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Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
“ISIS in the Pacific:
Assessing Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Threat to the Homeland”
April 27, 2016

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the threat from ISIS in Southeast Asia. My name is Supna Zaidi Peery. I am a strategic policy analyst at the Counter Extremism Project, a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization that combats the growing threat from extremist ideology.

ISIS could become a threat to the United States and its allies in Southeast Asia through its collaboration with local militant groups if regional governments do not aggressively seek out countervailing and preventative policies to combat violent and non-violent Islamist activity in the region. This includes an aggressive push against the proliferation of Islamist propaganda online, and on social media. Concurrently, regional governments must support and amplify counter messaging promulgated by moderate Muslim organizations like Sisters in Islam in Malaysia and Nahdatul Ulema in Indonesia.

Background:

Islamist extremism predates the arrival of ISIS in Southeast Asia. While the number of violent extremists in the region is currently low compared to the number in the Middle East and South Asia, ISIS, like other violent militant groups, and non-violent Islamist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, is skilled at manipulating regional and local problems and incorporating them into its Islamist message of global Muslim victimhood. This creates an environment where Muslim youth who come into contact with Islamist messaging online or in person become vulnerable to radicalization.

The most glaring example of this problem in Southeast Asia is the Rohingya crisis on the Burma-Bangladesh border. The ethnic group’s citizenship has been challenged by the government, which argues that the Rohingya are historically from Bangladesh, not indigenous to Burma. Consequently, without status it is difficult for the Rohingya to find work in Burma. Many attempt to flee, with some creating new lives in nearby countries like Malaysia. Other families, in the hundreds of thousands, fester at refugee camps on the border between Bangladesh and Burma.

Pro-ISIS militants from Bangladesh have allegedly attempted to recruit men from these refugee camps. It is unclear if these recruiting attempts were part of a new strategy to expand extremist activity to Burma.

ISIS has increased its profile and presence in Bangladesh as well in the last year, where increasingly aggressive domestic Islamist militant groups have killed foreigners, religious minorities and secular bloggers.

Technology enables extremist messaging that fuels radicalization, recruitment, and incitement to violence. There are more than 3,000 pro-ISIS websites in Southeast Asia, and 70 percent of these websites are hosted on servers in Indonesia. These websites feature translations of ISIS ideology as well as YouTube channels, Twitter, and other platforms exploited by extremists

ISIS propaganda is strengthened by purported non-violent Islamist groups in Southeast Asia as well. Islamist messaging encourages a separatist and supremacist attitude among otherwise moderate Muslims. Thus, as the Hudson Institute states, purported non-violent Islamist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir spread a mindset that jihadi recruiters can exploit to encourage militancy.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an Islamist movement founded in the Middle East that has chapters in more than 40 countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia. The group advocates an identical message to that of ISIS – regime change in favor of a caliphate. Rather, than support indiscriminate violence to realize their vision, HT hopes to convert key figures in society – like the military – so a coup can bring about a peaceful change in government. HT events in Indonesia regularly attract more than 5,000 men, women and children.

Separately, so-called peaceful Islamist events host religious televangelists like Zakir Naik, who teaches a supremacist interpretation of Islam alien to Southeast Asia. His online presence, including YouTube channels, satellite, and cable television, has grown his network called “Peace TV.” The station and its 24/7 Islamic programming reach hundreds of millions of men and women around the world in numerous languages.

On April 13, 2016, Naik spoke at an event in Indonesia attended by hundreds where a young woman asked how “brothers” could be killing each other. She was referring to the conspiracy that the majority of 9/11 victims were Christian and the perpetrators were Muslim. [Naik](#) responded by stating that 9/11 was an inside job by perpetrated by the White House. His evidence included a documentary called “Loose Change,” a conspiracy-theory-inspired series produced between 2005 and 2009.

Naik also spoke in Malaysia. His topic of choice was a speech on why Islam is better than Hinduism. Fearing communal tensions, Naik’s invitation was rescinded. The ban was lifted when he agreed to adjust his speech to “Islam and Hinduism.”

The propaganda spread by organizations like HT and individuals like Naik lays the effective groundwork for groups like ISIS and is just as dangerous. It chips away at the tolerant and pluralist societies that currently exist in Southeast Asia. Worse, once individuals are softened to a worldview setting Muslims apart and above all others, the radicalization of Muslim youth towards violence becomes more likely.

The situation in Southeast Asia can be compared to the evolution of events in the United Kingdom. Propagandist Anjem Choudary by no means reflects the majority of Muslims in the U.K. Yet, he is finally on trial now for his alleged support for ISIS in the U.K., and has spent decades advocating for sharia law. Choudary is responsible for founding [al-Muhajiroun](#) – which British law enforcement blames for at least 50 percent of terror plots in the U.K. from 1995 to 2015. Apparently, Choudary's fringe status did not prevent him from doing major harm in the U.K.

Worse, the separatist ideology of Choudary, and his mentor, Omar Bakri Mohammad, who founded the London-based chapter of Hizb ut-Tahrir, may be responsible for the lack of integration in some Muslim communities in the U.K.

The Current Landscape in Southeast Asia

Presently in Southeast Asia, militant Islamist groups are localized for now mainly in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In these locations, extremists have traditionally targeted their attacks on law enforcement and government, rarely attacking public spaces.

However, ISIS's propaganda in the region increases the future risk for more indiscriminate acts of terrorism, as well as the targeting of foreigners, religious minorities, and U.S. interests. The Bali bombing, for example, was committed by the Indonesian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah, with the help of al-Qaeda, in retaliation for the U.S.-led Global War on Terror.

In the past year, there have been indications of growing support in general for sharia among some Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, as well as growing support for ISIS. For example, the monarchy of Brunei instituted sharia law in 2013. Brunei is physically nestled on a small corner of a much larger Malaysian island. Cross-border influence is very possible.

In 2015, a retailer in Malaysia selling pro-ISIS merchandise was finally shuttered, despite local law enforcement having knowledge of the items in the store, including ISIS flags, T-shirts marked with statements like "Mujahideen cyberspace," and images of Kalashnikovs. The merchandise was produced in Indonesia.

In December 2015, the BBC published photos of HT members protesting in front of American Mining Company Freeport, in central Jakarta. HT propaganda argues that allowing Western firms to extract Indonesian minerals is un-Islamic.

Further anecdotal evidence indicates the influence of ISIS is growing in Indonesia. In February 2015, the BBC reported that students outside Jakarta declared their allegiance to ISIS. This was not an isolated incident, as other ISIS supporters have organized parades and demonstrations advocating ISIS's message in Indonesia as well.

Indonesia

A very small minority of Indonesians have sought an Islamic state since 1949, when the Darul Islam movement was formed.

A new wave of radicalization emerged in the 1980s, with al-Qaeda spreading its extremist message, like ISIS today, to near and far-flung Muslim communities from its headquarters in the Middle East. Al-Qaeda has funded militancy, including training camps in Southeast Asia since.

[Jemaah Islamiyah](#) (JI) made international headlines with bombings targeting tourists in Bali in 2002 and 2005, killing more than 200 in each incident, but the group has a long and violent history spanning decades. JI is also known for its ties to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, as well as the 1995 failed “Bojinka” plot, an attempt to bomb 12 U.S. commercial airliners in the span of two days.

Founded by [Abu Bakar Bashir](#) and Abdullah Sungkar to overthrow the secular Indonesian state through political disruption and violence, JI seeks to establish a regional caliphate that would encompass Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao (southern Philippines), southern Thailand, Singapore, and Brunei. [Bashir](#) pledged loyalty to ISIS in July 2014, but the group also has links to [al-Qaeda](#) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a Philippines-based terrorist organization.

ISIS propaganda and networking between Southeast Asian militants serving in Syria and those at home in Malaysia and Indonesia has created a nascent but powerful network supporting extremism from the Middle East to South Asia.

This was best illustrated on January 14, 2016, when pro-ISIS militants attacked a Starbucks café in Jakarta, killing 4 innocent people. The pro-ISIS militant responsible for the attack is Bahrun Naim. He is believed to be connected to ISIS propagandist Abu Jandal in Syria and pro-ISIS ideologue Aman Abdulrahman, who is currently behind bars in a maximum security prison in Java, Indonesia.

Abu Jandal is one of many Twitter propagandists CEP monitors and has repeatedly tried to force Twitter to take down. Jandal uses Twitter as a platform to advocate for ISIS as well as promote other extremist accounts. Via Twitter, Abu Jandal has condoned violence against civilians, including the victims of Paris’s January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

Aman Abdulrahman is believed to be responsible for the extensive translation of pro-ISIS propaganda from Arabic to Indonesian. His materials are available on a website called [al-Mustaliq.com](#). He is also the ideologue behind at least nine other local Islamist groups, [including](#):

- Tawhid wal Jihad group
- Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid
- Mujahedin East Indonesia
- Mujahedin West Indonesia (MIB)
- the Bima group
- NII Banten also known as Ring Banten
- Laskar Jundullah
- the Islamic Sharia Activists Forum or Forum Aktivist Syariat Islam (FAKSI)
- and the Student Movement for Islamic Sharia or Gerakan Mahasiswa Untuk Syariat Islam (Gema Salam)

The Philippines

In the Philippines, the Muslims of the southernmost islands of Mindanao have for centuries sought independence—first from Spain, then from the United States, and now from secular Philippine rule. The most recent vehicle for this pursuit of independence is the militancy of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), an Islamist terrorist organization that seeks to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines. ASG was founded by and named after Abdurajak Janjalani, who took the nom de guerre Abu Sayyaf, “Father of Swordsmen.”

ASG is known for kidnapping innocents, including Westerners, for ransom and beheading captives if their demands are not met. ASG’s brutal decapitations date back to 2001, predating the notorious beheadings by al-Qaeda and ISIS. ASG’s relationship with al-Qaeda brought extra attention to the Philippines as a battleground in the U.S.-led Global War on Terror. In the summer of 2014, ASG leaders pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), drawing focus back to ASG’s presence in the southern Philippines and its potential threat to other areas of Southeast Asia.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, as [Brookings](#) reported last December, ISIS conspires to initiate new attacks in major cities like Kuala Lumpur, as highlighted in a memo released by Malaysian police in December 2015. The memo stated that on November 15, 2015, representatives of Abu Sayyaf, ISIS, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) met in person in the Philippines and conspired to commit terrorist attacks in Malaysia. The police memo added that there were allegedly Abu Sayyaf and ISIS militants already present in a number of cities, including Kuala Lumpur.

This is troubling, not only because it puts Malaysia on the radar of terrorist targets, but because it indicates possible increased extremist recruitment in the country. Malaysians are already vulnerable to extremism because of Islamization programs that the government began in the 1980s. These efforts were made to appease and integrate extremist elements already existing in the country at the time. Instead, they normalized extremist rhetoric. In 2014, for example, current Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak “hailed” the courage of ISIS fighters. Another former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad,

is also known for repeating extremist rhetoric—including, ironically, blaming Israel for the growth of ISIS.

Thus, ties are already present between ISIS and local militant groups in Southeast Asia. Consequently, it is imperative that the regional governments go beyond law enforcement initiatives and create proactive policies to deter further growth in ISIS's influence. The United States should continue to provide support for measures that work to prevent violent extremism.

Recommendations

1. Remove Extremist Content Online and on Social Media

The first step is to assist regional governments in their effort to remove extremist propaganda from the Internet and social media in the region. First, Southeast Asian governments must create policies and work with the private sector to take down extremist propaganda online. Indonesia is of particular importance, given its role as the host to approximately 70 percent of the pro-ISIS websites in the region.

2. Counter Violent and Non-Violent Islamist Messaging

Regional governments should consider the separatist messaging of groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and televangelists like Zakir Naik in the same category as ISIS propaganda. All three encourage a separatist identity among otherwise pluralist Southeast Asian communities. It is an alien interpretation of Islam in the region that can easily be fought off with a stronger spotlight on moderate Muslim organizations. Otherwise, even the non-violent Islamist messaging feeds radicalized youth straight towards jihadist recruiters.

3. Improve Criminal Laws in Indonesia

First, encourage the Indonesian government to criminalize membership in militant groups like ISIS, fundraising for extremist groups and activities, and leaving the country to train at jihadist camps. Unlike Malaysia, it is not illegal to support ISIS in Indonesia. To date, law enforcement in Indonesia has had to fall back on more generic charges related to terrorism.

Address prisoner radicalization. Prison activity is not monitored as closely as it should be in Indonesia. This leaves petty criminals vulnerable to radicalization in prison. A report by the U.S. Agency for International Development found that "Due to overcrowding and limited resources, Indonesian prison officials struggle to isolate jihadist inmates from the general jail population." Moreover, pro-ISIS prisoners are able to proselytize to inmates openly.

Encourage regional governments to support moderate Islamic groups to boost the role of aggressive, preventative messaging. De-radicalization programs initiated after the

Bali bombings were limited to those involving law enforcement and the judiciary. Instead, public messaging, engagement by the media and in schools are all necessary ingredients for success.

4. Support the Moderate Islam Indigenous to Southeast Asia

In Indonesia, for example, the indigenous and peaceful interpretation of Islam is called Nusanatara Islam. The clerical body that supports this interpretation is called Nahdatul Ulama. Nusanatara Islam has approximately 40-50 million followers. On social media, Indonesian Muslims denounce ISIS using the hashtag #WeAreNotAfraid.

Yenny Wahid, the daughter of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, founded a research center in Jakarta focusing on religion and pluralism called the Wahid Institute. The motto listed on the organization's website says, "Seeding Plural and Peaceful Islam."

Ms. Wahid is quoted as saying, "We're not just coming up with a counter narrative, we are coming up with a counter identity, and that's what all this is about. We believe we're good Muslims but to be a good Muslim we don't have to accept the recipes that are handed out by some radicals from the Middle East."

[Sisters in Islam \(SIS\)](#) is a Malaysian organization focused on promoting universal human rights, including advocacy for women through an Islamic lens.

SIS has challenged the legality of child marriage, polygamy, and hudood laws (sharia laws governing adultery and other personal matters). SIS drafts original Islamic legal theory and jurisprudence as well, including the defense of free speech, protections for apostates against prosecution, and other human rights issues.

Conclusion

The governments of Southeast Asia can look to Europe and the United Kingdom as an example of what not to do. Islamist activity, when it appeared decades ago, was treated as something innocuous. But unchallenged, it grew as an ideology that has become not only a real security threat to the West, but a de-stabilizing and stigmatizing force for innocent Muslim citizens as well.

Southeast Asia has an opportunity now to respond properly to the growing extremist threat by addressing important identity issues and providing alternatives to the extremist messages daily churned out by ISIS and other Islamist groups. Otherwise, the threat to other countries like the United States will only grow over time.