Islamic State's First Terror Attack in Malaysia

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

The ideological influence of the Islamic State is spreading rapidly in Southeast Asia. The terrorist attack in Selangor, Malaysia demonstrates that the threat is growing.

Commentary

AFTER REPEATED threats the Islamic State (IS) mounted their first successful terrorist attack in Malaysia on 27 June 2016, with a bomb assault on an entertainment venue in Puchong, Selangor. Two IS operatives threw an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) into the Movida Bar and Lounge in IOI Boulevard in Bandar Puchong Jaya at 2.15 a.m., injuring eight patrons, one seriously.

Malaysian media quoted the nightclub owner as saying that the attack may be due to a personal dispute between two patrons. Claiming the attack, however, IS central located in Syria issued a statement saying "two soldiers of the Caliphate from the wilayat of Malaysia" conducted the first attack in Kuala Lumpur, "the heart of Malaysia" by targeting a nightclub with a bomb. The statement said the nightclub was attacked for not respecting the month of Ramadhan "by conducting sinful activities".

From group to networked attacks

Since the declaration of the so-called Islamic State in June 2014 in Syria and Iraq, the Malaysian authorities have prevented nine plots to attack Malaysia. However, they were unsuccessful in detecting and disrupting the attack in Puchong. The nature of the current wave of terrorism had changed from group attacks to networked attacks making it a challenge even for the best security and intelligence services to prevent all the attacks.

Initially, the Malaysian authorities ruled out the incident as an act of terrorism. At the scene, Selangor deputy police chief Datuk Abdul Rahim Jaafar said: "At this point it could be anything, the attack could have been fuelled by revenge or the suspects could have been targeting specific individuals at the bar." The Malaysian media and wire services reported the attack as an act of crime, until IS claimed the attack.

A week before the attack in Malaysia, Mohd Rafi Udin alias Abu 'Awn al-Malizi appeared on a video released by the Islamic State Philippines on 21 June 2016, threatening Malaysia. In response to the video, Malaysian Police Chief Khalid Abu Bakar challenged Rafi Udin who is from Negri Sembilan, to return home from Syria and take the authorities head-on, saying: "If you dare to make threats from afar, come back here and do it."

The Malaysian Special Branch Counter Terrorism Division had assessed the IS threat to Malaysia accurately. After disrupting nine attacks in the planning and preparation phases since 2014, its counter terrorism chief Dato Ayub Khan Mydin Pitchay had warned the Malaysian government of the rising terrorist threat to Malaysia.

The authorities had identified Muhamad Wanndy Mohamad Jedi, a Malaysian in Syria as the directing figure of the terrorist network in Malaysia. Raised in Durian Tunggal, Wanndy migrated to Syria in February 2015 and joined the external operations wing of IS. Together with his Malaysian wife Nor Mahmudah Ahmad, Wanndy lives in Syria planning and preparing attacks in Malaysia. Working with Rafi Udin and other operations managers, Wanndy's task has been to disseminate propaganda, recruit, raise funds, and organise attacks.

Growing Threat

The IS attack in Malaysia, despite continuing counter terrorism operations, demonstrates that the IS ideology has spread and established a regional presence, in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines, with support in Thailand, Singapore, and Brunei.

With IS planning to create a satellite of the caliphate in the Southern Philippines, the centre of gravity of the IS regional threat has shifted to the Philippines. To build support for the emerging IS base in the Philippines, the Syria-based Malaysian operative Rafi Udin said in a statement that Abu Abdullah al-Filipini has been assigned by IS to lead in the Philippines.

The regional governments and their partners are building up their capacity to respond to the ideological threat. With the exception of the Philippines the regional capacity to counter the operational threat is significant. Malaysia is planning to create several capabilities including a Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre in Kuala Lumpur to fight the threat. With their vast experience and expertise, Malaysian authorities will continue to disrupt other IS cells operating throughout the country.

More Needs to be Done

However, to fight the threat strategically, government security and intelligence services will have to work closely with both their domestic law enforcement and military counterparts as well as with their foreign partners. There needs to be a shift to collaboration where governments build common databases, exchange personnel, conduct joint training and operations, and share expertise, technology and experience, otherwise the Southeast Asian region will suffer more attacks in the coming months.

Since the Russian air campaign in Syria in 2015, IS has suffered but continues to replenish its losses. Although the IS threat in Iraq and Syria has plateaued, IS is in a growth phase in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. To counter the threat, governments will have to develop greater intelligence and operational capabilities both in the physical and cyber space to counter the extant and emerging threat. With its mastery in exploiting the social media, IS succeeded in creating pockets of supporters and sympathisers throughout the Muslim world, including in Southeast Asia.

In addition to building greater capacities to monitor and counter the threat, the strategy of governments and their community partners should be to reach out to vulnerable segments of Muslim communities to prevent radicalisation and enhance detection.

Rohan Gunaratna is Professor and Head of the International Centre for Terrorism Research and Political Violence (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is lead author, Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific (Imperial College Press, London, 2016).