

Publication: The Sunday Times, p B03  
Date: 20 November 2016  
Headline: ISIS losing ground, but extending reach

# ISIS losing ground, but extending reach

Lim Yan Liang

While Singapore held its biggest counter-terrorism exercise ever barely a month ago in response to the growing threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), what is the situation with the group's centre of struggle in the Middle East? And how will the changing situation affect South-east Asia?

A round-table held by The Sunday Times last Monday heard that big inroads are being made in the battle to reclaim ISIS-held territory, but on the down side, this could translate into more trouble in Asia.

## THE INROADS

ISIS' last stronghold in Iraq, the city of Mosul, is feeling the full force of a Western-backed military campaign to retake it.

The offensive has seen Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and various militia groups supported by an international coalition attack Mosul from three fronts over the past month, severely weakening the terror group's hold on territory in its so-called "caliphate".

## THE EFFECTS

The fact that ISIS is now losing territory means that, like Al-Qaeda before it, the group is likely to morph and spread itself out, while the estimated 700 Indonesians, 100 Malaysians and 100 Filipinos who went to the region to join the fight are likely to return to South-east Asia.

The recapture of Mosul - Iraq's second-largest city - will deal a psychological blow to the terror group, said security experts, as it was in its Great Mosque two years ago that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared himself the first caliph - commander of all Muslims - in generations.

"There is a sense that Mosul will not last very long in ISIS' hands," Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna, Head of Policy Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, told the round-table. "After that, the coalition will also try and retake Raqqa in Syria, ISIS' de facto capital."

But while coalition forces have had successes retaking territories held by ISIS - the key feature setting it apart from other terror groups - the group's virulent ideology is proving more difficult to eradicate.

The seductive idea that it is building a pure, utopian state that model Muslims are obliged to be a part of is a powerful one that explains how ISIS has attracted not just thousands of foreign fighters but also families, including a number from countries in the region such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, said Prof Kumar.

But with the heavy fighting and continued territorial losses, many of these foreigners are heading home, including back to South-east Asia.

This sets the stage for a repeat of the cycle of terror of the early 2000s, after the Soviet-Afghan war ended. With reinvigorated homegrown militant groups and self-radicalisation, there is now a "three-tier threat" that raises the spectre of more attacks in South-east Asia next year, said Prof Kumar.

Back in the 1990s, the South-east Asian elements of the Mujahideen - Islamist insurgents who drove out the Soviets - had returned to this region with war-fighting skills, started Jemaah Islamiah, and carried out a string of attacks, including the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2004 bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta.

"What we think we'll be seeing is a phenomenon where many of ISIS' South-east Asian fighters will come back, and they will augment the terrorism threat in the region," said Prof Kumar.

For all its losses in the Middle East, the danger of ISIS has metastasised and spread to many parts of the world, including South-east Asia.

The group's early military victories last year and the year before reinvigorated militant groups worldwide and sparked a number of terror attacks, and

many of these groups have since pledged allegiance to ISIS.

A briefing map from the United States National Counterterrorism Centre, picked up by the US media in August, showed that ISIS is now "fully operational" in 18 countries, including Nigeria, Algeria and Libya, compared with seven in 2014.

It also counted six "aspiring branches", such as in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Most worrying of these is the foothold achieved in South-east Asia over the past year in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao, which is already a hotbed of unrest.

Security experts have highlighted the rising threat of pro-ISIS groups there, noting that many Indonesian returnees have gone to Mindanao to fight with groups such as the Abu Sayyaf.

Outspoken Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said in September that he wants US special forces troops helping to fight terrorism in Mindanao to leave, throwing the long-term response to pro-ISIS groups there into question.

ISIS has also endorsed Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Haplon as "emir" of its South-east Asia campaign, signalling its growing focus on the region.

The group's effectiveness in bringing previously unrelated militant groups together under its banner was flagged in a report last month by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, a think-tank headed by Jakarta-based security analyst Sidney Jones.

"Support for ISIS in Mindanao has meant more than a repackaging of old kidnapping-for-ransom groups. It has facilitated co-operation across clan and ethnic lines, widened the extremist recruitment pool to include computer-savvy university students and opened new international communication and possibly funding channels," it noted.

"It means that more deadly violence in the Philippines involving alliances of pro-ISIS groups is a matter of when, not if."

Analysts told Insight that three factors - ISIS' building of a springboard into South-east Asia, its savvy use of social media to self-radicalise and groom lone-wolf attackers and its shift in tactics from spectacular and well-coordinated attacks to individual acts of terror that are harder to prevent - will make this region far more dangerous in the coming years.

"They are promoting the idea that you don't need to make a bomb, that with a knife or a truck you can also cause mass casualties," said Prof Kumar, alluding to a knife attack in Minnesota in September that wounded nine people, and the July incident involving a truck in Nice, France, which killed 86 people.

By holding up successful attacks as models to follow in its calls to supporters to spread terror wherever they are, ISIS wants to inspire copycats, said Mr Remy Mahzam, an associate research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, who was a panellist at the round-table.

"We've seen how the November 2015 Paris attacks inspired the January Jakarta attacks, and we can pre-empt more of such replication of attacks next year," he said.

This mindset shift means that terror attacks in the future are likely to occur not just at traditional hard targets such as government buildings, but even at places such as shopping malls and ferry terminals, said fellow panellist David Chan, who heads the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University.

This was the case in June's Puchong incident when ISIS-linked militants lobbed a grenade into a nightclub outside Kuala Lumpur.

"It has evolved to the point where you should expect a terror attack to happen anywhere and everywhere," he said.

"And it can be carried out not just by structured groups, but organic groups and even individuals."

yanliang@sph.com.sg

Source: The Sunday Times @ Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction