

Special Report#15

22 October 2018

Islamic State Impact: Terrorism and Counter-terrorism in Malaysia



Tanvi Gupta

Abstract

The Islamic State has not only drawn Malaysians to Syria as foreign fighters, but has converted some of them into effective recruitment tools to ferment trouble back home. A lone terror attack, number of terror plots, and a visible increase in radicalization are among the manifestations of the phenomenon that poses enormous complexities to Malaysian state. The new government in Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamad has introduced a range of changes to pursue a softer counter terrorism approach. These changes, however, need to be augmented by regional cooperation and focus on counter-messaging.

On 6 October 2018, the Malaysian Special Branch Counter Terrorism Division announced the detention of eight men with suspected links with the Islamic State. The suspects – five Europeans including three from France and one from the American continent; a man from the Middle East; and a Malaysian – had been detained in Perlis, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor on 24 September. According to police sources, all suspects were involved with an Islamic learning centre in Perlis, believed to be promoting extremist teachings. “Initial investigations based on intelligence shared by foreign intelligence agencies showed that the suspects had connections with a *madrasah* in Dammaj, Yemen, set up by Sheikh Muqbil Hadi Al Wadi, a Salafi Jihadi scholar. The *madrasah* follows the Salafi Jihadi teachings that permits the killings of non-Muslims and even Muslims who don’t follow their ways,” the police statement said.[1]

A month back, in September 2018, Malaysian police had announced the arrest of seven suspected terrorists belonging to the Islamic State. The arrests took place during a special operation in the states of Johor, Terengganu, Selangor, and Perak between 12 and 17 July 2018. Four of the suspects are Malaysians, while the remaining three are Indonesians. The arrested included a man who had threatened to assassinate both the Malaysian King and Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad.[2]

Malaysia is one of the few Asian countries to have a relatively low terrorism rate. And yet around 400 people have been arrested since 2013 for suspected links to terrorism. These include 115 arrested in 2016, 82 in 2015, 59 in 2014 and four in 2013.[3] The visible increase in the number of arrests coincides with the defeat suffered by the Islamic State, which had attracted Malaysians to Iraq and Syria. Some of them are coming back home, leading to a rise in terror plots and also, other manifestations of radicalization underway in the country since the past few years. According to a report released by Institute of Economics and Peace, Terrorism Index in Malaysia has increased from 2.69 in 2015 to 3.33 in 2016 and it is predicted that by the end of 2020, it will become as high as 3.57.[4]

This paper examines the impact of increased radicalization among Malaysians on the security situation of Malaysia and the Southeast Asian region. It also assesses the counter-terrorism approach of the Malaysian government to stem the influence of the Islamic State.

Malaysian fighters of the Islamic State



(Ustaz Lofti Ariffin)

The Syrian war and the subsequent creation of the Islamic State in 2014 radicalized a large number of Malaysians. A number of Malaysians attempted to travel to Syria, few to join the rebel forces fighting the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and the rest to join the Islamic State. Many of these travellers have become legends of sorts continuing to inspire more and more Malaysians to take to the path of terrorism. The first category of Malaysians who went to join the anti-Assad rebels included a teacher in a private religious school, Ustaz Lofti Ariffin. Lofti was killed in an airstrike in 2014. However, videos and literature available on his exploits have inspired a new generation of men and women, who have joined the Islamic State.

According to the Soufan Centre, which monitors foreign fighters of the Islamic State, 91 Malaysians landed in Iraq and Syria to become the soldiers of the Islamic State. Among them were 12 women and 17 children.[5] Along with the Indonesian fighters of the Islamic State, the Malaysians set up Katibah Nusantara, a Malay language-speaking unit of the Islamic State. After the fall of the Islamic State, the Soufan Centre estimated eight Malaysians have returned home.[6] While about 34 are believed to have died in Syria[7], the rest are suspected to be still there.



(Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi)

Of all the Malaysians who travelled to Iraq and Syria, 26-year-old Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi is arguably the most famous. He symbolises the dangers posed by long-distance terrorism, i.e. role played by Malaysians in Syria in fermenting trouble back home. Wanndy left for Raqqa with his wife in 2014. After entering Syria via Turkey, he received weapons training and joined the external operations wing of the Islamic State. For the first time in 2015, he drew public attention by appearing in a video showing the beheading of a Syrian man.[8] Wanndy's exploits were not limited to participation in acts of terror in Syria alone. He initially attempted to carry out terror acts at home through Al Qurbo, an Islamic State-linked group in Malaysia. However, he fell out with al Qurbo's leader and the plans did not materialise. However, working independently, Wanndy masterminded and executed an attack in Kuala Lumpur on 28 June 2016. On 29 April 2017, Wanndy, with the assumed name, Abu Hamzah Al Fateh who had made it to the United States' list of 'Specially Designated Global Terrorists' a month before, was killed in a drone strike in Raqqa.

At least four other Malaysians were identified as successors to Jedi's legacy. Among them are 52-year old Mohd Rafi Udin alias Abu Awn Al-Malizi; 38-year-old Wan Mohd Aquil Wan Zainal Abidin alias Akel Zainal[9]; 36-year-old Zahar Abdullah; and 25-year-old Muhammad Fudhail Omar.

Udin, a former taxi driver, who was involved in a bank robbery, travelled to Syria in 2014. He is now believed to be the senior most Malaysian in the Islamic State in Syria. Udin had been detained in 2003-2006 for his association with the radical Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah. In June-July 2016, he appeared in an Islamic State propaganda video, alongside an Indonesian and Filipino. Each of them went on to behead a Middle Eastern-looking prisoner. That was the first time when Southeast Asian fighters were filmed carrying out beheadings.[10]

Akel Zainal is a former rock-musician and has used his celebrity status to good effect to recruit Malaysians into the Islamic State. His social media posts have been extremely popular and have enticed people including a young woman Syamimi Faiqah. A former Kolej Universiti Islam

Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS) student, she left for Syria on 4 October 2014 to marry Akel.[11] According to an estimate, of the nearly 400 people who have been arrested in Malaysia for suspected links to terrorism since 2013, almost 95 percent were recruited or radicalized on social media.[12]

Zahar has been coordinating with the Islamic State's terror cells in Malaysia. Authorities have claimed that a certain number of Malaysian militants have been in contact with him and have received orders.[13]

Another contender to the top position was 25-year old Fudhail Omar, before his death during a Syrian security force air strike on Raqqa in June 2017. A former NGO member, Fudhail went to Syria on 2 May 2014. He had close connections with the slain Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi. Aspiring militants in Malaysia were reportedly often diverted to Fudhail on Facebook when they tried to contact another militant, Akel, or others. Two of Fudhail's brothers were arrested for supporting and transferring funds to him.[14]

While Fudhail has perished, three others are among the surviving foreign fighters in Syria and are spearheading recruitment of Malaysians, both to migrate to Syria as well as inspiring and supporting new recruits to launch attacks in Malaysia.[15]

Terror attack and Plots

On 28 June 2016, the Islamic State organised its first successful terror attack in Malaysia. The attack followed a threat issued by Islamic State militants in Philippines to carry out an attack on Malaysian soil. Two Islamic State operatives lobbed a grenade into a bar around 2:15 am, injuring eight patrons in an entertainment venue in Puchong, Selangor.[16] The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack and said that the night club had carried out sinful activities during the month of Ramadhan. This, so far, remains the only attack to have been carried out by the outfit in Malaysia.

Prior to this, Malaysian authorities had claimed to have busted nine terror plots. Since the Selangor attack, a number of other terror plots have been unearthed. These include mostly plans to attack non-Muslim places of worship and plots to kill Malaysians opposed to the implementation of *shariah* laws.

- Between 8-10 September 2017, three persons were arrested, for association with the Islamic State and attempting to involve themselves in terror attacks, during a sting operation conducted in Perak, Selangor and Melaka. Among them was a 21-year old unemployed man, who had received instructions from Syria to launch attacks on non-Muslims and their places of worship; a 38-year-old man, who actively printed and distributed Islamic State flags and was planning to join the outfit in southern Philippines; and a bus driver, who was planning to travel to Syria.[17]
- On 23 December 2017, police detained a 25-year-old teacher at a private religious school in Petaling Jaya and charged him with planning to kill non-Muslims. The teacher has been an Islamic State militant since early 2015 and was actively promoting the outfit's ideology on social media with the aim of recruiting new militants.[18]
- On 17 January 2018, an Indonesian member of the Islamic State was arrested. He allegedly had scoured a busy district of the capital, Kuala Lumpur, in November 2017, seeking to kill Buddhist monks, in retaliation for violence suffered by Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.[19] He also had planned to attack the federal police headquarters in Bukit Aman as well as the Travers police

station to steal weapons from there. He was in communication with a senior Islamic State leader on WhatsApp and had sought to recruit several other Indonesians and put up a flag of the Islamic State at the building site where he worked.[20]

- Between 27 February and 15 March 2018, police arrested seven men- a Filipino and six Malaysians- with links to the Islamic State. These men were planning attacks on non-Muslim places of worship and other targets. The Malaysians were arrested in Johor state, while the Filipino, who was a member of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), was detained in the eastern state of Sabah. These men were technicians, security guards, restaurant workers, and experts in preparing explosives, police said.[21]
- Between 27 March and 9 May 2018, 15 people including six Malaysians, six Filipinos, a young couple from a North African country and a Bangladeshi national were arrested during raids conducted in five states – Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Kelantan, and Sabah. One of them was a housewife who allegedly had planned to carry out a suicide mission on behalf of the Islamic State. Her plan was to use her vehicle and a gas cylinder to crash into a non-Muslim place of worship. Among the arrested was also a 17-year-old schoolboy who had pledged his allegiance to the terror group. Apart from assembling explosives, the teenager had recorded a video threatening to launch attacks and uploaded it on Islamic State- affiliated WhatsApp and Telegram groups.
- On 20 April, two Malaysians charged with planning to attack non-Muslim places of worship and kidnap and kill policemen were arrested.
- Between 12 and 17 July 2018, seven suspects were arrested including two persons who had threatened not only to launch bomb attacks in Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines, but also to assassinate the King, Sultan Muhammad V, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Religious Affairs Minister Mujahid Yusof Rawa for not implanting shariah laws in Malaysia.[22]

The other manifestation of the Islamic State phenomenon in Malaysia is the ‘jointness’ which has developed between Islamic State sympathisers and affiliates in Malaysia and Philippines. According to the analysis done by monitoring pro-Islamic State communication channels, Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC) reported that more than 30 Malaysian militants were involved in the Marawi siege[23] in Philippines. Philippines figured as a *Mantiqi* (regional unit) in Jemaah Islamiyah’s organisational structure. The JI and the ASG had partnered to add to each other’s nuisance value. The Islamic State appears to have taken the ‘jointness’ a step ahead. In 2014, three Malaysians went to Philippines to set up an Islamic State-linked network. None returned. Former Selayang Municipal Council officer Muhammad Joraimie Awang Raimee alias Abu Nur and former Universiti Malaya bookshop keeper Mohd Najib Husen alias Abu Anaz travelled to Syria from Philippines and were killed there. The third person- former Universiti Malaya professor Dr Mahmud Ahmad stayed back and is said to have played a key role during the siege of Marawi city. He was killed by Filipino security forces in October 2017.[24] In turn, ASG fighters have periodically been arrested in Malaysia. Some have been simply lying low in the country and others trying to assist their less experienced brethren in Malaysia to fine tune the terror plots.

Counter Terrorism Approach



*(Arrest of terrorism suspects in Perlis, Kuala Lumpur and Johor on 24 September 2018.
Photo Courtesy: Royal Malaysia Police)*

Malaysia's counter terrorism strategy is, therefore, faced with complexities that combine outward journeys of aspiring terrorists to Iraq and Syria, long distance and home-grown terror, home coming of foreign fighters, and the nexus between Islamic State sympathisers and outfits in Malaysia and Philippines.

The Security Offences and Special Measures Act (SOSMA) had already been passed shortly before the Islamic State emerged in 2014. The Act deals with terrorism-related offences and crimes against the state. In 2015, Malaysia also introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and the Special Measures against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act (SMATA) which gave police the power to arrest and detain individuals. This also led to the creation of two detention centres to house the terrorists. Malaysia also cracks down terrorist financing through its Anti-Money Laundering and Anti-Terrorism Financing Act (AMLATFA) which came into force in 2001.^[25] Malaysia in 2016 also set up the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre (RDC3) and the Counter-Messaging Centre (CMC). Both are run by the Royal Malaysian Police.^[26]

Amid experts citing weak implementation of some of these legislations and ineffectiveness of existing institutions, the security force establishment that has gained enormous power and resources over the years, swear by the effectiveness of acts like SOSMA. The act allows suspect person to be arrested and not to be produced in court. It even prevents enquiry nor action against persons responsible for the arrested person's death. However, these legislations of the era presided over the previous Prime Minister Najib Razak could very well become a part of history. The heavy-handed approach pursued in the past is in the process of being replaced by a softer approach. The current Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, has announced his plan to repeal SOSMA as it is 'not fair law'

and ‘if people commit any offence, they should be judged by the court’.[27] The government also favours withdrawing the military from Saudi Arabia as their presence there had “indirectly mired Malaysia in the Middle East conflict”.[28] The reversal of Malaysia’s close cooperation with Saudi Arabia also included shutting down the King Salman Centre for International Peace which had been set up amid much fanfare in 2017.

Conclusion

Faced with the complexities posed by the Islamic State phenomenon, the changes proposed by the new Malaysian government are significant. However, their essentially political nature notwithstanding, the heavy-handed counter terrorism approach pursued thus far at home, is not expected to change much. Malaysia has so far done well to prevent terror attacks on its home soil. Whether it is able to continue with its run of success would be a test of time. It will do better to address challenges of growing radicalism and focus on areas such as counter-terror messaging. Increasing cooperation with neighbouring countries including Indonesia, Singapore, and Philippines would add to its counter-terror abilities.

End Notes

[1] Farik Zolkepli, “Special Branch detain 7 foreigners, 1 M’sian with Salafi Jihadi links”, *The Star*, 6 October 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/10/06/special-branch-detain-7-foreigners-1-msian-with-salafi-jihadi-links/> Accessed on 7 October 2018.

[2] Hazlin Hassan, “Malaysian Police Arrest Seven Suspected ISIS Militants”, *The Straits Times*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-seven-suspected-isis-militants>, Accessed on 22 September 2018.

[3] Hazlin Hasan, “8 held in Malaysia for suspected terror links”, *Straits Times*, 6 October 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/8-held-in-malaysia-for-suspected-terror-links>. Accessed on 8 October 2018.

[4] “Malaysia Terrorism Index – Forecast”, *Institute of Economics and Peace*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/malaysia/terrorism-index/forecast>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[5] Francis Chan, “ISIS returnees pose major terror threat”, *Straits Times*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-returnees-pose-major-terror-threat>. Accessed on 10 October 2018.

[6] Tim Meko, “Now that the Islamic State has fallen in Iraq and Syria, where are all its fighters going?”, *Washington Post*, 22 February 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c6da758629bc. Accessed on 10 October 2018.

[7] Amy Chew, “Islamic State remains the top terror threat for Malaysia in 2018: Police”, *Channel News Asia*, 30 December 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/islamic-state-remains-the-top-terror-threat-for-malaysia-in-2018-9820872>. Accessed on 10 September 2018.

[8] “Malaysia’s top Islamic State operative killed in Syria: police”, *Reuters*, 8 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-militant/malaysias-top-islamic-state-operative-killed-in-syria-police-idUSKBN1841SC>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

[9] According to a report, Akel Zainal, a former drummer for now defunct 1990s rock band, the Ukays, joined the Islamic State in 2014. He is believed to have travelled to Syria after being influenced by Ustaz Lofti Ariffin. Zainal is currently in Syria along with several other Malaysian fighters.

[10] “Could Asian militants bring terrorism back home?”, *The Star*, 5 July 2016, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/07/05/could-asian-militants-be-bringing-terrorism-back/>. Accessed on 10 October 2018.

[11] “Ex-rock musician wooing Malaysian youths to join IS militants, Utusan report says”, *Malay Mail*, 13 October 2014, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/762675/ex-rock-musician-wooing-malaysian-youths-to-join-is-militants-utusan-report>. Accessed on 12 October 2018.

[12] Emir Zainul, “Fix the jihadi ideology, urges senior police officer”, *The Edge Markets*, 28 August 2018, <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/fix-jihadi-ideology-urges-senior-police-officer>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

[13] “Four contenders for IS militant Wanndy’s post”, *The Star*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/05/11/four-contenders-for-is-militant-wanndys-post/>. Accessed on 12 October 2018.

[14] “Cops confirm M’sian IS leader Fudhail killed in Syria”, *Malaysia Kini*, 21 July 2017, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/389315>. Accessed on 12 October 2018.

[15] Rohan Gunaratna, “Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy, Malaysia’s Top IS Recruiter”, *Benar News*, 16 May 2017, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/asia-pacific-threat-update/Rohan-Gunaratna-05162017180047.html>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

[16] Rohan Gunaratna, “Islamic State’s First Terror Attack in Malaysia”, *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, 29 June 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/CO16163.pdf>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[17] Amy Chew, “Malaysia foils Islamic State terror plot to attack places of worship”, *Channel NewsAsia*, 14 September 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-foils-islamic-state-terror-plot-to-attack-places-of-9215224>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.

[18] Farik Zolkepli, “Police Foil Terror Plot in KL”, *The Star Online*, 23 January 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/01/23/police-foil-terror-plot-in-kl/>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[19] “Malaysia arrests two ISIS militants over planned attacks on police stations and Buddhist monks”, *Straits Times*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-arrests-two-men-over-planned-attacks-on-police-stations-and-buddhist-monks>. Accessed on 10 October 2018.

[20] Farik Zolkepli, "Police Foil Terror Plot in KL", *The Star Online*, 23 January 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/01/23/police-foil-terror-plot-in-kl/>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[21] "Malaysia arrests seven men with Islamic State links over attacks plot", *Reuters*, 24 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-security/malaysia-arrests-seven-men-with-islamic-state-links-over-attacks-plot-idUSKBN1H00GK?il=0>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[22] Hazlin Hassan, "Malaysian Police Arrest Seven Suspected ISIS Militants", *The Straits Times*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-seven-suspected-isis-militants>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

[23] Zam Yusa, "Terror groups in Southern Philippines still recruiting in Malaysia", *Free Malaysia Today*, 5 January 2018, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/01/05/terror-groups-in-southern-philippines-still-recruiting-in-malaysia/>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

[24] Raul Dancel, "Top Malaysian Terrorist Killed in Marawi Clash", *The Straits Times*, 20 October 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/top-malaysian-terrorist-killed-in-marawi-clash>. Accessed on 20 September 2018.

[25] Michael Hart, "Malaysia's Counter Terrorism Strategy: Keeping ISIS in Check", *Geopolitical Monitor*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/malysias-counterterrorism-strategy-keeping-isis-in-check/>. Accessed on 24 September 2018.

[26] Prashanth Parameswaran, "Where is Malaysia's new counter terrorism centre in its Islamic State fight?", *The Diplomat*, 15 March 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/where-is-malysias-new-counterterrorism-center-in-its-islamic-state-fight/>. Accessed on 24 September 2018.

[27] "Malaysian government will repeal law allowing detention without trial: PM Mahathir", *The Straits Times*, 23 July 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-government-will-repeal-law-allowing-detention-without-trial-pm-mahathir>. Accessed on 27 September 2018.

[28] Sumisha Naidu, "Terrorism biggest threat to Malaysia, says Defense Minister", *Channel News Asia*, 28 June 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/terrorism-biggest-threat-to-malaysia-says-defence-minister-10480626>. Accessed on 23 September 2018.

(Tanvi Gupta is a project intern with Mantraya. This Special Report is published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network" and "Islamic State in Asia" projects. Mantraya Special Reports are per reviewed publications.)

Original weblink of the Special Report: <http://mantraya.org/special-report-islamic-state-impact-terrorism-and-counter-terrorism-in-malaysia/>

Welcome to Mantraya

Mantraya is an independent research forum that seeks to make constructive contributions in the realm of strategy, innovation and alternatives. It aims to:

- Inform public debate through regular publications on subjects of national and international importance ;
- Produce cutting edge research and provide alternatives by employing qualitative and quantitative methodology, primarily field based studies;
- Serve as a platform for exchange of ideas and strategy involving scholars, researchers, academia, media, governmental and non-governmental personnel/institutions.
- Provide advisory and consultancy services.
- Outreach and partnerships with likeminded institutions/ individuals.

Mantraya's research areas include:

- Non-traditional security challenges in South Asia
- Reconstruction, Governance and Institution building in transitional societies
- Challenges to Policy making in fragile states
- State and Peace building in post conflict societies
- Politics of Aid, Development, Gender and Security in South Asia
- Water, Climate change, Borders, Diaspora, Energy, Nuclear and Cyber Security
- Security Sector Reform and Civil-Military Relations
- Insurgencies, Terrorism and Strategies in Counter terrorism
- Non-State Armed Groups, Illicit Networks, Organised crime and Conflict Economy
- Countering violent extremism (CVE), counter terrorist financing and anti-money laundering
- Women in CVE, Conflict Resolution, and Strengthening Civil Society
- Rule of law, Political systems, Electoral and Constitutional Reform in South Asia
- Strategic Communications and Role of Media
- Role of Dialogue, Negotiations, Reconciliation, Mediation, Confidence-building measures and Track II initiatives
- Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution
- Great Power Politics, Global governance and Emerging Powers
- Regional Cooperation in South Asia and South East Asia
- India's foreign, aid and security policy