

Islamist Terrorism Update – 8 July 2016

Amid a surge of attacks during Ramadan perpetrated by global Islamist terror organisations, fears that they may be succeeding in expanding their operations, particularly in Asia, appear to be increasingly well-founded.

Whilst countries that have long suffered at the hands of malign groups such as Islamic State group (ISG) and al-Qaeda (AQ) - such as Iraq and Turkey - have sustained terrible but not completely unexpected attacks over the period, recent events in other territories including Bangladesh and Malaysia may be indicative of emerging threats, that could persist beyond Ramadan, thereby increasing the risk to business and travellers in several areas outside of core ISG territories.

Ramadan Violence

The tail end of the Ramadan period has been marked by a spate of violent attacks as well as an increase in exhortations on extremist sites for individuals to conduct their own 'lone wolf' attacks wherever they may find enemies. The most significant death toll was inflicted in Iraq, when on 2 July a suicide truck bomb struck a mainly Shia area of Baghdad killing over 280 people. ISG claimed the attack. The security of Turkey's major cities was brought into question again, when a suspected ISG gun and suicide bomb attack targeting Istanbul's main airport resulted in 41 dead on 28 June. Saudi Arabia suffered three suicide attacks on 4 July, targeting a US consulate, a Shiite mosque and the holy city of Medina. ISG are suspected as being behind the attacks.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Lebanon suffered a series of suicide attacks in a mainly Christian area, Yemen's Mukalla city was struck by four suicide car bombings, Jordan's security forces near the Syrian border were targeted by a suicide car bomber, whilst Kuwait reported that they had foiled a number of ISG plots.

Expanding Footprint in Asia?

Whilst attacks in the Middle East have taken place within and on the peripheries of areas where it is accepted that transnational terrorist organisations pose a persistent threat, attacks beyond these areas demonstrate that the threat of militancy directed and, or, inspired by groups such as ISG reaches much further.

On 1 July 2016, an attack occurred in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which may finally force the government to openly accept that the country is exposed to the threat of militancy conducted by citizens that identify with, and are possibly directed by AQ and ISG. Since September 2015, Islamist militants have conducted assassinations of secular bloggers, religious minorities, security forces, LGBT activists and foreign nationals. Many of these attacks have been claimed by ISG and AQ's regional affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). However, despite these claims, warnings from western governments and ISG themselves declaring the importance of Bangladesh to their declared regional intentions, the government has continued to deny the presence of such groups, instead laying the blame on home grown national political movements such as the right-wing opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami party.

The Dhaka attack saw six gunmen assault a café frequented by wealthy Bangladeshis and foreigners. The gunmen segregated Muslims and non-Muslims, before executing the non-Muslims with guns, knives and machetes. Twenty people died in the attack, including Bangladeshis, Italians, Japanese, Indians and Americans. The ISG-affiliated Amaq News Agency claimed the attack during the event, and ISG itself subsequently released a supporting claim. The attackers also succeeded in uploading images from inside the café.



The government has, as with previous attacks claimed by AQ and ISG, denied ISG's involvement and instead linked the attackers to Jumatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB).¹ Despite the government persistently denying the presence of ISG and AQ publically, perhaps in a deliberate effort to protect foreign investment in the USD \$26 billion garments industry, the attack represents an escalation in violence which will necessitate the security forces increasing their counter-terrorism efforts. Even if ISG do not, as the government claim have a 'presence' in the country, the attack demonstrates that their messaging is effective in reaching and inspiring Bangladeshi citizens to commit acts of violence.

Months prior to the attack, ISG had in their online publication 'Dabiq', signalled their intent to expand their operations in Bangladesh, both to operate within the country, but to also stage attacks into neighbouring India. Following the attack the group have also released a video message featuring Bangladeshi fighters in Syria, which urged Muslims to carry out attacks at home if they are unable to travel to fight in Iraq and Syria.

Fears of increasing levels of Islamist militancy in Malaysia were also realised recently. An estimated 100 Malaysians have travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria²; security force operations have also resulted in over a hundred people suspected of links to ISG³, and several apparent plots have also been disrupted, including a plot to kidnap Prime Minister Najib Razak and other senior ministers. However the country had not experienced any significant attacks.

On 28 June, a grenade targeted a nightclub in Puchong, near Kuala Lumpur, injuring eight people. ISG claimed the attack, that police initially believed was motivated by a business or criminal dispute. However, Malaysian police later stated that they believed two suspects they apprehended had received instructions from a Malaysian-born ISG fighter in Syria.

The attack is the first successful attack to be conducted in Malaysia. Whilst the attack is relatively low-level, it will be of concern to security forces as they were unable to disrupt it. As is the case with Bangladesh, ISG aspirations in Malaysia have featured in their propaganda material previously, and the proliferation of Malay-language extremist websites and propaganda is concerning. Although the security forces have largely been successful in preventing militant attacks, increased ISG focus on the country will likely see them being increasingly tested.

Where Next for ISG in Asia?

There are several opportunities including protracted Muslim insurgencies and areas of weak governance within South East Asia that ISG may seek to exploit. An indication of where ISG's efforts may be focussed came during a pre-Ramadan speech made by ISG spokesperson Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, which referenced persecuted Muslims in places such as Myanmar, Philippines and Indonesia.

In the Philippines, ISG have since April 2016 claimed many attacks conducted by pro-ISG groups against security forces. The group's first official claim followed clashes between Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and security forces, which the group claim resulted in 100 government troops being killed, a figure the government disputed. Subsequently, during Ramadan, the division of ISG in the Philippines released its first official video, showing the pledging of four factions to the group along with official ISG logos. Some of the groups in the video are known to be factions of ASG, and the video also depicted the group's leader, Isnilon Hapilon, the group's overall leader. Whilst the video stops short of proclaiming the establishment of a 'wilayat' in the Philippines, the consolidation of the groups and the appointment of a new leader meet the prerequisites for such a declaration.

An official announcement regarding an ISG 'wilayat' in the Philippines would not be a surprise, in a territory that is considered most likely to host ISG's first 'wilayat' in south East Asia. Whilst such a development would be of concern, there are currently no indications that such an announcement would represent an increased threat, with Islamic militants still largely restricted to operating in the restive Muslim majority southern provinces.

Elsewhere in South East Asia, Indonesia suffered its first successful attack influenced by ISG on 14 January 2016, when four militants conducted a bomb and gun attack targeting a police station and shopping district in central Jakarta. Most recently, on 5 July 2016, an ISG-linked suicide bomber conducted an attack against a police station in the city of Solo.

Previously, Indonesian and regional terror groups such as AQ-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), who conducted the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings and several attacks on Jakarta hotels, possessed capabilities beyond what has been seen so far from ISG allegiants. Remnants of the networks that supported these groups likely still exist; similarly militants now aligned to ISG would also likely maintain contacts that could help them facilitate attacks. Several small Indonesian groups have declared their allegiance to ISG, including Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT).

¹ <http://www.firstpost.com/world/bangladesh-terror-attack-government-denies-involvement-of-islamic-state-2870802.html>

² Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq – The Soufan Group, December 2015

³ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/nearly-100-malaysians-detained-for-islamic-state-links/>

The overall traction ISG ideology has enjoyed in Indonesia has however been fairly limited. The numbers of fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria from the country is small, relative to the size of the Muslim population. Furthermore the brand of Islam preached in Indonesia, known as Islam Nusantara, is highly moderate and as such in opposition to ISG's own philosophies. The threat posed by activities directed and inspired by ISG in Indonesia is likely to remain low in the near-term. However, as various small Indonesian groups that have declared allegiance to ISG compete with and strive to outshine each other, a significant attack cannot be ruled out.

Regarding ISG involvement in Myanmar, the 15th edition of Dabiq carried an interview with the supposed "Amir of Khialfah's soldiers in Bengal", who stated that Muslims in the country had long been oppressed by the Buddhist majority and, as a result, ISG would support them and launch operations when they have the capacity to do so and once their front in Bangladesh is suitably strengthened. Although there is little evidence that ISG have made inroads into Myanmar as yet, the maligned Rohingya Muslim minority may provide the disenfranchised population ISG need to incite acts of violence. The minority Muslim population in Central Myanmar around Mandalay, sometime victims of hard-line Buddhist aggression, whilst difficult to infiltrate might also become a focus of radicalisation attempts.

The ongoing Muslim insurgency in Thailand's southern border provinces has, since an escalation in violence in 2004, claimed over 6,200 lives. Whilst the conflict in the predominantly Muslim provinces has so-far retained a secessionist dynamic, as opposed to a religious-sectarian focus, recent developments have fuelled fear that groups engaged in the insurgency may be increasingly susceptible to radicalisation by groups such as ISG.

Recent social media posts by Thai insurgent groups have included symbols and flags that are associated with ISG. However, Muslim separatist groups in Thailand's south have so-far proved unreceptive to extremist ideology, and there is no evidence to suggest that Thai nationals have travelled to link up and fight with Jihadi extremists. That said the possibility that ISG propaganda may inspire an attack, perhaps by a lone-wolf, cannot be discounted.

Conclusion

The degree of success achieved by the direct coordination of, or ideological inspiration of radical Islamic terrorism in the region will of course be dictated by the counter-balances of state security and the sharing of intelligence as well as the posture of civil populations. However, given the relative ease with which individual, low-tech as well as more complex attacks ignite chaos and publicity, the gathering spots and foreign residences of the 'Far World' of ISG, AQIS and their affiliates must be regarded as under threat of further violence.



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