



# Terrorism Observer

Quarterly Report  
**ANALYSIS ON TERRORISM TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS  
DURING THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

## Global Trend

The year 2020 has been a long and challenging year for all aspects of human security. Even as the year has come to its end, the COVID-19 pandemic shows no sign of subsiding. As countries begin to roll out vaccines, infection cases continue to rise. Small pockets of violence continue to surge in conflict zones even as government forces persevere in targeting insurgents. While there were concerns that the pandemic will provide terrorist groups with the opportunity to regroup, regain their strength and continue inflicting violence against people worldwide, the pandemic has also proven to be disruptive and presented operational challenges for actors. For instance, lockdowns in Indonesia have caused Daesh affiliates in the country to suffer a severe loss of income, which resulted in declining revenues for pro-Daesh cells in the country, making it difficult to carry out operations. Meanwhile, in the Southern Philippines, more militant members surrendered themselves to the authorities as Philippine security forces continue to target them in a concerted counterterrorism effort.

In the meantime, Al-Qaeda (AQ) as an organisation has been suffering from a leadership vacuum. There was credible news that Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQ's reclusive emir, had passed away in October from natural causes. Meanwhile, his deputy, Abdullah Ahmed Abdulla @ Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was assassinated while driving along the streets of Tehran with his daughter, Maryam, in Iran. Al-Masri's untimely demise posed serious questions about the future of AQ. Government efforts in pursuing terrorist groups, particularly Daesh, are still in full force. US-led international coalition in Iraq and Syria continue to mount airstrikes against them. While clashes are erupting in some areas of Iraq and Syria where Daesh has a small presence, violence has escalated in Afghanistan as the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban carry on in Qatar. Although authorities have attributed many of the incidents to the Taliban's attempt to undermine the Afghan government's position on the negotiation table, the emerging Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) had claimed responsibility for a few of them.

Other key global terrorist incidents are as follows:

- a. On 4 Oct 20, chaos ensued at the Al-Hawl refugee camp when a group of female Daesh supporters terrorise other refugees and even attempted murder. The camp, which hosts over 65,000 occupants, including 24,400 women and children following Daesh's military loss, is currently faced with rapidly

worsening conditions due to overcrowding and foreign countries' reluctance to repatriate their citizens who came to Iraq and Syria as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs). Violent crimes and breakout attempts are common occurrences. Officials are fearful the camp is transforming into a breeding ground for unmitigated radicalisation.

b. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, ISKP gunmen stormed Kabul University while the university was hosting a book fair attended by Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan on 2 Nov 20. The siege, which lasted for more than five hours, saw 22 dead and 22 others wounded. Following this, ISKP launched a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attack that targeted a police headquarters in Kandahar on 9 Nov 20, resulting in four deaths and 40 injured. On 29 Nov 20, an ISKP suicide-bomber attacked a military base in Ghazni, killing 31 and wounding 24 people. ISKP also launched 10 Katyusha rockets on Hamid Karzai International Airport on 12 Dec 20, killing one and wounding two others.

c. In France, 47-year-old middle school teacher Samuel Paty was killed and beheaded close to Collège du Bois d'Aulne in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, Paris on 16 Oct 20. He was murdered for displaying caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) published in Charlie Hebdo magazine for a class discussion on freedom of speech. His killer, 18-year-old Abdullakh Anzorov, was shot dead by the police shortly after the attack. Two weeks later, on the morning of 29 Oct 20, three people were slain in a stabbing attack at the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Nice by a Tunisian man, Brahim Aouissaoui, who was shot by the police and taken into custody. Both incidents were attributed to Islamic extremism.

d. On 2 Nov 20, a gunman fired several shots across six locations in the city of Vienna, Austria, killing four and injuring 15 people in the process as the city was about to enter COVID-19 lockdown. The shooter, who was identified as 20-year-old Fezjulai Kujtim with Austrian and Macedonian citizenship, was shot dead by the police responders. Kujtim was wearing a fake explosive belt at the time of the attack. He was previously known to the authorities for attempting to travel to Syria to join Daesh. Following this, he was jailed for 22 months in 2019 and underwent a deradicalisation programme in prison. He was released on parole last December. The efficacy of existing deradicalisation programmes in Europe has raised several questions since the incident.

## **Terrorism Trends in Southeast Asia**

### **The Philippines**

Significant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) related issues are as follows:

a. An Indonesian woman suspected to be a terrorist identified as Rezky Fantasia Rullie @ Cici was arrested by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Jolo on 10 Oct 20. She was detained along with two other women who are Philippines citizen – Inda Nurhaina and Fatima Sinadra Jimlani. Both women are the wives of two ASG sub-leaders, Ben Tatoo and Jahid Jam. Cici herself was the wife of Andi Baso @ Radit, who orchestrated the twin bombing attacks in Jolo last August. Baso was killed a few days later.

b. On 12 Oct 20, eight prisoners, including an ASG member, attacked a prison warden to escape the prison facilities in Barangay Sumagdang, Basilan in the Southern Philippines. During this incident, the warden was killed after the perpetrators seized both of his weapons and shot him. One of the escapees

was killed while another was recaptured by police in the ensuing pursuit. The other six managed to flee. All of them were imprisoned for murder, kidnapping and unlawful possession of explosives and weapons.

c. On the same day, the Philippine security forces disclosed that a senior ASG militant known as Furuji Indama was killed along with five other members during a security operation in Zamboanga Sibugay, Mindanao, on 9 Sep 20. Indama, who succeeded Isnilon Hapilon after his death, was amongst the 18 ASG members who were charged for a suicide bombing in Basilan two years ago.

d. On 3 Nov 20, the AFP successfully intercepted the ASG during their planning to carry out kidnapping activities in mainland Mindanao. Seven suspected members of ASG were killed following the encounter at sea. Hatib Hadjan Sawadjaan, one of ASG's top leaders and the designated Daesh emir in Mindanao, was confirmed dead during the clash. Three other deaths were identified as Mannul Sawadjaan, Mujapar Sawadjaan, and Madsmar Sawadjaan. Mannul and Mujapar were cousins of ASG bomb expert Mundi Sawadjaan, who is believed to have masterminded last August's twin-suicide bombing in Jolo, while Madsmar was Mundi's brother. The Jolo attack saw 14 dead and 75 wounded.

e. Two separate clashes involving ASG and the Philippines' Marine Battalion Landing Team 1 occurred in the Barangay Area, Sulu, on 20 Nov 20. Hatib Munap Binda, an ASG subleader who operated in the Sulu towns of Kalingalan Caluang and Panamao, was killed in the first altercation. In a second confrontation one hour later, the Marines encountered another group led by Sansibar Bensio, another ASG subleader active in Panamao. Sansibar's father, Bensio Barahama, was killed during this clash. Both Binda and Bensio were responsible for a series of kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities in the area.

f. Thirty-nine members of ASG surrendered to the Philippine security forces in Tawi-Tawi and Sulu. Three of them were followers of the recently deceased ASG's emir, Hatib Hadjan Sawadjaan. Based in Tawi-Tawi, they had participated in high-profile kidnappings and killings of foreign hostages. The remaining 36 were followers of Alhabsi Misaya, an ASG senior member who was killed in a clash with the security forces in 2017 in Sulu.

Significant Daesh related issues are as follows:

a. On 15 Oct 20, it was revealed that the Philippines security forces are running surveillance on religious schools and pesantren in Sulu and Mindanao due to fears that terrorist outfits are targeting these institutions for recruitment. Given that Daesh disseminates narratives through various social media on the Internet, surveillance activities include scrutiny of those platforms' use by at-risk youths. The monitoring effort received support from the Philippines' Department of Education.

b. On 9 Dec 20, a 47-year-old Saudi national, Sulaiman Alsuhibani, was arrested in Cotabato City on suspicion of facilitating Daesh militants' entry from the Middle East into the Philippines. His wife, 36-year-old Norhaya Silongan Lumanggal, was also arrested. Alsuhibani was believed to have acted as a facilitator in cooperation between Daesh and BIFF. During the arrest, the investigators found a home-made explosive along with its components, travel documents and several passports in his home.

On 19 Oct 20, the Philippine armed forces revealed that remnants of Maute members have regrouped under Fahaaruddin Hadji Satar @ Abu Bakar, who was appointed as the de facto leader of Maute Group. Although

the appointment was unofficial, but the militants in Lanao del Sur already recognised him as their leader to replace Owaida Marohombsar @ Abu Dar, who was killed on 14 Mar 19.

On 3 Dec 20, BIFF orchestrated an attack on a police precinct in Datu Piang Town, Maguindanao. The group also torched a police vehicle before escaping. Following the attack, the Philippine security forces increased security in the area. The attackers were believed to be part of the Daesh-linked Karialan faction, led by a sub-leader called Motorola.

Until 31 Dec 20, it is estimated that about 347 members of ASG (128), BIFF (184) and Maute (35) combined have surrendered to the Philippine government since the start of 2020. Meanwhile, armed encounters have neutralised some 130 members of ASG (68), BIFF (31) and Maute (31). These surrenders and deaths may indicate that the prolonged military offensive has been effective at weakening the militants and disrupting their terror activities in the southern part of the country.

The Philippine military has been aggressive in targeting ASG in Basilan and Sulu. Some 50 surrendered – most of them were senior members and followers of the late Hatib Hadjan Sawadjaan, Radulan Sahiron, Alhabsi Misaya and Radzamil Jannatul. The latter is believed to be a contender for succeeding Furji Indama as ASG's leader in Basilan. Yet ASG remains resistant and continue to stage kidnappings, including a few operations at sea.

The AFP demonstrated their increasing capacity to counteract ASG activity in the maritime space, particularly in Jolo. The military operations have been effective in sustaining pressure on the Daesh-linked group in the area, which resulted in the deaths of its key senior members, leading to a reduction in their activities. As the group begins to diminish, there is a likelihood that they might seek out new launching points to continue with their illicit activities.

The Datu Piang attack also signalled that the Bangsamoro region's security situation remains fragile and highlights the limitations of the Bangsamoro transition government in preventing violence. The BIFF appears determined to spoil the ongoing peace process by staging low-level attacks in central Mindanao. While threats of terrorism have reduced in the country, the militants will remain persistent in prolonging the violence, and they will continue to evolve. Additionally, Marawi's slow rebuilding process makes it a fertile recruiting ground for the Maute group.

## Indonesia

Significant Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) issues are as follows:

- a. Densus 88 arrested four suspected JI members in Bekasi, West Java, on 4 Oct 20. They were believed to be involved in the 2005 Ambon riots, undergoing militant trainings in 2012, travelled to Syria, and other terror-related activities.
- b. In October, Densus 88 apprehended a 54-year-old cleric named Ustad Arif who was from Klaten, Central Java. The nondescript man turned out to be the leader of JI for the last eight months, and reportedly has links to sleeper cells in Malaysia.

- b. In two separate arrests, Densus 88 detained six terror suspects on 6 and 7 Nov 20 in West Sumatra and Batam. Four of them were members of JI's cell, Imarrudin, led by Para Wijayanto. The remaining two were members of Jamaah Anshorut Daulah (JAD). All six men were entrepreneurs and businessmen.
- c. Densus 88 captured a high-profile member of JI, Taufik Bulaga @ Upik Lawanga, on 23 Nov 20. Lawanga, wanted in Indonesia since 2006 for terrorism charges, was detained in his home in Lampung, West Java. He reportedly learned to build the explosives for JW Marriot and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta under the late Dr. Azahari bin Husin, who was believed to be the technical mastermind behind the 2002 Bali bombings.
- d. On 2 Dec 20, POLRI revealed that JI had deployed charity boxes at minimarkets in several regions throughout Indonesia to fool unsuspecting shoppers into donating money that would fund the group's terror activities, including sponsoring travel to Syria for training. JI created legal NGOs, charity foundations and orphanages to mask their illicit fundraising for their operations.
- e. A 57-year-old JI senior member, Zulkarnaen @ Aris Sumarsono, was arrested in Lampung, West Sumatera on 10 Dec 20. He had received militant training in Afghanistan and played a crucial role in JI's operations and intelligence work. He was involved in the 2002 Bali Bombing and the 2003 JW Marriot Hotel attack.
- f. The arrest of Ustad Arif in October and the discovery of his links to Malaysia signals the regeneration of Neo-JI. Despite being nearly eradicated in 2007 when the police arrested over 40 members, including its top leaders, JI had managed to reincarnate itself as Neo-JI since then. Even with all these latest arrests, JI has demonstrated that it has the necessary resilience to continue evolving and will remain to be a relevant threat in this region.

Significant East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) issues are as follows:

- a. On 31 Oct 20, Indonesia extradited four Uyghur men to China for links with terrorism. The four men were previously arrested in 2015 for entering Indonesia with false travel documents to join East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) in Poso. The Jakarta court had sentenced them to imprisonment of six years and a fine amounting IDR100 million (MYR28,267) for the charge. They were deported to their home country after China paid the fine.
- b. On 17 Nov 20, two suspected MIT members were shot dead by Densus 88 during Operation Tinombala, a joint police and military task force, in West Desa Bolano, Palu in Sulawesi. The slain men were on a list of wanted people for their involvement in terrorism activities in Sulawesi. Police found a revolver with bullets, two home-made bombs, a GPS, and a compass at the scene.
- c. Densus 88 arrested seven terror suspects and seized several weapons from them in Randangan and Buntulia in Pohuwato district, North Sulawesi on 27 Nov 20. It has been speculated that the detainees may be MIT members. Those arrested had been subject to a long-term police surveillance operation.
- d. On the same day, the MIT orchestrated an attack against a village in the sleepy Lembantongoa hamlet in Sigi, Central Sulawesi, which caused hundreds of residents to flee their homes. The pro-Daesh

militants torched houses and brutally killed four farmers who were members of the local Salvation Army Church. This latest episode was one of the most violent incidents ever launched by MIT under Ali Kalora's leadership.

On 5 Nov 20, two former members of JI and Al-Qaeda (AQ), Ali Fauzi and Sofyan Tsauri, warned of potential terrorist attacks that target French citizens following the statements made by the French President, Emmanuel Macron, on freedom of speech and the threat of radical Islam. Meanwhile, chief of National Police Commission (Kompolnas) Benny Mamoto predicted that future terrorist attempts would utilise sharp weapons inspired by the France attack. The AQ in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) urged their followers to target any individual who disparages the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

In response to the atrocities committed by MIT in Lematonggo, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) deployed 30 more officers drawn from the Indonesian Army and Navy forces to assist with the ongoing Operation Tinombala on 1 Dec 20. The task force which consists of the TNI and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) is still focused on targeting the MIT leadership, Ali Kalora, in Sulawesi.

The Sigi attack demonstrated MIT's ability to increase operational lethality and group resilience despite sustained counterterrorism pressure amid a pandemic. The attack's motivation should not be simplified as exclusively religious, but more likely driven by vengeance over the killings of two suspected MIT members during Operation Tinombala in the previous week. The Sigi attack also signalled MIT's ability to sow fear to coerce compliance amongst the local population. Although MIT is a small outfit, it is critical to recognise that its resiliency is rooted in the group's narrative that they can control territory in Poso. Therefore, they have the ability to attract outsiders, funding and support from other international terrorist organisations or networks.

On 22 Dec 20, POLRI disclosed their estimation that presently JI has 6000 active cells throughout Indonesia. These cells function as shelters for JI members who are still at large. While JI has not visibly engaged themselves in any recent acts of violence, they should still be seen as a persistent threat in the medium to long term. More importantly, JI's capabilities and relevance should not be underestimated. This year saw Indonesian has fully enforced its 2018-approved counterterrorism law and redoubling their law enforcement efforts against JI. The enforcement of the law has led to the arrest of more than 30 members including their top spiritual leader, top bomb maker and their operations chief, however the group remains lethal. JI has shown that it has greater financial resources, is better organised, and has better educated and better trained members compared to the other terrorist groups in the country. In total, POLRI has arrested 228 suspects in terrorism cases this year.

The Indonesian government signals its commitment to cracking down on Islamist militancy. Nevertheless, they must not be over-confident with their deradicalisation efforts and should re-evaluate their current counterterrorism approaches to better defuse JI and other terrorist organisations' resiliency.

## Singapore

A 26-year-old Bangladeshi labourer, Ahmed Faysal, was arrested on terrorism-related charges under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) on 2 Nov 20. Faysal, who arrived in Singapore in 2017, became radical after consuming Daesh materials on social media in 2018, which he translated into Bengali for dissemination. He had planned to travel to Syria to join Daesh. In 2019, the suspect had expressed his support for Hayat Tahrir al-Syam (HTS) and donated money to the group. He also expressed his support for AQ and Al-Shabaab. The suspect was

believed to be planning an attack in Bangladesh and had purchased several types of knives online to target authorities in the country.

The arrest showcases Singapore's zero-tolerance response towards any element of terrorism in the country. There is no doubt that Singapore will continue to enforce ISA to neutralise potential threats as the law has continuously produced measurable success in combating terrorism.

## Malaysia

To date, the total number of terrorism-related arrests since 2013 remains at 533. There have been no arrests made since January through December. The local authorities continue to monitor for any terrorist activities or developments in the country.

Indonesian labourer named Irwanzir pleaded not guilty at the Kuala Lumpur High Court on two charges of unlawful possession of terrorist materials under the Section 130JB(1)(a) of the Penal Code on 21 Oct 20. The first charge involved five videos and 29 Daesh-related images. The second charge involved seven videos and 28 terrorism-related images that were recovered from his mobile telephone. If found guilty, the accused could be jailed up to seven years maximum or fined.

On 30 Nov 20, a 60-year-old man who claimed to be the commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) 2.0 was detained by the E8 Division of the Bukit Aman Special Branch. He was arrested for threatening to attack the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The suspect who issued his threats via email to the media also claimed he planned to target Sri Lanka next. In the message, he expressed his intent to kill the Chief of Police, Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Bador. Investigations found that the individual was mentally ill and had no links with the LTTE.

Despite some concerns that adherents of the LTTE are attempting to revive the group on Malaysia's soil, the terrorism threat level remains moderate. The combination of Movement Controlled Order (MCO) during the year along with strict entry restrictions into the country due to the ongoing pandemic has stifled potential terrorist activities and movements across borders. Malaysia continues to demonstrate commitment in combating terrorism and exercising existing counterterrorism laws in defusing any elements of terror.

## The Lessons Learned

The on-going counter-terrorism operations in Iraq and Syria have also seemingly reduced the impact of Daesh-related terrorism worldwide as governments involved continue to target prominent violent groups such as Daesh, Taliban and AQ. Afghanistan soon will have to contend with the emerging ISKP in its horizon, a Daesh affiliate with a potential to pressure the Taliban and the government. A shift in narratives must be expected even as the threat landscape begins to show signs of changing. The imminent withdrawal of US troops from the Middle East and Afghanistan suggests that the threat of violent Islamist terrorism will not subside. Multiple ongoing insurgencies fuel the terror; therefore, governments must be focused and proactive in eliminating these threats.

Religious extremism remains the main driver of political violence in the Philippines and Indonesia. ASG, which is also recognised as the Islamic State of East Asia Province, was responsible for this year's deadliest incident in the Philippines which saw twin bomb attacks detonated in Jolo, in the southern Philippines province Sulu, killing 14 people and wounding 25 others. Even as the Philippines security forces are actively carrying out



anti-terrorism operations throughout the south of the country, Daesh-affiliated radical groups are still active in recruiting and training new members to carry out more operations and launch attacks.

Since the collapse of Daesh's caliphate in 2017, many predicted that the terrorist organisation would attempt to rebuild in Southeast Asia. The concentrated terrorist activities in the Southern Philippines makes it the leading candidate. Additionally, the COVID-19 health crisis was expected to provide terrorist groups with an opportunity to regroup, plot attacks, drive narratives that encourage divisiveness and increase recruitment. This turned out not to be the case as the pandemic and quarantine lockdowns not only encumbered their operations, they also impeded their revenue streams as seen in Indonesia. Furthermore, Indonesia's recently revised anti-terrorism law has curtailed the threat at local level. The updated anti-terror Bill provides law enforcement broad powers to make pre-emptive arrests on suspicion of terrorism and enables longer detention. In contrast, following the wake of the Marawi siege in 2017, the Philippines heavily emphasised military actions in their counterterrorism effort against domestic threats. However, in the long run, this strategy may prove to be limiting without being complemented by an extensive soft approach to address local grievances.

Despite the pandemic's challenges, some groups have proven to be capable and resilient in meeting these obstacles. For instance, MIT demonstrated its ability to be adaptable by expanding its operational lethality during difficult times. Other groups struggle, such as BIFF and ASG in the Philippines, which saw many of their members deserting them following leadership decapitations and sustained government counterterrorism pressure through aggressive military operations. While much of the terrorist activities in Southeast Asia remain centred in the Southern Philippines and Indonesia, Malaysia must stay vigilant for any signs of diffusion of violence across borders. Although terrorism in Indonesia and the Philippines are largely homegrown, Malaysia should learn from their efforts and be watchful for any attempts to appeal for support, participation, or financial aid through surreptitious means from Malaysian citizens.

The valuable lesson to be learned from 2020 is that the pandemic can pose operational challenges for some violent actors and force them to fall back. However, other groups can still adapt and develop their operational lethality. While military operations effective in counterterrorism campaigns; however, the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach are always essential in complementing them. The Vienna attack was an important lesson for all the governments to ensure constant and consistent evaluation of deradicalisation programmes to ensure its effectiveness and transparency. Equally, as the JI charity box scandal has shown, terrorists and insurgents are very adept at identifying security gaps to exploit. Financial aid proves to be a vital lifeline for them that must be disrupted. Nevertheless, defeating terrorists through military action appears to be effective. As a result, according to the latest report by the Global Terrorism Index, the number of fatalities caused by Daesh are at the lowest since 2013. Even so, countries are still struggling with the repatriation of their nationals who went to Syria to become FTF for Daesh. However, the military alone cannot subdue terrorism. Governments must explore other options and continue to assess and re-evaluate existing deradicalisation, rehabilitation and community engagement programmes to identify areas that require improvements.



## Conclusion

Grievance and the weak rule of law are still powerful incentives for violent actors. The growing socio-economic and political instability reflects social disenfranchisement and exclusion. Therefore, countries engaging in counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts must always consider improving social and economic conditions to diminish motivations for joining any violent political movements. A key challenge for developing countries remains to address existing schisms in the communal fault lines concerning racial or religious tensions, and tackling corruption, all of which fuel sympathies for terrorist movements.