

# ISIS: A Threat Well Beyond the Middle East

The success of militants in Iraq may be inspiring radicals in Southeast Asia.

By [Luke Hunt](#)

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The threat of Islamic militants deploying terror tactics across Southeast Asia is making an unwelcome comeback.

Image Credit: REUTERS/Social Media Website via Reuters TV

Driven in part by the relentless drive into Iraq by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the threat has already emerged in Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Authorities in these countries fear home-grown Islamic militants in league with Baghdadi and his Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will return and plot their own caliphate, not unlike Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) did when it launched its own terror campaign in league with al-Qaeda more than a decade ago.

Arrests have been made in Malaysia amid reports that four new terrorist groups have emerged to stake a claim over much of mainland Southeast Asia. All are Sunni Muslims with Shi'ites in their sights. Police are also **looking** for another five Malaysian men who fled to the Philippines where they are believed to be in hiding with the Abu Sattaf.

The arrests followed the release of a **video** from ISIS senior clerics, titled *There Is No Life Without Jihad*.

In the video, Abu Muthanna al Yemeni from Britain boasts about the many countries that have supplied ISIS mercenaries, adding: "We have brothers from Bangladesh, from Iraq, from Cambodia, Australia, UK."

Muslim leaders in Cambodia rejected the claims although diplomats says hundreds of foreign nationals, including Khmers, are fighting with ISIS. Among them are those who studied in madrassas in the Middle East.

In recent days ISIS has **changed its name** to simply the Islamic State, after more than 15,000 militiamen loyal to Baghdadi extended the civil war in Syria southwards into Iraq, reaching as far as the northern outskirts of Baghdad. It insists a caliphate has been established across both countries and has **released a map** outlining its territorial ambitions, stretching from the Atlantic coast of Spain and Morocco to the western border of Myanmar.

In Malaysia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, recruitment for ISIS and its vitriolic anti-Shia campaign is occurring through social media outlets, including Facebook. One analyst pointed to **Lotfi Ariffin**, who has 24,796 followers and was a member of Malaysia's hardline Islamic party PAS.

"It is worrisome, yes," said Shahrman Lockman, a senior foreign policy analyst at Malaysia's Institute of Strategic & International Studies.

"If they wanted a safe haven for their training and operations, they could easily go to the numerous failed states in Africa. But they chose to operate from Malaysia, where the risk of being under surveillance is much higher."

Among them was 26-year-old **Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki**, said to be Malaysia's first suicide bomber after he reportedly drove a military vehicle laden with explosives into an Iraqi military post, killing 25 soldiers, six weeks ago. Details of the attack were published on the ISIS website under the headline "Mujahidin Malaysia Syahid Dalam Operasi Martyrdom."

Malaysian police have also arrested 19 people over the last two months in a counterterrorism operation the authorities hope will end any plans by jihadists of establishing recruitment and training centers in the Southeast Asian country. Meanwhile, the Royal Malaysian Navy is conducting background checks on staff after an officer was arrested for harboring militants plotting attacks in Iraq and Syria.

Analysts said ISIS leader, Baghdadi, is attracting support and filling a void left by the killing of Osama bin Laden, with promises of an Islamic state and his ruthless approach to jihad.

"ISIS's priority has to be to sustain and consolidate its present campaign in Syria and Iraq rather than dissipate resources and personnel in non-core areas for the movement such as Southeast Asia," said Gavin Greenwood, a regional security analyst with Hong Kong-based Allan & Associates.

"However, ISIS's success to date has and no doubt will continue to attract recruits to the movement with any survivors to what may be years of fighting from countries such as

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand representing a threat based on their skills and experience.”

*The New Straits Times* reported the four terror groups were independent of each other and subscribed to the similar ideologies of JI, al-Qaeda and ISIS. Like their predecessors, they held links to militants in the Southern Philippines, in particular the Abu Sayyaf.

Intelligence sources cited by the newspaper did not name the groups, although a fifth outfit based in West Malaysia on Borneo was named as Darul Islam Sabah, which it said police were monitoring.

Members of all these groups have apparently undergone weapons training and have been armed with the financial backing of Malaysian businessmen.

Greenwood also drew comparisons with Soviet-occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s when the U.S. and other Western countries supported the Mujahideen, which included the likes of bin Laden, saying the current dynamics are “analogous to those who fought” there, back then.

In the first decade of this century, hundreds of lives were lost through JI’s bombing campaigns, mainly in Indonesia. Thousands more have been killed by Islamic militancy in the Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, although fighting in both countries has its roots in ethnic groups demanding a homeland as opposed to jihad and its modern day ideology, which was honed by the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia.

“The other factor that will concern the security services in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is the example ISIS has given, despite its model of a small but well armed and financed insurgent force overwhelming far larger military formations having no likely parallels in the region,” Greenwood said.

“Overall ISIS’s main impact on the region is to serve as an inspiration for Islamic radicals rather than a movement that poses a direct threat to any Southeast Asian countries.”

This is the same philosophy that was spun by bin Laden and followed resolutely by JI, leading to a breathtakingly cruel bombing campaign that brought widespread death and lasted more than a decade.

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