

The Rise of ISIS in the ASEAN Region

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ABSTRACT

This research paper seeks to examine the emergence of ISIS in the ASEAN region and its debilitating effect on the political stability of the ASEAN member states. Although ASEAN has been confronted by various political and security threats right from its inception, the subversive political terrorism of ISIS represents a brand new and much more perplexing security challenge. The paper starts with a brief review of ASEAN's history, highlighting the role of external security threat posed by nation-state actors as a key determinant of its establishment. The section of the paper presenting an analysis of subversive terrorism depicts political terrorism as a major asymmetric threat posed by non-state actors. A subsequent insight into ISIS's background, ideology, structure and modus operandi brings to the fore the magnitude of this problem. This is followed by an analysis of those factors which have facilitated the rise of ISIS in the ASEAN region. Although militarily defeated in its birthplace as of 2019, ISIS continues to show its presence and strength in ASEAN – the region which is geographically remote from the locality where it originated. In its conclusion, the paper recommends a number of solutions that ASEAN can implement in order to tackle and eliminate this asymmetric threat.

Keywords: ASEAN, Political terrorism, ISIS, Nation-state actors, Political stability, Security.

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INTRODUCTION

The global political system is characterized by the ever-present existence of various political and security challenges which have detrimental effects on the stability of nation-state actors. Some of these challenges have a global impact, while some of them have a regional effect. Obviously, different countries tend to choose different solutions when it comes to finding ways to address these challenges, but with the enhanced cooperation, increased connectivity and deeper integration of nation-states that are bound by geographical proximity, it has become gradually apparent that addressing common challenges would require long-standing cooperation among these nations. Ultimately, two intergovernmental organizations – supranational entities – came into being in the context of the postwar global political system: the European Union and ASEAN.

ASEAN

Over the fifty years from its inception, there has been no shortage of challenges confronting this organization. Established in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born out of necessity. **All the five founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – faced the same political and security problem that threatened the stability of their political systems – the spread of communism across Southeast Asia. It was this external security threat – posed by the nation-state actors – that became a key determinant of ASEAN's establishment.** Although mutual international relations among ASEAN countries were often plagued by the existence of territorial disputes and constant suspicion, the expanding threat of communism forced them to find a common ground. Thus, a political and military agreement was achieved in 1967 and ASEAN came into being. Containing communism became an overreaching goal of the organization and ASEAN was successful here. None of the founding members met the same fate that befell South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975.

But unlike the EU, ASEAN was characterized by a democratic deficit, as some ASEAN political leaders “have pointed to their restrictions on civil and political liberties as laying a foundation for order and the avoidance of chaos.”¹ With the expansion of ASEAN and the subsequent incorporation of its former enemies into its structure throughout the 1990s, the security threat that had once been posed by Southeast Asia's communist countries gradually diminished. **In addition, heightened globalization and deepening economic integration meant that the focus of ASEAN had to shift from political-security concerns to economic and social ones.** As a result, the process of multidimensional integration succeeded in lifting millions of ASEAN citizens out of poverty.

“Contemporary ASEAN cities give little hint of their tumultuous pasts. Skyscrapers now stand in old districts that were once damaged by war and neglect. Spread over an area of 4,480,000 km² with a population of more than 600 million indigenous peoples, immigrants, and scions of intermarriages, ASEAN is a class model of social and cultural integration.”²

¹ Gerber, J. (2005). *International Economics*. San Diego, USA: Pearson. pp.408.

² Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H., & Hooi, D. H. (2015). *Think New ASEAN! Rethinking Marketing Towards ASEAN Economic Community*. Singapore, Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education (ASIA). pp.1.

Although this picture of sustained development and prosperity began to emerge across the ASEAN region – particularly at the turn of the twentieth century – old security challenges resurfaced too, but in much more sophisticated forms. Illegal activities, such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, transnational crime, money laundering, cross-border smuggling and corruption may have always been present in this region, just as they are in many others, but what very few saw coming was a rise of violent religious extremism. Especially in the form of the **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)** – a Salafist-jihadist terrorist organization that originated in a locality which is geographically very remote from ASEAN's boundaries. If globalization played an indispensable part in the institutionalization of ASEAN, then – by the same token – it also enabled the rise of challenges that threaten the stability of its member states. Moreover, because of its commitment to barbaric and brutal tactics of political terrorism, ISIS has managed to position itself as a major asymmetric threat to the ASEAN region.

POLITICAL TERRORISM OF ISIS

Although a universally accepted definition of terrorism is yet to be born, in his book named *Political Terrorism*, Paul Wilkinson defines this phenomenon as **a systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to service political ends**.³

ISIS certainly fits this definition. In addition, to shed more light on this organization – and to fully understand its genesis – we have to deploy a historical analysis. Without question, certain factors that facilitated the rise of ISIS are usually associated with the beginning of the Iraq War – a conflict which erupted in 2003 and in which this terrorist organization actively participated, but to fully understand the complexity of the current challenge, we have to revisit a much earlier period of Middle Eastern politics.

The postwar rise of secular nationalist regimes in the Middle East did not bring about the kind of major economic progress that would have lifted millions of impoverished Arabs out of poverty. **A lack of decent employment prospects for the booming population of the Middle Eastern countries, coupled with the feeling of national humiliation caused by recurring defeats in wars against Israel, effectively created a reservoir of discontent for the most radical groups to tap into for many decades to come.**

“Especially after the 1973 war, a sense of hopelessness and humiliation drove thousands to attend Islamic schools and mosques where preachers blamed the failures of Arab regimes on their detachment from God.”⁴ **A certain pattern was about to be formed – the pattern that would allow various backstreet preachers (including al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed leader of ISIS) to claim legitimacy for their violent actions.** More importantly, a large number of *fatwas* issued by these preachers would allow radicalized Arab youth to embrace forms of political violence even though they were explicitly prohibited by the religion itself, as well as mainstream religious scholars and the law.

“Contemporary political interpretations of Islam were of course nothing new among Muslims in the Middle East or elsewhere. But up to the mid-1970s such groups – the so-called Islamists – were small and persecuted minorities. Even in Saudi Arabia, where the king claimed to base his whole political system on Islam, only government-approved Islamists were allowed. Egypt, Syria, and Iraq had all banned the Muslim Brotherhood, and those who believed in a political

³ Wilkinson, P. (1974). *Political Terrorism*. London, UK: The Macmillan Press Ltd. pp.11.

⁴ Westad, O. A. (2017). *The Cold War. A World History*. New York, USA: Basic Books. pp.471.

role for Muslim leaders disappeared into the regimes' prisons, or worse. Gradually Islamists turned toward underground organization and terrorism."⁵

This schism, which has plagued mostly Middle Eastern countries for decades, has not been resolved until now. It has proved to be a continuing political and religious reality for the region and beyond. More importantly, it continues to be the same catalyst for subversive terrorism of a political nature just as it was in the past.

By definition, **political terrorism draws its strength from those long-standing national, ethnic, cultural, political, religious, or socio-economic problems that tend to escalate into wider rifts within a nation-state.**⁶

The Sunni-Shia divide, which was laid bare in the aftermath of the Iraq War – and which provided fertile ground for an upsurge of subversive Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups – confirms these findings. As part of al-Qaeda, ISIS had participated in this conflict, engaging a different range of targets: From non-combatants to combatants; from Shias to Christians; from the Kurdish community to moderate Sunnis; from Iraqi civil authorities to US army personnel. Just as its targets varied, so did its *modus operandi*. Its operational repertoire included kidnappings, assassinations, bombings, executions, and suicide attacks. **While a protracted armed conflict in Iraq led to the emergence of ISIS as one of the offshoots of Salafi-jihadist fundamentalism, the events of the Arab spring occurring in neighboring Syria since 2011 truly paved the way for a disturbing rise in its strength and activities as the conflict, which initially started as an uprising against the Assad regime, quickly deteriorated into a civil war.**

As Assad's heavy-handed crackdown on the uprising backfired, and more and more discontented Syrians were driven into the hands of extremists, all ISIS had to do was to portray the conflict in the same terms it had already done in the case of Iraq. Accordingly, in both countries, Iraq and Syria, the ruling Shia regimes attempted to neutralize the Sunni branch of Islam and marginalize Sunni communities – and in doing so, the governments in Baghdad and Damascus acted on the direct orders of their Shia masters, Iran. Having capitalized on the Sunni disenfranchisement in both countries, ISIS's growing influence was reflected in its territorial gains.

ISIS now had the capacity to advance on three separate fronts at once and move dozens of kilometers per day, which no Arab national army could do. ISIS at one point in mid-2014 was pushing west to the Mediterranean coast, while it had already swept through Mosul and was pushing north towards Kirkuk and south towards Baghdad, maneuvering with a speed that no sophisticated modern army could match.⁷

Its rapid geographical expansion allowed ISIS to introduce one more element into its ideological doctrine – a declaration of 'caliphate'. Al-Baghdadi, its 'caliph', had urged those sympathetic to the plight of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis to join the caliphate. Mesmerized by the prospect of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sviatko, M. (2005). *Globalny Terorizmus*. Banska Bystrica, Slovakia: Euro-Atlantic Center. pp.29.

⁷ Kingston, A. (2015, July 15). *Don't underestimate the ISIS threat: Martin Chulov*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/don%E2%80%99t-underestimate-the-isis-threat:-martin-chulov/6621882>.

salvation, thousands of foreign fighters accepted this call, and by 2014, ISIS had an army of nearly forty thousand foot soldiers recruited from up to one hundred countries. **This allowed the organization to spread its influence beyond the Middle East. Consequently, ASEAN quickly became one of those regions in which ISIS intended to demonstrate its operational capabilities.**

THE RISE OF ISIS ACROSS ASEAN

Although ISIS's arrival in the ASEAN region could be symbolized by the siege of Marawi, a city in the Philippines captured by ISIS in 2017 and held for five consecutive months, ISIS's presence in the region can be recorded as early as 2016, when ISIS-linked terrorists staged attacks in the financial district of Jakarta, Indonesia. Furthermore, a hand-grenade attack on a bar located on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur in 2016, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, indicated that the organization was able to put down its roots in several ASEAN countries at once.

As we know, there are many subjective reasons which shape one's perception of reality and subsequent form of political participation. In most societies, the various stages of the socialization process ensure that individuals tend to be law-abiding citizens. However, certain factors of a psychological, emotional, moral or religious nature may, under some circumstances, lead to very extreme forms of political participation, especially when traditional political processes – such as the election process – cannot be properly exercised. In short, it is not viable to single out just one factor which may turn peaceful citizens into violent terrorists. In the context of the ASEAN region, however, we will try to highlight those objective factors that have offered ISIS an ideal maneuvering space.

There are several major reasons for the emergence of ISIS in ASEAN. For ISIS, the region has all the ingredients needed to become its next cauldron of violence: Porous borders, logistical bases, weak regimes, poor enforcement measures and disenchantment among marginalized Muslims. Thus, many of ISIS supporters, including those who have returned home after fighting wars in Iraq and Syria, have now set their sights on turning Southeast Asia into the next terrorism hotspot.⁸

As we have just highlighted, ISIS has already demonstrated its presence in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Hundreds of ISIS fighters left these countries for Syria and Iraq, often forming smaller national contingents of ISIS's army. But the rise of ISIS is a quite perplexing issue, particularly in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia. Firstly, neither Malaysian nor Indonesian political system bear any kind of resemblance to the Iraqi or Syrian political systems. The political landscape and social fabric of these two ASEAN countries differ significantly from the historical and political realities of the Middle East.⁹

Secondly, in both ASEAN countries – Malaysia and Indonesia – the Sunni branch of Islam is the dominant religious path followed by the millions of Muslims of those countries. Christianity and Buddhism, also widely practiced religions, are not at odds with the dominant religion of Islam.

⁸ Mokhtar, F. (2019, February 4). *The Big Read: Battered in the Middle East, IS eyes Southeast Asia as next terrorism hotspot*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/islamic-state-terrorism-extremism-eyes-southeast-asia-11199586>.

⁹ The 'fault lines' of Southeast Asia's political landscape have distinct racial and ethnic connotations.

Aware of religious, racial and cultural sensitivities, the governments of these countries usually take stern actions against those who attempt to stoke religious tensions. Moreover, the Shia version of Islam is not practiced in Southeast Asia. Therefore, unlike Iraq and Syria, the ruling governments in Indonesia and Malaysia enjoy widespread support among Muslim population and, more importantly, unlike Iraq and Syria, the Sunni-Shia schism is practically nonexistent. The same can also be said about Brunei, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

Thirdly, both Malaysia and Indonesia are fully functioning democracies. As such, they guarantee political and religious freedoms. Freedom of the press, media and freedom of speech in those countries are broader than in the rest of ASEAN. Political pluralism practiced in those countries allows peaceful changes of government through the election process, making voting the most important form of political participation. This reality can only be wishful thinking for many Middle Easterners, let alone for Iraqis and Syrians. And yet, despite this wide range of political and religious freedoms present in Malaysia and Indonesia, ISIS had managed to make a mark in both countries.

Understandably, in order to explain this peculiar problem, we have to turn our attention to economic factors. On the one hand, the remarkable economic progress ASEAN had registered over the past three decades has decreased poverty and created a significant urban-based middle class. On the other hand, the very same economic progress had also contributed to **rising inequality**, which is a source of serious concern for many ASEAN countries. It appears that some segments of these ASEAN societies had benefited from the economic progress of the past three decades more than others. According to the findings of the *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2018*, Thailand ranked as the first most unequal country in the world in 2018, with the country's *Gini index* standing at 90.2%.¹⁰

Given the fact that Southern Thailand has been plagued by an Islamic insurgency for decades, with no apparent solution to this problem in sight, a growing gap between the rich and poor can easily produce a reservoir of discontent that ISIS and other radical groups are able to exploit. Economic inequality remains a profound problem in Malaysia as well as in Singapore. Unlike Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines record somewhat lower levels of economic inequality, but these two ASEAN countries face other serious economic problems – **unemployment** and **premature deindustrialization**.

Particularly in the case of Indonesia, the absence of a broader manufacturing base to produce high-value exports, the continued dependence on commodities as well as premature deindustrialization and utterly low labor productivity signify that Indonesia's economic growth would never exceed 6 percent in the next five years. In turn, that would mean that Indonesia would never rise from a lower-middle to high-income country while it fails to increase growth to at least 7 percent.¹¹

With its population approaching 280 million, this indicates that there will simply not be enough jobs for everyone. In the aftermath of the Iraq war, ISIS had successfully recruited hundreds of its members from unemployed Iraqi Sunnis. A lack of jobs was seen as the biggest factor driving

¹⁰ Bangkok Post. (2018, December 6). *Report: Thailand most unequal country in 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/1588786/report-thailand-most-unequal-country-in-2018>.

¹¹ Lingga, V. (2019, February 13). *Reinvigorate manufacturing or remain trapped in 5 percent growth*. Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/02/13/reinvigorate-manufacturing-or-remain-trapped-in-5-percent-growth.html>.

people into the arms of ISIS.¹² **Given its vast population, Indonesia is poised to become an abundant source from which ISIS can easily draw its manpower for decades to come.** The same can be said about the Philippines where unemployment and poverty remain serious economic issues.

There is one more problem that almost all the ASEAN countries share – the slower pace of economic growth. The GDP growth in ASEAN is expected to slow to 5 percent in 2019, after an estimated 5.3 percent in 2018.¹³

This will be exacerbated further by the ongoing US-China trade war. Moreover, as automation gathers pace, the 4.0 Industry slowly arrives, and the export-oriented model of economy fades, ASEAN will enter uncharted territory. It is not unreasonable to say that turning its back on the most vulnerable may be fatal for any ASEAN country. By contrast, introducing a basic social safety net for the poorest may be one of the most effective ways of combating the threat of ISIS.

Concerning the newly integrated member states such as Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia – countries which exemplify ASEAN's democratic deficit – the presence of ISIS in the ASEAN region constitutes an additional political and security challenge. **Troubled by endemic corruption, poor law enforcement and controversial treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, these countries have unwittingly created potent ground for extreme forms of political participation, including terrorism.** For instance, the recent humanitarian crisis in Myanmar caused by the genocide of the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, continues to destabilize the region. In addition, it also provides ISIS and other radical groups with that kind of grievance that they desperately yearn for in order to claim legitimacy for their senseless attacks. For example, the Sri Lanka Easter bombings carried out by ISIS in April 2019 were, according to this terror network, 'an act of reprisal' for the Christchurch shooting, which took place in New Zealand in March 2019.

Cultural and religious sensitivities always matter, and they matter a great deal in the ASEAN region. With regard to the newly integrated ASEAN members, with the exception of Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism is the official or semi-official religion of those countries. As such, Buddhist institutions receive regular government funding, leaving local Islamic organizations dependent on private donors, many of whom might have an extremist background. This, however, is just one of many problems.

In addition, unlike Indonesia, Malaysia or Singapore, **governments of ASEAN's newly integrated countries are neither familiar with basic principles of cross-cultural communication nor aware of the mechanism essential for running a multi-religious society. In the long run, these factors may be decisive in making sure that genuine Islamic teachings are delivered by authentic religious scholars rather than by backstreet preachers or self-proclaimed caliphs.**

¹² Dudley, D. (2016, April 12). *Unemployment Is Driving Young Arabs Into The Hand Of Islamic State, Says Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2016/04/12/unemployment-is-driving-young-arabs-into-the-hands-of-islamic-state-says-survey/#55cad19e2f0e>.

¹³ The Business Times. (2018, December 4). *GDP growth in Asean expected to slow in 2019: ICAEW report*. Retrieved from <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/asean-business/gdp-growth-in-asean-expected-to-slow-in-2019-icaew-report>.

CONCLUSION

The fall of its last stronghold in Baghouz, Syria in February 2019 marked the end of the caliphate's reign over large territories of Iraq and Syria. Having been defeated and discredited across the Middle East Region, ISIS experienced a rapid destruction of its military capabilities. Moreover, with Syria's civil war nearing its endgame together with its own inability to sustain the influx of foreign fighters coming to Syria, ISIS's days appear to be numbered. However, just as policy makers are engaged in discussion as to how the new, post-ISIS Middle East region will look like, a much more disturbing picture is emerging in the ASEAN region.

It is important to bear in mind that the ASEAN political landscape is very diverse. It includes an absolute monarchy without any democratic framework, various military regimes endorsed by rigged elections, but also genuine democracies operating within the rule of law. While a democratic deficit across the ASEAN region is an undeniable reality, none of the political systems of the ASEAN countries have espoused ideas as violent, backward and unreasonable as those proposed by ISIS. Nevertheless, the idea of a transnational caliphate, linking autonomous terrorist groups and cells operating across the Southeast Asian region, poses an unparalleled security challenge to all the nation-state actors in this region.

Curbing the rising threat of ISIS won't be easy. The ASEAN countries will have to step up activities such as cross-border cooperation of law enforcement agencies, military coordination and surveillance. Developing a common foreign policy and putting it in place would be a good start. Political will is, therefore, a prerequisite for subsequent military coordination. It remains to be seen if the ASEAN member states are able to find this political will, considering that many of them are embroiled in decades-old mutual territorial disputes. **But it is perhaps ASEAN's ability to deal with the security challenges posed by ISIS that will ultimately determine just how resilient this organization is with regard to the South China Sea disputes.**

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