

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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On the morning of April 4, 1995, approximately 200 Islamist militants, believed to be part of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), ransacked the city of Ipil in Mindanao, looting banks, setting fire to buildings and killing more than 50 people, before making off with more than half a billion pesos and numerous hostages.¹ Twenty-two years later, the same group—albeit under different leadership and comprised of a new generation of recruits—laid siege to the much larger city of Marawi, located some 300 kilometers east, for a period of five months. By the time security forces finally defeated them, over a thousand people had been killed, hundreds of thousands of people had been displaced and the city lay in ruins.² Unfortunately, ASG is just one of many armed groups that the region has had to contend with over the years, and—like ASG—many have proven to be frustratingly resilient, sometimes even resurgent, in the face of formidable efforts to defeat them.

The Deep Roots of Insurgency in Southeast Asia

Besides ASG, other militant organizations that were in action back in the 1990s included the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Communist New People's Army (NPA), which had been established in the Philippines in 1969 and 1977 respectively, as well as the Free Papua Movement (OPM; formed in 1965), the Free Aceh Movement (GAM; founded in 1976) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI; established in 1993) in Indonesia and Malaysia. Muslim-separatist militants, who had been active in Southern Thailand since the 1960s, also conducted sporadic attacks during the 1990s and would soon gather enough strength to mount a fearsome insurgency.

By the time of ASG’s assault on Ipil, terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia were already well-entrenched and quite diverse. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into three main types: Salafi-jihadists, separatists, and communists. This chapter provides an historical overview of the most significant terrorist and insurgent threats in Southeast Asia over the last 25 years. Focusing primarily on those countries which have experienced the most attacks (namely, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar), it highlights the major jihadist, separatist, and communist groups in the region and charts the rising and falling levels of violence in relation to a variety of internal and external factors. The following section identifies a number of political and social issues, along with current and emerging threats that may shape the nature of terrorism in Southeast Asia in years to come. The concluding part of the paper draws upon the previous sections to highlight lessons learned from history that may help the region in future.

Terrorism in Southeast Asia: 1995-2018

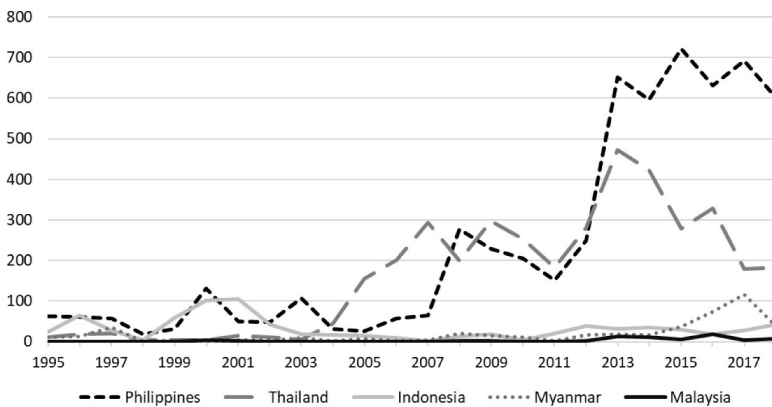


Figure 7.1: Incidents of terrorism in Southeast Asia (including the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia) from 1995 to 2018.³

LOOKING BACK ON 25 YEARS OF TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY

The Early Days of ‘Global Jihad’ in Southeast Asia

As Figure 7.1 above shows, relatively few attacks occurred during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, jihadist terrorists, in particular JI and its offshoots, became increasingly sophisticated and belligerent during this timeframe,

chalking up several high-profile successes—most notably the Bali bombing of 2002 in which 202 people were killed. Domestically, the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 had given JI newfound room to act. However, the real key to their success was their bond with al-Qaeda, which had been forged in the camps in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s and brought with it important benefits, including expertise, funding, and logistical support. The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, followed by that of Iraq, then provided shots of adrenaline to the jihadists' cause. However, after the links to al-Qaeda were effectively severed through concerted law enforcement and military action during the early 2000s, jihadist networks in Southeast Asia became increasingly fractured. By the end of the decade they were focused more on local concerns (the “near” as opposed to “far enemy”).⁴

Separatist Insurgencies in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines

Just as regime change in Indonesia enabled jihadists to act, so it allowed separatists to flourish as well. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was able to take advantage of this at a time when popular support for the group was at an all-time high, thanks to widespread anger at human rights abuses perpetrated by security forces, along with frustration at the government's failure to implement promised reforms.⁵ By the time the peace process collapsed in 2003, GAM had succeeded in generating significant international support for its cause, while simultaneously increasing its membership in Aceh fivefold and expanding its influence to control 70-80% of the province.⁶ Had it not been for the tsunami of December 2004, which forced the two sides to work together for the common good and ultimately led to the peace treaty of 2005, it is quite likely that insurgency in Aceh would still be alive today.

As depicted in Figure 7.1, the separatist insurgency in Thailand has been one of the most significant sources of violence in Southeast Asia. In 1998,

The Free Papua Movement (OPM)

One of the longest running separatist movements in Southeast Asia today is led by the OPM in West Papua, Indonesia. OPM militants have been responsible for numerous acts of sabotage, kidnapping, assassination, and attacks on construction workers and security forces, including a number of mass-casualty incidents. The independence movement remains strong, however, the insurgency is disorganized and—unlike GAM—has never been able to seriously challenge the Indonesian state.

the militants were on the back foot, thanks to the establishment of stronger cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia.⁷ However, having learned from this experience, they mounted a comeback in 2004, upping the tempo, scale and sophistication of their operations. As in Aceh, the insurgency has been fueled by incidences of excessive use of force by military and police, and although there have been numerous rounds of negotiations, little has been done to address Malay-Muslim grievances. Thanks to resourcing constraints, changes in leadership and continued military pressure, levels of violence are currently at about their lowest since the 2004 wave of insurgency began; however, the underlying causal conditions remain unchanged.⁸

In the Philippines, the MILF also varied its use of violence in response to government pressure and perceived willingness to engage in meaningful negotiation. For example, when negotiations stalled in 2007, the MILF stepped up its operations lasting through 2009.⁹ However, in contrast to Thailand, the government of the Philippines has shown a willingness to listen to militants' demands and—after more than 20 years—peace talks eventually paid off, culminating in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in February 2019.¹⁰

The Enduring Threat of the New People's Army

The Philippines has had less success with the NPA, which—having previously downsized since peaking during the 1980s—stepped up its operations in 2008.¹¹ By this time, peace talks had been stalled since 2004 and, according to Alexander Yano, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in 2009, the military had become preoccupied with the MILF.¹²

The surge of 2008 was followed by a relative slump in attacks lasting through 2011 as the group experienced difficulties in recruitment and weapons acquisition, as well as a crisis of leadership.¹³ However, since 2012, when yet another round of peace talks ended in deadlock in June, they raised the tempo of activity to new heights, averaging more than 270 attacks per year from 2013-2018.¹⁴ Now into its 51st year of insurgency and with peace talks currently suspended, the NPA remains the largest internal security threat in the Philippines, with no end in sight.

The Escalation of Violence in Myanmar

Myanmar has had to deal with a plethora of ethno-nationalist/separatist insurgent groups dating back to the country's foundation in the late 1940s.¹⁵

The most powerful and durable of these groups were formed in the 1960s and are based in Kachin and Shan states in the north and east. However, arguably the most consequential group to emerge was established in 2012. That year, a new group, initially known as Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY), and subsequently rebranded as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), was formed following deadly, anti-Muslim riots that broke out after three Muslims allegedly gang-raped and murdered a Rakhine Buddhist woman in July.¹⁶ Things escalated even further in August 2017, when ARSA overran 30 Border Guard Police posts, inviting an indiscriminate crackdown by the Burmese military that led to the displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingya, who fled to neighboring Bangladesh. Since then, ARSA has largely been subdued, though by no means eliminated, and the Rohingya issue has come to define Myanmar's image on the international stage. At the same time, the country is still plagued by a variety of other ethno-nationalist and separatist militant groups and there appears to be little prospect of peace.

The ISIS Effect

The war in Syria and the rise of ISIS have rejuvenated jihadist terrorism in the region, beginning around 2012. Close to a thousand people from Southeast Asia traveled to Syria and Iraq, and the most active terrorist groups (including ASG and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)) all pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁷ Moreover, although it took some time before ISIS officially recognized these pledges, Southeast Asian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq were instrumental in encouraging and facilitating attacks back home, as well as providing funds.

ISIS is also at least partly responsible for the increase in foreign fighters in the Philippines as well as the growth of suicide bombing in the country since July 2018.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as time has gone on, a succession of key leaders who served as important points of contact between Asia and the Middle East have now been eliminated, similar to what happened with al-Qaeda in the early 2000s. Most of the recent attacks appear to have been

ISIS Funding for Terrorism in Southeast Asia

According to Indonesian police, from 2014-2016 ISIS transferred more than 10 billion rupiah (more than US\$700,000) from various overseas sources to Indonesia. The Philippine military reported that ISIS sent "at least" \$1.5 million to ASG and the Maute Group to help fund the aforementioned siege of Marawi in May 2017.

locally organized and counterterrorism (CT) authorities are increasingly effective. For example, Malaysia has suffered just one minor attack, while thwarting an additional 25 plots and has arrested more than 500 ISIS suspects since 2013.¹⁹ In 2019 alone, Indonesia arrested around 275 suspected terrorists.²⁰ That same year, they reduced the number of terrorist incidents in the country by 58%.²¹

Militants in the region were quick to pledge allegiance to the new “caliph” after al-Baghdadi was killed in October 2019 and clearly remain committed to ISIS, despite that it has been reduced to a shadow of its former self and personal and operational ties to Southeast Asia appear to have been at least temporarily weakened. This commitment is also evident in the actions of so-called “frustrated foreign fighters” (those who tried but didn’t make it to Syria), and other home-grown cells and lone actors with varying organizational affiliations, who continue to plan and sometimes conduct attacks in the name of ISIS. Thus, although international linkages have been degraded and authorities in the region appear to be gaining the upper hand, there is no room for complacency and the road ahead is fraught with challenges.

CHALLENGES AND TRENDS IN THE YEARS AHEAD

Having looked at the rises and falls in terrorism and insurgency in Southeast Asia over the last 25 years, we now turn to the future. Although trying to predict what terrorism might look like in another 25 years would be futile, it is useful to highlight existing challenges and developing trends in the political and social environment in Southeast Asia, as well as the threat, that are likely to shape the militant landscape now and in the immediate future.

Politicization of Religion in Indonesia and Malaysia

In Indonesia and Malaysia, there has been a gradually mounting sense of unease over what observers consider to be a potentially dangerous rise in more conservative forms of Islam, coupled with increasingly assertive political activism and the willingness of politicians to cater to these movements in order to expand their base of supporters. The controversial conviction of the former governor of Jakarta on charges of blasphemy in 2017 exemplifies this trend. The fact that Indonesian President Joko Widodo then chose a conservative cleric—Ma’ruf Amin, who has supported *fatwas* restricting the rights of religious minorities and homosexuals—as his running mate in the 2019 elections is further evidence of the growing religious influence

in politics. This can also be seen in Malaysia, where the hardline Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS)—which advocates stoning—has grown in strength to the point that it is now part of the ruling coalition.

Although the politicization of religious issues will not directly increase the risk of terrorism in either country, it is possible that, over time, it will gradually expand the space within which violent extremists are able to operate. As ever more conservative government policies are proposed (whether or not they are enacted), the more that extremists are likely to feel emboldened to promote their own agendas. The more politicized that notions of religion and identity become, the more polarized society is likely to be, and the greater the feelings of marginalization and frustration. These are gifts to extremist and terrorist recruiters, who are adept at exploiting such sentiments to generate support and convince new recruits to join their cause. Should political maneuvering around the topic of religion intensify in Southeast Asia in the months and years ahead, it is therefore possible that violent jihadists will be able to exploit this to their advantage.

Instability in the Southern Philippines

In the Philippines, optimism resulting from the various gains that have been made in Mindanao is constrained by the recognition that the reality on the ground is still highly conducive to the potential resurgence of terrorist groups in the region. Because of continued delays in the reconstruction of Marawi (popularly believed to be the result of corruption), tens of thousands of people are still unable to return home more than two-and-a-half years since the siege was brought to an end.²² It has repeatedly been warned that terrorists in the area are seeking to capitalize on this growing sense of frustration and anger at the government, which may enable ASG and others to rebound.²³

Compounding this situation is the fact that as the peace process with the MILF gradually progresses, there are likely to be hardliners and others who become disillusioned and seek a return to violence. In September 2019, interim Chief Minister Ahod “Al Haj Murad” Ebrahim of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (who also serves as the chair of the MILF), admitted that running a government is three times as difficult as running a revolution, pointing to budgetary gaps and bureaucratic challenges.²⁴ The Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) which runs the BARMM government, has until 2022 to iron out these issues and demonstrate the capability to govern in preparation for elections that year. Its ability to do so,

and the related outcome of the elections, will greatly impact local support for the BARMM. The more that it struggles, the greater support there is likely to be for ASG, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, or others who seek to undermine the peace process.

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

There are approximately one million Rohingya refugees still in Bangladesh and although ARSA has not been particularly active in Myanmar since 2017, reports suggest that it is active inside refugee camps and is using the time to regroup in preparation for future attacks.²⁵ Whatever the present strength of the organization, there is currently no end in sight to the Rohingya's predicament and little prospect of them returning home. Citing security concerns, the Bangladeshi government has begun implementing tighter measures of control, to include restriction of internet access and building of fences.²⁶ Educational and other basic services are also lacking, leaving Islamist groups to fill the void.²⁷ Although there is thus far no evidence of collaboration between ARSA and transnational jihadists, both al-Qaeda and ISIS have expressed support for the Rohingya's cause and there has been a handful of cases where jihadist individuals have been arrested for attempting to infiltrate the area or for plotting attacks against Burmese targets.²⁸

For the time being, the Rohingya issue remains a slow-burning crisis and has not transformed into a major rallying point for jihadists. However, the longer it goes on, the greater chance that this might happen, either because the situation flares up again or because entreprenuring terrorists are able to establish inroads into the region. In the longer term, it is also quite possible that the next generation of Rohingya militants (many of whom will now be children languishing in refugee camps with memories of atrocities fresh in their minds) will grow up to be more radical than the current crop of insurgents.

Returning Foreign Fighters, "Home-Grown" Cells and Lone Actors

One of the biggest shared concerns for Southeast Asia in 2020 is the eventual, if not imminent return of foreign fighters and their families from the region, who are currently in Syria.

One way or another, at least some of these individuals are thus likely to come home. Even if they face prosecution and imprisonment, perhaps cou-

pled with specialized reintegration programs, some are likely to reoffend.²⁹ Of course this could include planning and conducting attacks, but arguably the bigger danger is that returnees will help to expand, reconsolidate and reinvigorate jihadist networks in the region. Importantly, this process could play out over many years.

Of course, returning foreign fighters and their families cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader pool of “home-grown” cells and lone actors, who may or may not be affiliated with organizations such as JAD and ASG. This includes deportees and others who tried, but were unsuccessful, in their bid to get to Syria, along with others still who opt for local courses of action. Connections to established groups are not always clear and the offenders often rely upon close-knit family relationships instead. This, combined with a willingness to sometimes strike opportunistically using readily available weapons, means they can be especially difficult to detect before they act. Looking ahead, we can expect to see more (semi)autonomous acts of terrorism in Indonesia in particular. Similar cases may emerge in Singapore and Malaysia, but there they are more likely to be detected, thanks to tighter security in those countries. In the Philippines, where the environment is more permissive, organizations such as ASG will remain the primary threat.

The Syria Detainees

According to the authorities, there are 689 Indonesians and 56 Malaysians detained in Syria, plus unknown (but likely relatively small) numbers from other Southeast Asian nations. Although pressure has been mounting for countries to repatriate their citizens, they have been slow to act. Malaysian authorities have reported that they are still working to bring home those who are willing to do so, but have not taken any decisive action. Meanwhile, Indonesia announced in February 2020 that after having assessed the risk, Syria detainees would be barred from coming home, with the possible exception of some children under the age of 10. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine such large numbers of people—mostly women and children—remaining where they are indefinitely, particularly when the conflict eventually comes to a close. The fact that both Turkey and Iraq have begun deporting terrorism suspects and their families shows that countries in or near the conflict zone may take the matter into their own hands.

Women and Children in Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Non-jihadist groups like the NPA have long used women and children in combatant roles. Similarly, the MILF made use of child soldiers for many years. As documented by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), women within jihadist organizations such as JI historically played key, nonviolent roles, raising funds and helping to expand and strengthen networks through marriage but were forbidden from fighting. JI also invested a great deal of time indoctrinating children in a network of boarding schools that served as recruitment centers and “marriage marts.”

Women and Children in Terrorism

As many of the above examples allude to, a defining feature of jihadist terrorism in the age of ISIS has been the increasing involvement of women and children, including in acts of violence.

What has changed is the mobilization and recruitment of women and children in greater numbers, and the acceptance and utilization of them in more prominent roles—most notably, conducting attacks. This was clearly reflected in the large numbers of women and children who traveled from Southeast Asia to Syria, beginning around 2012. Among those currently still in Syria, it seems that the majority are women and children. For example, of the 56 Malaysians who have been identified, 19 are men, 12 are women, 17 are boys and eight are girls.³⁰ If these proportions turn out to be similar for Indonesia, it would mean there are close to 150 women and more than 300 children from that country still in Syria. In most cases, it will be extremely difficult to verify whether they have been involved in violence. However, in the current climate, both past and future violent conduct, along with involvement in activities such as proselytizing and fundraising, must be regarded as very real possibilities. Of course, this also applies to female extremists and their children who never left home.

The participation of women and children in suicide bomb plots and attacks in Indonesia since 2016; the arrest of Malaysia’s first female ISIS bomb-plotter in May 2018; and the participation of women in suicide bombings in the Philippines in January and September 2019 are all testimony to the severity of this threat.

Attacks involving minors, while unlikely to become the norm, will probably be emulated in future, if only by a small number of ultra-hardcore extremists. As for the involvement of women in conducting attacks, the genie

appears to be well and truly out of the bottle. At the very least, they can be expected to play essential roles in repairing, sustaining and expanding jihadi networks as the movement seeks to recuperate from its recent battering. Countries in the region would therefore be wise not to underestimate this threat, and to ensure that they are adequately prepared.

The Surabaya Bombings

The Surabaya bombings of May 2018 were particularly shocking. Five teenagers plus another five children between the ages of seven and 12 were used as suicide bombers, or were present at the bomb-factory in Sidarjo when it exploded on the evening of May 13. Analysts have since debated whether this marks the beginning of a new phase of violent jihad, where children will be used like this on a regular basis. It is worth noting that jihadists themselves are divided on the issue. As reported by IPAC, imprisoned JAD leader Aman Abdurrahman issued a statement afterwards condemning the use of children, saying the attacks “could not have been undertaken by people who understand the teachings of Islam and the demands of jihad. They could not come from sane people.” However, others vehemently disagreed and a precedent has clearly been set.

A Possible Comeback for Jemaah Islamiyah

As noted above, JI (which remains pro-al-Qaeda and anti-ISIS), faded into obscurity around 2007. In 2008, they appointed a new leader, Para Wijayanto, and made a conscious decision to focus on *dawah* (proselytizing), which they believed would be more productive than *amaliyah* (armed jihad).³¹

Following a process of reorganization, they embarked on a fairly extensive campaign to recruit within universities and established a network of educational institutions, ranging from kindergartens to high schools.³² Professionals have also been targeted for recruitment. These efforts have been complemented by the acquisition of legitimate businesses, including cacao and palm oil plantations, in order to generate funds.³³

In May 2014, JI’s military wing suffered a severe setback after Densus 88 raided one of its weapons factories, arresting several key operatives in the process.³⁴ In May 2018, police arrested some of JI’s Syria returnees and a year later they finally caught up to Wijayanto on terrorism charges dating back to his involvement in the Christmas Eve bombings in the year 2000.³⁵ As these developments show, Indonesian authorities have not taken their eyes off of JI, despite the more immediate threat from JAD and others. The group is also not assessed to be currently planning domestic attacks, despite their con-

tinued interest in acquiring and maintaining militant capabilities. Nevertheless, they have been able to rebuild a significant amount of capacity during the last decade and reportedly had as many as 2,000 members as of late 2019.³⁶ Moreover, the danger is that some within their ranks become disillusioned with the group's current position on the use of force (not to mention disgruntled at the arrest of their leader) and break away to form yet another splinter group committed to violence.³⁷ In the event that this occurs, it could present a challenge not only for Indonesia, but for Southeast Asia and beyond.

Jemaah Islamiyah's Position on Violence

While JI's leadership maintains that armed attacks are likely to be counterproductive, given their relative strength compared to the government of Indonesia, they have not abandoned violent jihad entirely, according to IPAC. In 2010, they formed a new military wing, which manufactured weapons and provided paramilitary training to JI recruits in order to prepare them for eventual, violent confrontation in pursuit of an Islamic State. From 2012, JI organized dozens of fundraising events for Syria and, though it is unclear how much was raised, the bogus charity that they used to handle the funds (Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia) was later designated as a terrorist entity by the UN for sending cash and medical supplies to Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda's representative in the region, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Furthermore, as reported by the *South China Morning Post*, from 2013 to 2018, JI sent at least 14 of their men to Syria to receive paramilitary training.

CONCLUSION

The past 25 years in Southeast Asia have been turbulent. We have seen the rise and fall of al-Qaeda-driven jihadist terrorism in the early to mid-2000s; the dramatic escalation of separatist and communist insurgencies in Thailand and the Philippines, respectively, beginning in the mid-to-late 2000s; the even more dramatic impact of the war in Syria and Iraq and the rise of ISIS from 2012 onwards; and the emergence of what now looks like a long-term humanitarian crisis, triggered by a low-level insurgency and indiscriminate government crackdown in Myanmar in 2017. Looking at the graph in Figure 7.1, it is clear that overall, terrorism has increased during the last two-and-a-half decades. The number of attacks has been on the decline in the region since peaking in 2013 and there have been some notable successes, such as the reduced levels of violence in Thailand, the successful peace accords

with GAM and the (near) completion of the peace process with the MILF. However, the number of incidents recorded in 2018 was almost eight times higher than in 1995.³⁸

What can we learn from this? Clearly, terrorist groups in Southeast Asia have varied their activities in response to a complex array of factors, some internal to the region, others external. For jihadists, arguably the primary driving influences have been external: namely, the incidence of conflict and the related strength and prominence of foreign terrorist organizations (first in Afghanistan, later in Syria). These greatly impacted overall support for their cause and provided them with much-needed resources. In between conflicts, these groups have turned their attention to domestic issues, criminality and—in the case of JI—nonviolent capacity building, and have struggled to maintain relevance. The activities of separatists and communists, on the other hand, appear to have varied more in relation to domestic conditions, including the willingness of governments to negotiate or make concessions; the practical opportunities available to them to organize, recruit and acquire materiel; the degree of popular support; and their own internal organizational integrity.³⁹

In all cases, pressure from the military and law enforcement makes a significant difference. It is vital for constraining the activities of terrorists, disrupting their operations and degrading their strength. However, heavy-handed tactics have at times undermined the legitimacy of governments in the region and contributed to escalations in violence and instability. Just as importantly (though it may seem like a cliché), it is clear that “hard” counterterrorism tactics alone are insufficient to bring about a lasting reduction in the threat. Specific groups and individuals may come and go, but each type of terrorism has proven to be remarkably resilient. This is not to suggest that governments of the region should simply capitulate to terrorists’ demands, or abandon the use of force in favor of negotiations. However, it must be realized that if legitimate grievances and underlying causal conditions are left unaddressed, the cycle of violence will continue indefinitely. Currently, there is little hope for meaningful peace talks with the region’s two most active insurgencies—the loose conglomeration of groups in southern Thailand and the NPA in the Philippines. Not only does this suggest that attacks by these groups will once again rise when conditions are ripe. It also means that, due to continued instability, the so-called “root causes” of terrorism—poverty, unemployment, political marginalization and corruption—will persist. Though they may be fighting for a different cause, these are also conditions that violent jihadists routinely exploit.

For the time being, terrorism in Southeast Asia appears to be on a gradual downward trend. However, all of the groups currently in existence are likely to remain enduring features of the militant landscape. There are no signs of their imminent defeat and, if history is anything to go by, we will see a resurgence of violence at some point in the future. As discussed above, this may be precipitated by political and social conditions in the region, to include politicization of religion and identity; instability in the southern Philippines; and the Rohingya refugee crisis. Events outside of the region—especially conflicts in which jihadists are involved—may also play an important role. At the tactical and operational levels, authorities will have to adapt to changing threat dynamics. Specific concerns in the near-term include (returning) foreign fighters; home-grown cells and lone actors; the involvement of women and children in terrorism; the possible reemergence of JI; not to mention ever-evolving terrorist tactics. On top of all this, the region must also now

The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic

In the short-term, the coronavirus pandemic does not appear to have resulted in a significant escalation of terrorism in Southeast Asia. This is despite the fact that terrorists are trying to exploit the situation to their advantage in various ways, including propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, and conducting attacks (most notably so far in the Philippines and Indonesia). The lack of immediate escalation of violence is likely due to several reasons. To begin with, temporary ceasefires were declared by different sides in the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, many ISIS supporters believe that the pandemic is a great plague foretold in the hadith, or else signifies the coming End of Times. In either case, this means they should stay at home and prepare themselves, rather than go out and conduct attacks. Perhaps more importantly, the closure of borders and enforcement of checkpoints, curfews and lockdowns throughout the region has surely made it more difficult for terrorists to move around. According to Rommel Banlaoi of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism, this has “enormously” reduced the flow of foreign fighters to the Philippines.

Nevertheless, the pandemic may still exacerbate terrorism in the region in the medium to long-term. Widespread unemployment and economic hardship, combined with already evident rising social and sectarian tensions, are likely to result in significant levels of marginalization, desperation and anger, making more people potentially susceptible to terrorists’ ongoing recruitment efforts. Governments will also come under increasing financial pressure, meaning that in future, counterterrorism may be deprioritized in favor of public health and economic recovery. The degree to which terrorists are able to take advantage of this situation will largely depend on how well governments in the region are able to navigate the many challenges ahead, while also maintaining social cohesion and the trust of their citizenry. This will be no easy task.

contend with the coronavirus pandemic, which is likely to complicate, if not accelerate, many of these trends.

Whether dealing with separatists, communists, or indeed jihadists, governments would do well to identify legitimate grievances and contributing political and social conditions they might be able to address. This must be paired with a surgical approach to CT operations that avoids excessive use of force and is situated within an overall strategy that is not only comprehensive but also long term. Few governments attempt to plan much more than four or five years into the future. By comparison, during its hiatus from violence, JI came up with a 25-year plan to achieve its goals.⁴⁰ If terrorism in Southeast Asia is to be sustainably reduced to “acceptable” levels, it will require a similarly patient approach that is far-seeing yet also cognizant of history.

Notes

1 Max V. Soliven, “How Easily We Forget What the Abus and MILF Can Do: Remember Ipil?” *Philippine Star*, March 6, 2002, <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2002/03/06/152845/how-easily-we-forget-what-abus-and-milf-can-do-remember-ipil>; “World News Briefs; Filipino Troops Corner Rebels After Attack,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/07/world/world-news-briefs-filipino-troops-corner-rebels-after-attack.html>.

2 Note that decades earlier, a group calling itself the ‘Mindanao Revolutionary Council for Independence’ had taken control over Marawi in 1972 from October 21-24 (see Alan R. Luga, “Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao, Philippines” (Master’s diss., U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2002), 39, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a406868.pdf>).

3 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database

(2020), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/access/>.

4 Sidney Jones, “The Ongoing Extremist Threat in Indonesia,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2011): 91-104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41418639.pdf>; Cameron Sumpster, “Indonesian Jihadism: Increased Intensity but Familiar Strategy,” *Strategist*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesian-jihadism-increased-intensity-familiar-strategy/>.

5 Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Free Aceh Movement (GAM): Anatomy of a Separatist Organization* (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2004), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/free-aceh-movement-gam-anatomy-separatist-organization>.

6 Ibid.

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39 This is not to suggest that these factors are irrelevant to jihadists, or that international factors do not play a role for separatists and others—merely that they play different roles, relatively speaking.

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