah; and two Filipino organizations: Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. In addition, the Malaysian government arrested 19 individuals that plotted to bomb several pubs and a brewery outside of Kuala Lumpur (Regencia 2014). ISIL affiliates also issued bomb threats to the largest Buddhist temple in the world, in Java, Indonesia. A myriad of individuals, such as Firman Hidayat Silalahi, from Indonesia, have been arrested for demonstrating their support of ISIL by flying ISIL flags. Videos on YouTube demonstrate various Filipino groups’ support of ISIL. A plethora of groups and individuals, the largest from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore, have pledged their support to ISIL, which poses significant threats to the region.

These threats are real and require action. For such an effort, the role of ISR stands paramount. PACOM’s ISR capabilities should be leveraged to ensure sufficient response times to potential dangers. Admiral
Locklear stated, “USPACOM’s success depends on our ability to accurately assess the theater security environment with penetrating and persistent ISR and domain awareness...[and] assured means for sharing critical information with our allies, partners, and our forces [emphasis added]” (2014). Admiral Locklear also stated the desire to enhance military to military engagements with partner nations. ISR provides another means through which these military to military engagements may be incorporated as a component of building partner capacity. ISR and intelligence sharing will provide PACOM and U.S. allies an asset through which Asian terrorist activity may be mitigated.

Contrarian View

Alternate arguments include the claim that Southeast Asian nation economies are much stronger today than they were during the Soviet occupation in the Middle East, which garnered significant Asian support and will counterbalance a robust Asian response in the present conflict. Additionally, the cultural distinctions between Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims is sizeable and includes fluency in Arabic and overarching religious fervor, which will make the two groups incompatible.

Despite the veracity of the aforementioned claims, ISIL has attained a minimum of 1,000 Asian jihadists traveling to the Middle East, while the previous conflict with the Soviet Union achieved only 800. Additionally, Asian extremist organizations have already pledged allegiance to ISIL. Neither economic prowess nor cultural ambiguities have impeded the response from Asia.

Conclusion

ISIL is playing a significant role in the PACOM area of responsibility. Asian fighters are traveling to Iraq and Syria, secondary effects of these travels present serious risks, and Asia proper is witnessing increasing support of ISIL. The following actions will assist in mitigating said threats: the formulation of a combatant command coordinating council will facilitate the countering of threats posed by those traveling to the Middle East, building partner capacity will reduce the risk of secondary effects, and ISR and intelligence sharing will minimize potential terrorist activity in Asia proper. The threats in Asia are real and merit the attention and action necessary to quell ISIL’s footprint in the region.

References


**About the Author**

David L. Edwards

David L. Edwards is a Plans and Policy Analyst at the Defense Language and National Security Education Office within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. In this capacity, he authors, drafts, reviews, and analyzes language, regional, and cultural policies and strategies. He previously served as a foreign language and culture analyst in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs).


**Links:**

5. [http://www.nctc.gov/docs/2014-09-03_remarks_for_the_brookings_institution.pdf](http://www.nctc.gov/docs/2014-09-03_remarks_for_the_brookings_institution.pdf)

Copyright © 2015, Small Wars Foundation.

Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#). Please help us support the [Small Wars Community](#).