QUAD-PLUS Dialogue 2015
Looking at the security landscape in the Asia–Pacific region, and in particular in Southeast Asia, as recently as two or three years ago, it would appear that the threat of Islamist terrorism was on the wane. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the regional branch of the global jihadist movement, had fragmented, its most prominent leaders had been killed or arrested, and its network had been broken up. One could argue that Southeast Asia offered a preview on the end game of the global jihad: a situation in which jihadist groups cannot meet their objectives, their agents are decimated, and the extremist ideology is widely repudiated. Now we have seen the reemergence of transnational Islamist terrorism across the world in an even more virulent form. This paper analyzes the evolving jihadist threat to the Asia–Pacific region and to Southeast Asia, in particular.

The Indian subcontinent is another theater with different characteristics in that the major terrorist threat there is state-sponsored terrorism, that is, terrorism linked to groups based in Pakistan and operating with the support or acquiescence of Pakistan’s military intelligence service. Of course, state sponsorship or toleration of terrorist groups is a two-edged sword. In recent years there has been a proliferation of terrorist groups outside Islamabad’s control that threaten the stability of the Pakistani state. The December 2014 Peshawar Army Public School massacre, in which the Pakistani Taliban murdered 141 students and teachers, has already produced some significant changes in Pakistan’s counterterrorism posture, but it is too early to tell whether it represents a break with the country’s ambiguous attitude toward extremist groups.

India, of course, has been the main target of the Pakistan-based groups. The most widely known Indian terrorist group, the Indian Mujahideen, is believed to be a front for, or to have close ties to Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, the group responsible for the 2008 Mumbai and numerous other terrorist attacks in India. In September 2014 al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the formation of a branch of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent. This was clearly an effort to take the spotlight away from the Islamic State (ISIS) and it is not clear at this point whether this was a public relations exercise or represents a real threat.
Southeast Asia is the most vulnerable region in the Asia–Pacific, but there is also a significant threat to Australia that in some ways resembles the terrorist threat to North American and European countries by radicalized members of their Muslim communities. While there is a great deal of talk about self-radicalized individuals, the most serious threat of major attacks is posed not by individuals acting independently, such as the hostage taker at the chocolate café in Sydney, but by militants associated with, and in some cases trained and directed by, transnational terrorist organizations.

Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, was the epicenter of jihadist terrorism in the Asia–Pacific region in the first decade of the 21st century. The thesis of this paper is that the jihadist threat in Southeast Asia peaked between 2002 and 2005—with a yearly cycle of major terrorist attacks in Indonesia—and declined thereafter as the result of effective Indonesian counterterrorism. However, Islamist terrorism in the Asian region has always been linked to a significant degree to international trends, especially to developments in the Middle East, and the rise of ISIS and the competition it has engendered with al-Qaeda is likely to give a new lease on life to regional terrorism.

The key developments in the decline of the terrorist movement in Indonesia were the death or capture of key operatives and the disruption of the network. Azahari Husin, a Malaysian mathematician who developed his bomb-making skills in a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan and was believed to have designed the bombs used in attacks in Bali and Jakarta, was killed in a police raid on his hideout in November 2005. His associate, another Malaysian named Noordin Muhammad Top, a recruiter and financier who at the time was the most wanted militant in Southeast Asia, was killed in August 2009.

Some of the militant leaders who were eliminated by the Indonesian security services were previously believed to have been hiding in Mindanao. Dulmatin, an expert on explosives and insurgency tactics, was killed by Indonesian police in March 2010 after he had returned to Indonesia to establish a terrorist base in Aceh under the name al-Qaeda in the Verandah of Mecca. More than 50 terrorists were thought to be training at the camp in Aceh before it was broken up. This enterprise was funded by the founder and former spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, who headed a splinter group named Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid. Ba’asyir was found guilty of inciting terrorism in 2011 in connection with his funding of the training camp and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Another key operative, Umar Patek, who was also previously in the Philippines, was captured by Pakistani authorities in January 2011 in Abottabad, the same town where bin Laden was hiding, and was extradited to Indonesia for trial. At his trial, Patek denied that he had gone to meet bin Laden, but Indonesian counterterrorism chief Ansyaad Mbai linked Patek’s arrest to the subsequent killing of bin Laden. A report of a Pakistani
investigative commission, published in *al-Jazeera*, stated the commission’s belief that “[i]t could be that Patek came to meet OBL [Osama bin Laden] but was not aware that OBL no longer met Al-Qaeda members for fear they were being tracked by intelligence agencies and could unwittingly compromise his own security…. Did CIA have access to Patek during his detention in Pakistan? If not, they would certainly have access to him in Indonesia and may have extracted far more information from him that the ISI [Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate] was able to. It would seem very likely that Patek, despite his denial, had come to seek instructions or inspiration from OBL. If so, it shows that Patek knew where to look for him.”¹ Patek was tried and convicted of making explosives used in the October 2002 Bali bombings and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The prosecutors did not seek the death penalty after Patek apologized to the victims and their families.

There was also a concerted effort to combat the radical ideology. Indonesian clerics denounced the use of violence and the Indonesian government mounted a counter-ideological campaign that employed former militants and conservative clerics to delegitimize the use of violence for political ends. By the end of the past decade, the threat of Islamist terrorism in Indonesia had receded, but this is not to say that it had ended. The fragmentation of JI resulted in a number of splinter groups, some of which continued to engage in terrorism, such as Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, which was responsible for a series of attacks against police in the area of Poso, Mujahideen Kompak, and the Hilal al-Ahmar Society. However, these groups found it difficult to converge into a coherent movement in the absence of a recognized emir.² Aside from its failure in Indonesia, JI also failed to co-opt any of the two main Muslim insurgent movements in Southeast Asia, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines and the Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, both of which remained focused on local issues.

Before 9/11 there were linkages between the MILF and JI. In the early 1990s Nasir Abas, who later became the emir of JI’s Mantiqi III, which covered Philippines, Borneo, and Sulawesi and was responsible for training, helped to train the personal bodyguard of Hashim Selamat, the leader of the MILF. In return the MILF allowed JI to operate a training camp for Indonesian and other Southeast Asian jihadists, Camp Hubaidiyah, within the MILF’s main camp, Camp Abubakar. After 9/11 the MILF leadership conspicuously moved to distance itself from any association with al-Qaeda and JI. The MILF recognized, as Ghazali Jaafar, the Front’s Vice Chairman for Political Affairs, told

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this author, “JI is very much a concern of the MILF now because it is hurting the interests of the Bangsamoro people.”

Some relationships continued between Indonesian militants and some MILF commanders, which were largely based on personal ties and on the potential usefulness of foreign trainers to the MILF. On the other hand, the benefits to the MILF of a relationship with al-Qaeda-linked militants were outweighed by the fact that the MILF was seeking international respectability and support for its positions on the peace process with the Manila government.

An important factor in the future evolution of the security environment in Mindanao is the cohesion of the MILF. The MILF suffered a major split in 2008, after the botched signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), when Ameril Umbra Kato and other hard-line MILF commanders broke off from the group and established a rival organization, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Although the BIFF is a relatively small group, it has spoiler potential by providing a rallying point for those in the MILF that object to the peace process with the Philippine government. There are also indications that the BIFF has made a tactical alliance with elements of the Abu Sayyaf Group.

The Indonesian militants’ relationships in Mindanao were closest with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The ASG’s home ground is the Sulu archipelago, primarily the islands of Basilan and Jolo, and its members largely belong to the Tausug ethno-linguistic group, which is also the ethnic base of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Former MNLF fighters who objected to the MNLF’s peace agreement with the Ramos government in 1996 formed the nucleus of the group.

In its structure, tactics, and goals, the ASG differed substantially from the MILF. The ASG controls very little territory, but takes advantage of the relative inaccessibility of the areas where it operates and some degree of willing or forced compliance by the local population. It has successfully exploited the maritime environment of its area of operation by engaging in piracy and kidnappings. The group has been seriously degraded by Philippine military operations supported by the United States. Currently, the ASG is very localized with only a limited capacity to strike beyond its strongholds in the Sulu archipelago.

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3 Author’s discussion with Ghazali Jaafar, Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kuradat, Mindanao, January 2008.
5 Author’s discussions with Armed Forces of the Philippines officials, Manila, August 2011.
The ethnic Malay insurgency in southern Thailand has been festering for over a quarter of a century. In the late 1990s, a seemingly successful counter-insurgency campaign dismantled the infrastructure of the separatist groups in the South, but more shadowy groups emerged, linked to radical Islamic pondoks or madrassas, that initiated an escalating campaign of violence. Unlike the Moro insurgency in the Philippines, there is no single organization leading the struggle against what the rebels regard as “Buddhist occupation.” In the words of a Thai official, there are a multitude of tiny insurgencies. All analysts agree that there is no evidence of external involvement in the attacks in southern Thailand. According to well-informed Thai sources, offers of support by al-Qaeda and JI were rejected. One of the insurgent’s religious leaders told his followers that if they accepted the help they would be beholden to al-Qaeda and JI and would lose its independence.

As noted earlier, trends in Islamist extremism in the Asia region cannot be viewed in isolation from global trends and, particularly, from developments in the Middle East. Among the factors that influenced the development of Islamist extremism in Asia in the 1990s and 2000s were the dissemination of Salafist ideologies originating in the Middle East, Saudi and other Gulf funding of entities associated with these ideologies, the development of transnational extremist networks, and the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, which to jihadists was logically coextensive with other battlefields—Kashmir, Chechnya, or Mindanao—and which generated a cadre of veterans who populated armed radical movements throughout the Muslim world.

The decline of the violent extremist movement in Southeast Asia was part of a global trend. By 2008 the al-Qaeda affiliates in two critical theaters in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia and Iraq—had suffered strategic defeats. The remnants of the Saudi branch of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) migrated to ungoverned areas in Yemen, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) lost much of its base in Anbar province. The question that analysts were asking was whether there were any prospects that AQI could reconstitute itself. The majority view was that the mistakes made by AQI were probably irreversible, given that that the group’s methods had thoroughly alienated social sectors whose support was indispensable for the organization to regain lost ground. One caveat to this analysis was that al-Qaeda and some of the Sunni insurgent groups retained some common grounds, so there was a level of support that permitted a residual al-Qaeda presence in some parts of Iraq.

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7 Author’s information.
Subsequent developments, some of which could have been predicted and others not, transformed the dynamic of the conflict in Iraq. These factors, as we know now, were the failure of the U.S. and the Iraqi government to agree to a residual U.S. presence, the sectarian policies of the Maliki government that convinced many Sunnis that there was no place for them in a Shi’ite-dominated state, and the outbreak of the armed conflict in Syria. All of these factors opened space for two developments that now shape the global jihadi scene: the rise of ISIS and the sharpened competition between ISIS and al-Qaeda for leadership of the global jihadist movement.

The discrepancies between al-Qaeda and its former branch in Iraq go back to the time of the founding of al-Qaeda in Iraq (formally *Qā'idat al-Jihād fi bilad al-rafiḍayn*, al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers). The group’s emir, the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, favored a strategy of violence too extreme even by al-Qaeda standards. Leading jihadi ideologues, including al-Zarqawi’s ideological mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the author of very significant jihadi texts, criticized al-Zarqawi for excessive killing of civilians in Iraq. In a July 2005 letter to al-Zarqawi, al-Zawahiri admonished al-Zarqawi, telling him that his methods were alienating his base of support and that, in the absence of popular support, “the Islamic mujahed movement would be crushed in the shadows.” “Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable,” al-Zawahiri admonished al-Zarqawi, “are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages.” Therefore, al-Zawahiri wrote, “the mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve.”

Contrary to al-Zawahiri’s advice, Al-Zarqawi implemented a strategy that was based on terror and coercion. The extreme brutality of al-Qaeda in Iraq cannot be explained by the personality of al-Zarqawi alone because these methods have outlived him and are part of the DNA of the present-day ISIS. The reason for the extreme violence is strategic and may be explained by the influence of the jihadi strategist Abu Bakir al-Naji on the Iraqi jihadi movement. In his book *Management of Savagery*, al-Naji argued that the jihadis needed to open security vacuums—what he called areas of savagery—in vulnerable countries through terror attacks. Once the government’s presence was driven from these areas, the jihadis would then gain the support or at least the acquiescence of the population by providing security and social services and implementing shari’a.

At the present time ISIS has the momentum in the competition with al-Qaeda because, unlike al-Qaeda, which is a stateless group that has not been able to achieve any notable

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successes in recent years, ISIS has established territorial control over large parts of Syria and Iraq and effectively erase the boundaries established by the colonial powers. Its declaration of a caliphate, although rejected by most Sunni scholars, has a powerful appeal to Islamists. As bin Laden himself famously said, “When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will be attracted to the strong horse.”

ISIS has also been adept in using the media, which includes images of graphic violence and killings. These images appeal to the audience that ISIS is trying to reach. ISIS’s media magazine, Dabiq, is a glossy, professional product published in several languages, including English. It presents an idealized view of life in the areas that it controls, features the testimony of foreign fighters from different regions, and forecasts the impending victory of the caliphate.

Who’s winning? So far the scorecard looks like this: ISIS has gained the allegiance of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, which is active in the Sinai peninsula; Boko Haram, a group that controls an area about the size of Belgium in Nigeria, is fighting the armies of Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is actually based in the tribal areas of Pakistan and has close ties to the Taliban and al-Qaeda; Ansar al-Shariah is in Libya and Tunisia; and Algeria’s Djoun Al-Khilafa. The Caucasus Emirate has a group of Chechen commanders fighting in Syria and they are divided between ISIS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. In October ISIS announced that it was expanding the caliphate to a region they call Khorasan, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia.

Al-Qaeda retains the allegiance of two key groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQIM and its leader Abdelmalek Droukdel has refused to recognize al-Baghdadi as the new leader and there are reports that ISIS is trying to open a front against AQIM in North Africa. AQAP issued a video rejecting ISIS and renewing its oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda. AQAP noted that al-Qaeda has a pledge of allegiance to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Both al-Baghdadi and Omar style themselves “Commander of the Faithful,” which is one of the traditional titles of the caliph, and in view of al-Qaeda and the groups affiliated with al-Qaeda Omar is the legitimate caliph, although he has never tried to extend his authority outside Afghanistan.

In Southeast Asia, a number of militant groups and individuals have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. These include the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines. In response to Germany’s decision to support actions against ISIS, the Abu Sayyaf Group threatened to kill one of two German hostages that it held. The Abu Sayyaf Group was demanding a ransom of 250 million
pesos (or about $5.6 million in U.S. dollars) and Germany’s withdrawal of support for the fight against ISIS. ISIS’s franchise in Mindanao is a group of unknown strength called Khilafa Islamiya Mindanao (KIM). These are groups that the Armed Forces of the Philippines considers “peace spoilers,” but may mutate into larger, more sophisticated, and more lethal terrorist organizations.

The former emir of JI, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, pledged his allegiance to ISIS from his prison cell in August 2014. The fugitive terrorist Santoso, the head of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, produced a video that featured Santoso’s pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Two Bahasa-language websites, Al-Mustaqbal.net and Shoutussalam.com, have become ISIS mouthpieces in Indonesia.

The risk to countries that are potential targets of jihadists is that the competition between Islamic State and al-Qaeda for leadership of the global jihadist movement creates an incentive for both groups, but especially for al-Qaeda, to carry out spectacular attacks against infidel countries in order to cement their credibility in the jihadi scene. The terrorist attack in Paris against the staff of the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine has to be seen in that context. The two brothers who carried out the attack were associated with AQAP, which has claimed responsibility for the attack, which arguably was meant to help al-Qaeda move out of the expanding shadow of ISIS and to burnish AQAP’s reputation as one of the world’s most aggressive al-Qaeda affiliates. The attack also tells us that the global terrorism risk is not just from returning foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, but also from more traditional sources.

Of course, the large number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq enhances this risk. It was returning veterans from the war in Afghanistan in the 1990s that led to the establishment of both the Abu Sayyaf Group and JI and JI’s campaign of terrorism in the early 2000s, so the return of these fighters could and probably will open a new stage in the global jihad.


The most recent information is that there are about 15,000 foreign fighters from some 80 countries in Syria and Iraq\textsuperscript{13} far more than there were at any point during the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan or in Iraq at the height of the insurgency. The majority comes from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, and Western Europe. About 100 are believed to have come from Australia, 300 from Indonesia (of which about 60 have been reported dead),\textsuperscript{14} between 100 and 200 from the Philippines,\textsuperscript{15} and 20 to 30 from Malaysia, although according to a Malaysian police counterterrorism official the number could be higher.\textsuperscript{16} There are also between 100 and 300 Chinese nationals, possibly members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), fighting alongside ISIS.\textsuperscript{17}

An individual believed to be a Malaysian or a Filipino participated in the simultaneous beheading of 22 Syrian soldiers as shown on an ISIS video.\textsuperscript{18} A 26-year-old factory worker named Ahmad Tarmimi was the first Malaysian suicide bomber associated with ISIS. Tarmimi drove an SUV filled with explosives into Iraq’s SWAT headquarters in al-Anbar province. The suicide bombing, with Tarmimi’s photograph, was featured on the official ISIS website with the title, “Mujahidin Malaysia Syahid Dalam Operasi Martyrdom.”\textsuperscript{19}

If this executioner were indeed a Malaysian he would have likely belonged to the Malay Archipelago unit for ISIS, the Malaysian Support Group for the ISIS. Since April 2014 the Malaysian police have arrested 11 people associated with this group who were

\textsuperscript{14}Fatiyah Wardah, “Indonesia Battles Islamic State Recruitment,” VOA News/Asia, November 25, 2014.
\textsuperscript{15}Lopez, “ISIS in the Philippines,” and “BIFF, Abu Sayyaf Pledge Allegiance to Islamic State Jihadists,” GMA News Online.
\textsuperscript{18}The individual had the Facebook name of Khairul Anuar, which is the name of a famed Malaysian archer, but according to Kurdish sources he is a Filipino. See the analysis of the video in Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), “Detailed Analysis of Islamic State (ISIS) Video: Although the Unbelievers Dislike It—A Story of Expansion and Beheadings. Segment Three: The Mass Simultaneous Beheading,” http://www.trackingterrorism.org/article/detailed-analysis-islamic-state-isis-video-although-unbelievers-dislike-it-story-expansion-3 (accessed May 13, 2015).
accused of planning attacks inside and outside Malaysia as well as recruiting fighters to support jihadist groups in Syria, using humanitarian assistance work in Syria as cover.\(^\text{20}\)

Initially, the destination of choice of most foreign jihadis was the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. However, since ISIS’s successes in northern Iraq and the declaration of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliphate that has changed. Now it is estimated that the majority of foreign fighters are joining ISIS. Invoking the example of Muhammad, ISIS has made an explicit call on fighters from all over the Muslim world to make the *hijra*, that is, to immigrate to the territory that it controls.

In the third issue of its publication *Dabiq*, foreign fighters are described as “the most wondrous of the creation in terms of faith, and the strongest of them all.” The article goes on to say, “Soldiers and the commanders to be of different colors, languages, and lands: the Najdī, the Jordanian, the Tunisian, the Egyptian, the Somali, the Turk, the Albanian, the Chechen, the Indonesian, the Russian, the European, the American and so on. They left their families and their lands to renew the state of the muwahhidīn in Shām [the Levant], and they had never known each other until they arrived in Shām! I have no doubt that this state, which has gathered the bulk of the muhājirīn in Shām and has become the largest collection of muhājirīn in the world, is a marvel of history that has only come about to pave the way for al-Malhamah al-Kubrā (the grand battle prior to the Hour).”

In conclusion, the world, including the Asia–Pacific countries, is now facing a more dangerous threat from Islamist terrorism than at any point since before 9/11. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to this threat because some of the structural conditions that made the region vulnerable to Islamist terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century—the presence of transnational terrorist networks, its vulnerability to radical influences from the Middle East, the training of Southeast Asians in terrorist camps abroad and their acquisition of combat skills, and the ability of terrorists to conceal themselves in urban and rural areas—still pertain.