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The Implication of ISIS for Southeast Asia
- The Phenomenon of ISIS Affiliates

Master thesis

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Abstract

Following the announcement of the establishment of a Caliphate in 2014, individuals and groups from all corners of the world pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State. Of particular interest to this study are violent terrorist groups based in Southeast Asia. The thesis focuses on this region as, despite obvious geographical constraints, local bay’ah pledges have allowed ISIS to suddenly emerge in the region with a large and well organised force allowing for an increase in terrorist activities and ultimately the capture of Marawi, the largest city to fall under the ISIS banner outside of Syria and Iraq. But a question remains too often unanswered – why do terrorist groups ally? While the dynamic is rare and paradoxical due to groups’ illicit and clandestine nature, strategic alliances between terrorist groups are far from being a new phenomenon. While a handful of scholars dared to explore this complex field, it remains under-theorised to this day. This thesis uses an available list of studies and analyses on terrorist alliances and complements it with theories related to alliances between states in order to understand the rationale behind Southeast Asian Islamists alliance with ISIS. While there lacks a consensus as to why groups ally, the study finds it to be a multi-dimensional and mutually beneficial phenomenon in which trust enabled by commonalities, e.g. ideology and common foes, acts as a basis for terrorist interaction. More complex factors are identified by analysing some local affiliated groups and by thoroughly examining their activities prior and following their allegiance pledge as well as what is known of their relationship with ISIS. The thesis singles out conducive factors for entering into an alliance with ISIS including territorial control, membership size, insecurity, but ultimately identifies organisational needs as an essential part of local groups’ reasoning.

Keywords

Terrorism, Islamic State, Affiliates, Allegiance, Southeast Asia, Bay’ah, Terrorist Alliance, Indonesia, Philippines.

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Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.

3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague 31/07/2019  Jean-Patrick Clancy
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Introduction

For years, ISIS has expanded far beyond the Syrian and Iraqi borders, establishing its presence and conducting activities worldwide. Such campaign and expansion, an illustration of ISIS’ global strategy, is identified by the Institute for the Study of War as a three circles geographical scheme. The first “interior ring” (Gambhir, 2015 p. 2) is made up of Iraq, Syria and goes as far as including other States in al-Sham such as Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. A “near abroad” (Gambhir, 2015 p.4) zone comprises-the former lands of the Caliphate which include Middle Eastern, North African States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Caucasus, all being parts of ISIS regional governorates, or wilayats. Last but not least, the third ring, or “far abroad” (Gambhir, 2015 p.8) area, covers ISIS activities in Europe, North America, Southeast Asia and cyberspace. However, one particular region in this latter ring has been the focus of much attention lately. Indeed, the prospects of ISIS expanding in the Southeast Asia region became a considerable source of concern for many scholars and experts, as seen by the IPAC Report in 2016 which stated that ISIS had deepened cooperation among Southeast Asian extremist groups and that losses experienced by ISIS in the Middle East could eventually “increase the incentive to undertake acts of violence at home” (IPAC, 2016 p. 1), and eventually turned into a reality (Yeo, 2017).

On 28 June 2014 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that a caliphate had been formed by ISIS. This proclamation would eventually capture the imagination of various extremist Islamist groups throughout the world, including those located in Southeast Asia, where Islamic fundamentalism had been increasingly growing since the early 1970s following events such as the world oil crisis, the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Mehden, 2005 p. 8).

A global appeal came after the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate as ISIS militants called on all Muslims to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi and “reject democracy and other garbage from the West” (BBC, 2014). With the help of a well-planned comprehensive and concernedly effective propaganda campaign through social media and its numerous magazines, a series of bay’at (or, allegiance pledges) ensued by individuals, clerics and radical groups throughout the world, including Southeast Asia, most notably from both Indonesia and the Philippines. To name a few, groups from the Philippines and Indonesia which subsequently pledged their allegiance to ISIS and its ruler al-Baghdadi included Ansar al-Khilafah, Ikhwan man Ta’a Allah, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Maute Group, Jama’at Ansar al-Dawla, Ma’rakat al-Ansar in Sulu, Islamic Movement in Basilan (with numerous subgroups), Abu Sayyaf Group (Ness, 2017 p. 5) and so on. It is clear that
This worrying rapprochement would also later be coupled with the formation and deployment of Katibah Nusantara, an all Malay-Indonesian speaking ISIS unit of foreign fighters involved in campaigns in Syria. This unit started with 22 members as of September 2014 (Hussain & Teoh, 2014), it later grew to more than a hundred. It is however difficult to estimate with precision how many individuals from Southeast Asia travelled from the region to join the Islamic State campaign in the Middle East. As of 2016, it has been estimated that around 800 to 1,000 fighters from the region had travelled to Syria and Iraq which is far larger than the number of Southeast Asian individuals who travelled to Afghanistan to join al-Qaeda (Ignatius, 2016), as many of them were encouraged through ISIS propaganda to perform hijraj to Syria and Iraq with their families and children (Singh, 2016 p. 5). However, despite no clear confirmed data on the number of individuals who travelled to the Middle East, there is a common expressed concern that the return of militants from the battlefield to the region will pose a threat to security as they will most probably attempt to conduct attacks and/or train militants who didn’t have the means to travel to Iraq or Syria.

Despite ISIS’ clear ambition to involve Southeast Asian militants in its campaign and to further its grip on the region, the organisation has yet to formally declare the region as an official wilayat at the time of writing this thesis project. The current presence of ISIS within the region is mostly expressed through radical groups and individuals who have pledged bay’at to the organisation and al-Baghdadi, but contrary to common belief, no governorate has yet been despite clear intentions of establishing itself as demonstrated by the Marawi siege (Allard, 2017), and attention as to why this has not happened yet will be explored in this thesis. Many have even been misled by ISIS itself as it seemed that it had finally declared East Asia as a wilayat on 21 July 2018 in its weekly paper al-Naba according to BBC Monitoring journalist Mina al-Lami¹, but this would prove short lived as this unannounced surprise move would soon be reversed on 27 July of the same year as ISIS would drop the wilayat title from East Asia in its weekly paper².

The author argues this seemingly ambitious particular topic is of prime relevance, as much of the analysis on ISIS and its global approach currently tends to focus on the Middle East and Europe, especially following its’ setbacks in Syria and Iraq. However, this approach neglects the organisation’s ambitions through allegiance pledges and with the return of foreign fighters, ISIS “is growing its presence in Southeast Asia to make up for losing ground in Iraq and Syria” (Xueling, 2016).

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¹ Retrieved from BBC journalist twitter publication from 21 July 2018, available at: https://twitter.com/Minalami/status/1020630131981856769
² Retrieved from BBC journalist twitter publication from 27 July 2018, available at: https://twitter.com/Minalami/status/10227445349138092052
for Southeast Asia and its relationship with other extremist groups, a region which have seen a growing number of attacks in the past couple of years from ISIS affiliated groups and a region which has the potential of breeding extremism as a fertile ground for jihadi expansion, which in turn could have a devastating impact beyond its’ own borders.

**Research Target, Research Question**

The objective of this thesis will aim at understanding the factors which may explain why extremist groups in the region have chosen to pledge allegiance to ISIS and what such cooperation could mean for ISIS as it attempts to expand its scope of influence by possibly embarking on a campaign to establish a permanent foothold on the Pacific archipelago following its setbacks in the Middle East and not simply act as a simple “backpacker” in the region.

This first research focus will also be followed by an attempt at analysing the possibility of other Islamist groups (whether they are affiliated or not to ISIS) at attempting to establish an Islamic Caliphate of their own. Indeed, rivalry amongst groups should be given focus as the lack of leadership and/or rivalry between leaders (Lamb, 2016), and the lack of alignment and cooperation between ISIS affiliated groups (Jayakumar, 2017 p. 30) may have detrimental effects on ISIS efforts to permanently establish itself in the region.

**Literature Review**

Some preliminary readings which have provided insight as to the influence that ISIS has exerted upon Southeast Asia and its inhabitants include Zachary Abuza’s “Joining the New Caravan: ISIS and the Regeneration of Terrorism in Southeast Asia” in which the author raises numerous questions surrounding the motivations for people from the region to travel to Syria and Iraq and fight for the Caliphate, while emphasising the concerns of States within the region which have been actively engaged in an ISIS-related crackdown so as to prevent the presence of “ISIS alumni” after already having experienced the return of jihadists from Afghanistan in the 1990s (Abuza, 2015). An interesting yet critical point was also raised by the author that despite only a limited number of fighters and families have managed to travel to both Syria and Iraq during the height of the ISIS campaign, the return of these individuals risk having a disproportionate effect back home. Just like the 1990s veterans of the Afghan theatre, ISIS might be creating a next generation of Salafi militants. Such founded concerns have been similarly raised by a number of other scholars such as Elani Owen. The author in this case also emphasises the logic behind ISIS’ potential expansion of activities in the region by highlighting several elements such as the considerable number of Muslims living in the region whilst keeping in mind that the vast majority of
them remain largely moderate despite Al Qaeda’s continued presence in many countries and the establishment of numerous extremist groups hence the long history of terrorism in the region (Owen, 2017). Whilst not all Muslims in the region support ISIS or its activities in the Middle East, thousands have reportedly pledged allegiance to the organisation. Such popular support, which can be explained through various factors (accompanied by a perceived form of legitimacy attributed to ISIS as the pro-Islam force in the conflict), does not necessarily imply the movement of individuals to the battlefield in the Middle East nor even their participation in attacks at home, the increase in terms of support ISIS has enjoyed throughout the years in the region is an evident indication of the appeal of the organisation. This support can only but further assert ISIS’s expansionist agenda which was described by Peter Chalk through the establishment of an Islamic State in the wider Levant whilst developing so-called governorates beyond the Caliphate’s borders through the process of oaths of allegiances from jihadist groups throughout the world operating in several circles previously described in the introduction of this project by the Institute for the Study of War. After recalling Kumar Ramakrissna’s description of ISIS’s overall political goal which, to briefly summarise, include the consolidation and expansion of the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate, avoiding defeat in the Middle East whilst destabilising ‘near enemies’ and reducing the political will of the ‘far enemies’ to effectively counter it (Chalk, 2015 p. 9), one can deduce that such political objectives and expansionist agenda can only be exacerbated by the support the organisation has and will further gain in Southeast Asia while taking into account the region’s relationship with Islamic fundamentalism. By looking at ISIS’s agenda, the level of support it gained throughout the years by some locals (to some extent) could be illustrated by the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters but more importantly for us, through the pledges of bay’at by numerous groups in the region. Indeed, resorting to affiliates will allow the organisation to become established and to expand (Oosterveld & Bloem, 2017 p. 11), and allowing the creation of a global ummah.

Joel Day studied this phenomenon by attempting to understand the reason behind Southeast Asian extremist groups’ declaration of allegiance and thereof openly expressing their affiliation to ISIS core itself. Day argues that such affiliation is mostly attributed to a social phenomenon (Day, 2016 p. 2) rather than material gains or incentives; and such an “imaginative act” would allow these groups to become more visible on the international stage. It was however pointed out a few times that relying solely on material incentives to cooperate wouldn’t work because cohesion depends highly on collective identity (Bacon, 2018 p. 355).

Besides material and power gain related incentives, we should also study the interactions between ISIS and its’ Southeast Asian counterparts by looking at something they share: the very nature of their identity due to the ideology they have in common. According to Tricia Bacon, having a shared ideology and
common enemies can indeed explain the establishment of alliances between terrorist organisations but
she however insists on the fact that “to form an alliance, groups craft, internalize, and preserve an identity
that binds them together” (Bacon, 2018 p. 354).

Despite the lack of consensus on the role of identity in the formation of alliances or group core/periphery
relations, one could imagine that such identity could open dialogue between these non-state armed groups
thereof allowing the possibility for cooperation to emerge. Other scholars also agree on the idea that
alliances will be formed when one organisation is particularly large and powerful. Indeed, such
organisations are able to share skills, funds, training, material etc. with smaller terrorist organisations
(Asal, Park, Rethermeyer & Ackerman, 2016 p. 8). Indeed Philips also hypothesised that structural factor
could play a major role as smaller groups could benefit from alliances/allegiances to bigger terrorist
organisations as such could promote material support and also carry out more sophisticated and visible
attacks (Philips, 2012 p. 9) which is what we have been witnessing in Southeast Asia so far. But we
shouldn’t ignore the fact that bay’at pledges to ISIS could also have an unintended result for the
organisation. Despite the fact affiliates give ISIS core potential fall back options in case of total
breakdown in Syria and Iraq (Byman, 2016 p. 6) and allows the groups to pursue their terrorist activities,
these very same affiliates will potentially retain their own structure, agenda and still suffer from a lack of
leadership and in-group rifts (Byman, 2016 p. 8). One can only imagine that such internal organisational
struggles and the opening of new fronts could overstretch ISIS activities to a point of collapse. Such
factors and potential consequences for the ISIS expansion agenda through its affiliates will be explored in
this thesis.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The main objective of this thesis is to understand why terrorist groups in Southeast Asia have, over the
past few years, increasingly decided to pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State, and to observe the
influence the series of bay’ats from groups operating in the region have had on the security environment.
The thesis will also aim at analysing elements, within the context of cooperation between terrorist
organisations, which may lead to the collapse of such cooperation instead of its apogee. To study the
relation between armed groups and the nature of their cooperation, an analysis of alliance formation will
be undertaken in this work. Within this particular theory of International Relations, we will be identifying
the nature of non-state armed group cooperation by studying both phenomenon of balancing and
bandwagoning. These two approaches, which are rather distinct, have often been tested to identify the
relation maintained by non-state armed groups within the framework of alliance formation.
Methodology and Data

This thesis will resort to a quantitative approach for most parts of the thesis through the use of research papers, online available sources, interview(s) and data collected from various meeting attended at the United Nations relevant to terrorism in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, in order to describe empirical events and in parallel, verify theories used in the thesis to better understand ISIS and affiliated groups’ behaviour and incentives in Southeast Asia.

In one particular chapter focusing on ISIS related activities in Southeast Asia, data will be collected on the type of attacks, nature of targets and level of “success” of attacks in order to analyse the intensity of ISIS related activities in the region. This exercise will cover periods pre- and post-declaration of a Caliphate in the Middle East and pledges of allegiance from groups based in Southeast Asia from 2014 onwards. The author will also potentially consider a collection of data on activities from non-ISIS affiliated jihadi groups in order to analyse the difference of intensity and reach of attacks. In order to narrow the content of this exercise, based on prior research, the author will focus on a few countries and not the region as a whole, and will consider a comparison of “major” active groups in the region. This exercise will not include activities of non-relevant (to this thesis) separatist groups. This exercise will be coupled by an analysis on the findings upon data collection with the use of graphics as to provide a visual display of the findings. Available data will be collected from media sources, Governmental and non-governmental reports and open databases related to terrorist activities in the region.

Planned Thesis Outline

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Theoretical framework
- Data
- Methods
- Chapter 1: Southeast Asia’s troubling history with Islamic Fundamentalism
- Chapter 2: Gaining Support in Southeast Asia
- Chapter 3: ISIS Affiliates related Activities in the Region
- Chapter 4: Potential Limitations to ISIS activities
- Conclusion
References


Table of Content

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1
I. Significance of the Topic .................................................................................................................. 1
II. Research Question ......................................................................................................................... 3
III. Methodology and Data .................................................................................................................. 4
IV. Structure Overview ...................................................................................................................... 7

Chapter I – Context: Understanding the Rise of ISIS in Southeast Asia ............................................. 8
I. A Troubling Path Leading to an Islamic State Expansion .................................................................. 8
   1. A History of Islamist Extremism in the Region .............................................................................. 8
   2. An Experience with Islamist Terrorism ......................................................................................... 10
II. The Islamic State looking East ....................................................................................................... 12
   1. An Open Door for ISIS Expansion ............................................................................................... 12
   2. A Pool of Recruits ......................................................................................................................... 16

Chapter II – Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 20
I. Literature Review ........................................................................................................................... 20
   1. Shortcomings in Contemporary Literature ................................................................................. 20
   2. Defining a Terrorist Group Alliance ............................................................................................. 22
II. Why do Terrorists Ally? Balancing and Bandwagoning Behaviours .............................................. 24
   1. Balancing Against a Common Enemy? ....................................................................................... 26
   2. Bandwagoning ............................................................................................................................. 28
III. Further Conducive Factors for an Alliance Between Terrorist Groups ......................................... 31
   1. Terrorist Group Organisational Needs ......................................................................................... 32
   2. A Common Identity ...................................................................................................................... 34
   3. Territorial Control ......................................................................................................................... 36

Chapter III – From Theory to Practice: A Focus on ISIS and its Affiliates in the ‘Islamist Tropical Crescent’ ..................................................................................................................... 39
I. Understanding the Concept of Bay’ah ............................................................................................. 39
II. ISIS Affiliated Groups in the Islamist Tropical Crescent .................................................................. 42
   1. ISIS in Indonesia ........................................................................................................................... 42
      a. Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) ............................................................................................. 44
      b. Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) ........................................................................................... 46
   2. ISIS in the Philippines .................................................................................................................. 49
      a. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) ....................................................................................................... 50
      b. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) ....................................................................... 53
III. Findings .......................................................................................................................................... 56
Chapter IV – A Review and Analysis of ISIS Affiliates Operational Dynamics in Southeast Asia

I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 59
II. ISIS Affiliated Terrorist Activities in Indonesia ................................................................. 60
   1. Frequency of JAD & MIT Attacks in Indonesia ................................................................. 60
   2. Nature of JAD & MIT Attacks and Targets ................................................................... 62
      a. Nature of Attacks ....................................................................................................... 62
      b. Nature of Targets ...................................................................................................... 63
III. ISIS Affiliated Terrorist Activities in the Philippines ....................................................... 63
    1. Frequency of ASG & BIFF Attacks in the Philippines .................................................. 63
    2. Nature of ASG & BIFF Attacks and Targets ................................................................. 65
       a. Nature of Attacks ..................................................................................................... 65
       b. Nature of Targets ..................................................................................................... 66
IV. Marawi – A Turning Point for ISIS and its affiliates in Southeast Asia ......................... 67
    1. Brief Description of the Marawi Siege ........................................................................ 67
    2. ISIS core Involvement in the Marawi Siege ................................................................. 69
V. Findings ............................................................................................................................... 72

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 75

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................. 80
List of Figures

Figure 1. Al Qaeda and Terrorist Networks in Southeast Asia................................................. 11
Figure 2. ISIS Footprint in Southeast Asia .................................................................................. 16
Figure 3. Summary of Hypotheses Established in Chapter II...................................................... 38
Figure 4. The “Islamist Tropical Crescent” in Southeast Asia ...................................................... 42
Figure 5. Frequency of JAD Attacks......................................................................................... 61
Figure 6. Frequency of MIT Attacks......................................................................................... 61
Figure 7. Nature of Attacks - JAD .............................................................................................. 62
Figure 8. Nature of Attacks - MIT ............................................................................................. 62
Figure 9. Nature of Targets - JAD............................................................................................... 63
Figure 10. Nature of Targets - MIT............................................................................................. 63
Figure 11. Frequency of ASG Attacks......................................................................................... 64
Figure 12. Frequency of BIFF Attacks......................................................................................... 64
Figure 13. Nature of Attacks - ASG............................................................................................ 65
Figure 14. Nature of Attacks - BIFF........................................................................................... 65
Figure 15. Nature of Targets - ASG............................................................................................ 66
Figure 16. Nature of Targets - BIFF........................................................................................... 66
Figure 17. Marawi Siege - 2017................................................................................................. 68
### List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFP</td>
<td>Armed Forces of the Philippines</td>
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<tr>
<td>AKP</td>
<td>Ansarul Khilafah Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ</td>
<td>Al Qaeda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASG</td>
<td>Abu Sayyaf Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIFF</td>
<td>Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAKSI</td>
<td>Forum of Islamic Law Activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTD</td>
<td>Global Terrorism Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPAC</td>
<td>Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAD</td>
<td>Jemaah Ansharut Daulah</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAT</td>
<td>Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid</td>
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<td>JI</td>
<td>Jemaah Islamiyah</td>
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<tr>
<td>KMM</td>
<td>Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>Maute Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>MILF</td>
<td>Moro Islamic Liberation Front</td>
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<td>MIT</td>
<td>Mujahidin Indonesia Timor</td>
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<td>MMI</td>
<td>Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNLF</td>
<td>Moro National Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US INDOPACOM</td>
<td>United States Indo-Pacific Command</td>
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</tbody>
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“We pledge to obey [al-Baghdadi] on anything which our hearts desire or not and to value him more than anyone else. We will not take any emir other than him unless we see in him any obvious act of disbelief that could be questioned by Allah in the hereafter.”
Senior Abu Sayyaf Group commander, Isnilon Hapilon (Summer 2014)

Introduction

I. Significance of the Topic

Following the Islamic State’s dramatic territorial gains in Iraq and Syria in 2014, Islamist militant groups from across the globe had begun to shift their loyalty from Al Qaeda to ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Pledges of allegiance from terrorist groups emerged as Al Qaeda’s Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri disavowed the Islamic State in February 2014 in a bid by Al Qaeda and its network to reassert some level of authority over the jihadi campaign in Syria. Instead this resulted in setting the stage for groups across all continents to begin choosing sides. While Al Qaeda had for years been one of the only terrorist organisations operating in the Middle East, North Africa and both South and Southeast Asia acting as an attractive partner for dozens of smaller terrorist groups, the rejection of its new fundamentalist competitor by Al Qaeda leadership enabled the Islamic State to gather new affiliates on a global scale. Support for the Islamic State among other fundamentalist militant groups manifested itself through various means. Some groups would simply show their support for ISIS’s ideology by displaying the infamous black banner while other groups took a dramatic step further and pledged loyalty, or bay’ah, in this case to ISIS’s Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi demonstrating their allegiance to the core organisation and formally establishing a terrorist alliance once their bay’ah pledge has been recognised and acknowledged by ISIS leadership. This move would at times lead to the establishment of an official Islamic State province, or wilayat, allowing ISIS to expand geographically and for local Islamist affiliates to gain further legitimacy. While the exact number of ISIS official affiliates is unknown and could include a worryingly large number of groups across the globe, ISIS to this day still receives pledges of allegiance. While the group’s setbacks in the Middle East have caused it to lose some momentum, cells still remain loyal to their Caliph and groups have been recently renewing their pledges and even at times pledging their allegiance to ISIS for the very first time.

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3 BBC. Al-Qaeda disavows ISIS militants in Syria. BBC News, 2014
allowing for new provinces to emerge such as in Turkey in July 2019. While the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq may be a shadow of its once formidable self with a military wing in tatters and stripped of the quasi totality of the lands it once conquered and ruled with an iron fist, its deadly ideology remains alive and well and attractive to other militant groups.

Unfazed by geographical constraints, Islamist militant cells located thousands of kilometres away from Baghdadi’s Caliphate and the jihadi campaign in Syria have also pledged bay’ah to the core organisation’s leader since 2014 and have remained committed to their alliance with ISIS. Southeast Asia has not escaped the ISIS trend and local Islamist cells have seen in ISIS an opportunity which cannot be ignored. The establishment of the long envisioned Islamic Caliphate in 2014 would be followed by allegiance pledges from Islamist cells located in the region, particularly in both the Philippines and Indonesia, an allegiance to join ISIS in its successful campaign and struggle against the corrupt and vicious enemies of Islam while defeating the armies of Rome. This phenomenon was however initially disregarded by Southeast Asian governments despite ISIS’s sphere of influence expanding in West Africa, the Maghreb, the Middle East and South Asia in just over a year, and eventually spreading to Southeast Asia. It would ultimately lead to a deadly second wave of terrorism in the region following local Islamist pledges of allegiance to al-Baghdadi and amid ISIS’s rise throughout the globe. Indeed while many plots were foiled, the low intensity of successful initial terrorist attacks led some to believe that ISIS affiliates in the region did not possess the capability to launch large-scale and mass casualty attacks as was the case of the 2002 Bali bombing orchestrated by Al Qaeda’s regional affiliate Indonesian-based group Jemaah Islamiyah. However, terrorist attacks attributed, enabled or inspired by the Islamic State that shook countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, were perpetrated by entities or individuals that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The ISIS banner would also allow local Islamist cells to regroup and unite in the hopes of establishing an Islamic State of their own while fighting against their common enemies in a battle opposing the good and the infidels in which they would liberate the exploited and marginalised Muslims from their plight. A vision which eventually came to light in 2017 when ISIS affiliates took control over Marawi city, a strategically important economic hub in the Southern Philippines, the first major city to fall under the ISIS flag outside of Syria and Iraq.

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4 POSTINGS, Robert. *Islamic State Turkey province video claims new wilayah in old turf*. The Defense Post, 2019
Although it may seem reasonable for some Islamist groups to want to ally with the Islamic State, it could be argued that their choice might involve hurdles and the move itself could result in much higher costs for these cells than previously they had previously anticipated. To date there has been a lack of thorough study on why Islamist groups in Southeast Asia have made the decisive move to align with the Islamic State. Instead there has been a growing body of scholarly literature on other terrorism-related phenomena such as the organised crime-terror nexus and State-sponsored terrorism. The lack of attention could be attributed to the nature of the events being rather new. However, this phenomenon, although rare, is far from novel; as Al Qaeda can be seen as an ideal example of such dynamic through the network it has forged throughout the years when it acted as the vanguard of Salafi Jihadism prior to ISIS’s advent in the global jihadi arena. Furthermore, it is possible that many policy-makers and academics attribute the move to factors which can comfortably be identified and relied upon in counterterrorism operations. This state of mind could explain why Southeast Asian governments have not only taken so long to acknowledge the threat posed by ISIS-affiliated cells in the region, but also have failed to prevent local Islamists from aligning themselves with ISIS and its doctrine resulting in renewed deadly terrorist activities such as the taking of Marawi and ultimately the deaths of thousands of individuals and the revitalisation of religious tensions in the region.

This thesis seeks to fill some gaps and further explain the phenomenon of ISIS affiliates with respect to Southeast Asia as the regional context may bring further insight as to local Islamist militant groups’ choices despite the scarcity of primary sources related to these events.

II. Research Question

Very little is known about local ISIS-affiliates structures, resources, groups’ membership and their level of operational and intelligence capabilities. Even less is known about these groups’ ties to ISIS core subsequent to the bay’ah pledges to the terrorist organisation’s Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. While ISIS took the world by surprise, academics are now confronted with a new smokescreen in a field which already suffers from much debate, irregularities and self-criticism. The aim of this thesis is not to claim to have all the answers but to complement past studies in the field of terrorist alliances and incorporate previously identified factors within the context of Southeast Asian Islamist groups affiliated to ISIS core. While this thesis may indirectly provide an insight in to how an alliance between local Islamist cells and ISIS could
impact on the region, it seeks to answer one relevant question: What are the incentives that may lead Southeast Asian terrorist groups to pledge their allegiance to ISIS, thus seeking out an alliance with the Islamic State?

III. Methodology and Data

This study seeks to understand what factors could enable Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia to seek a military alliance with ISIS core by looking at several theories presented by various authors who have all heavily contributed to the field of military alliance and/or cooperation between terrorist groups. Theories will be presented in greater detail and will be followed by an attempt at establishing a parallel between presented theories and the behaviour of violent Islamist groups’ alliance based in Southeast Asia.

In order to test the hypotheses of this research which will be presented in the theoretical framework chapter, a quantitative method will be utilised in order to study and analyse data related to the frequency, the nature and the targets of attacks perpetrated by four known ISIS-affiliated Islamist groups based in both the Philippines and Indonesia. Each of the groups’ operational dynamics will be extensively studied and analysed prior and following their pledge of allegiance to ISIS leadership up until 2017. The information gathered will be turned into visual displays in order to provide a better understanding for the reader. In this study, data has been acquired from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) for attacks led by ISIS affiliated groups in both the Philippines and Indonesia only up until 2017 due to the absence of data related to attacks after 2017 on the database. A lack of consistent, accurate and available data for attacks after 2017 would have meant that the thesis would be using erroneous figures, thus possibly impacting the objective of the exercise and thereby to discrepancies.

For terrorist activities in Southeast Asia, the choice was made to focus on results generated using the GTD and to ensure that as many as possible attributed attacks would be identified. Both successful and unsuccessful attacks have been used to create visual graphs. It is however important to mention that some terrorist activities may have been omitted or missed simply due to the nature of the study itself and the lack of reliable data. The study also relied on the definition, used by the GTD database when collecting figures, of a terrorist attack as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation”. Three attributes
identified by the GTD therefore needed to be met: (1) the incident had to be intentional, (2) the incident had to entail a political threat of violence, and (3) the perpetrators of the incidents had to be sub-national actors.

In addition to the definition provided by the GTD and the three attributes noted above, the study also ensures that three criteria assigned by the GTD will be met in order for available data to be collected and to be visually displayed: (1) the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal, (2) there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims, and (3) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities\(^5\). After collecting data from the GTD and inserting it into Microsoft Excel, an analysis was performed on each of the four groups chosen for this study to provide better visual results relating to the frequency of attacks led by the groups since their creation and since the pledges of allegiance to ISIS. Information has also been collected in respect of the methods used by the groups in terrorist activities and the nature of their targets; data was collected, sorted on various excel spreadsheets and eventually released through the use of graphs for better visual results. This exercise also enables us to grasp the related groups’ methods of attack before and after their bay’ah pledges thus allowing an analysis of the level of violence of those groups prior to and following their alliance to ISIS. It is however crucial to stress that data collected via the GTD or other various online sources might include minor inaccuracies due to the nature of the studied field and as “not all sources that are available in real time are still available or accessible years later”\(^6\).

Additionally, a qualitative research method is also be applied in order to better comprehend each groups studied in this chapter and gain a greater understanding of each of the groups’ history, internal structure, ideology, area of operations, source of funding and so forth, a way of constructing a portfolio for each of the terrorist groups studied. This analysis, coupled with the quantitative exercise, allows for a better testing of hypotheses thus providing the thesis with all the required tools for results to be presented in respect to the research question. This exercise relies on the collection and analysis of secondary sources which includes academic articles as well as news sources, local to the region when possible in order to collect as much reliable data as possible in order to study a field which already suffers from many inconsistencies. The aim is to achieve more approximate results in the findings of the study.

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\(^5\) GTD. Data Collection Methodology. Global Terrorism Database

The thesis also heavily relies on data collected by both international and when feasible Southeast Asian-based organisations which include the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, the Terrorism Research Analysis Consortium, the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, and the Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Data triangulation allows for the collection of data from multiple sources thus further enabling the thesis to corroborate findings and reduces bias in the research process while increasing the measure of certainty of the findings. This approach therefore provides a more holistic perspective and complete portrait of the phenomenon in this study.

Hypotheses in this thesis are tested by relying on case studies involving four Southeast Asian Islamist groups which have all pledged allegiance to ISIS and not simply support to the core organisation. The four groups include Jemaah Ansharut Daulah, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, Abu Sayyaf Group, and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. These groups emanate from Indonesia and the Philippines, the only two countries in the region where dozens of cells have pledged allegiance and support to the Islamic State since 2014. These groups have been selected for the case study exercise by looking into their activities, the level of attention they had acquired following their pledge of allegiance, the level of threat they pose to their countries of origin and lastly, simply by looking into the quantity of available data which would allow for a feasible study. The case study research is defined by Yin as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” thus allowing the study to investigate in great detail a phenomenon in its context through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative settings.

A process tracing method is used in the writing of this thesis. This is an important tool of qualitative analysis defined by Collier as “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” thus allowing for a better shaping of causal mechanisms. There is a focus on the method of explaining-outcome process tracing, one of the three types of process tracing outlined by Beach and Pedersen. The method employed in this case allows the thesis to make an attempt at explaining the outcomes by using a plethora of potential factors that contributed

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8 COLLIER, David. Understanding process tracing. PS: Political Science & Politics, 44(4), 823- 830, p.823
to local Islamists pledging allegiance to ISIS core. This particular method is deemed preferable in this scenario as the thesis aims at investigating a known outcome while we are left to some extent in the dark as to what exactly could have contributed to it.

IV. Structure Overview

This thesis is divided into four distinct chapters which all present relevance in order to answer the research question set forth. The first shortest chapter focuses solely on the context in which ISIS has received and acknowledged bay’ah pledges from Southeast Asian Islamist groups. This chapter is far from futile as it provides the reader with all necessary information as to the region’s fundamentalist Islamic context. This chapter therefore provides some first-hand tools to understand why local Islamists have sought out a terrorist alliance with ISIS and in turn why the terrorist hub has accepted these allegiance pledges from a region which could be identified as a hotbed for Islamist insurgency.

The second chapter includes both a literature review and the theoretical framework for this thesis. As yet, there has been little focus on the phenomenon of terrorist groups establishing international alliances, thus this chapter explores the shortcomings of contemporary literature and seeks to explore some hypotheses after looking into a number of theoretical factors which may contribute to the phenomenon.

Chapter three is the first part of the empirical analysis of this thesis. Four Islamist militants groups, that have all pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader (two of which are based in Indonesia and two in the Philippines), are thoroughly studied. The aim here is to understand the groups’ composition, their ideologically-driven doctrine, their structure and any further information which could provide clues as to groups’ incentives to pledge their allegiance to ISIS.

The final chapter allows for another empirical study of the same groups studied in chapter three, but this time by looking at each groups’ method of attacks, targets of attacks and frequency of terrorist activities. While this research may indirectly answer the question of how an alliance with ISIS may come about, it also complements the previous chapter by providing further insights as to reasons why local terrorist cells would opt for an alliance with ISIS core, thus providing a more detailed setting for the conclusion of the thesis.
Chapter I – Context: Understanding the Rise of ISIS in Southeast Asia

I. A Troubling Path Leading to an Islamic State Expansion

1. A History of Islamist Extremism in the Region

It has been well reported that many Southeast Asian nationals have followed the dark path of radicalisation, embraced a perverted interpretation of Islam calling for a war against America and nations it sponsors, before travelling to the Middle East to join ISIS in its “Just War” to protect Muslims against repression and mortal threats\(^\text{10}\). Those who could not afford to travel to Syria and Iraq or had been prevented in doing so have instead joined ISIS affiliated cells in Southeast Asia, primarily active in the Philippines and Indonesia despite the popular conception of the region itself being religiously diverse and tolerant. The past decade however has seen a worrying rise in Islamist (violent-) extremism occurring throughout Southeast Asia with attacks perpetrated by violent secessionist Islamist groups in the Southern Philippines and Thailand, Islamic militancy in Singapore and Malaysia as well as calls from some individuals and extremist groups for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Indonesia\(^\text{11}\). Islamic militant groups have for decades been active and have been operating either in their own country or islands in the archipelago focusing their agenda on domestic issues related to the adoption of Sharia law and/or seeking independence from government control and authority. It is worth mentioning that religious extremism in the region should not only be seen as an Islamic-led issue as illustrated by the recent troubling intense period of violence directed towards the Rohingya minority in Myanmar by extremist Buddhist monks which allowed ISIS and other terrorist groups to lure new recruits to engage in acts of terrorism\(^\text{12}\). In this particular scenario, militants linked to Al Qaeda and ISIS both explicitly and implicitly expressed their willingness to wage jihad against the government, an “obligation of Islam” against their enemies\(^\text{13}\). It is also important to point out that the rise of (violent-) extremism is not only limited to a small number of Islamist extremist groups but has found growing appeal

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\(^{12}\) BERNAMA/AM. *Islamic State using Rohingya crisis to recruit Malaysians for ‘holy war’: Counter-terror chief*. Channel News Asia, 2017

among the broader population at a time when freedom of expression has worryingly led to an increase in religiously motivated hate and violence.

The emergence of radical Islamist groups in Southeast Asia dates from the 1990s and can be traced to several factors which can be identified both domestically and externally. Historically also, links to Islamic fundamentalism can be illustrated through the involvement of Southeast Asian nationals during the Cold War in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets before returning home with a newly acquired experience of fighting ‘infidels’ and new teachings and years of fighting experience. It is estimated that approximately 1,000 Southeast Asian mujahedeen had been exposed to the fundamentalist belief in training camps in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, allowing the returning fighters to establish their own Islamic schools or to disseminate their radical message through local mosques.

The mid-1997 Asian financial crisis created a propitious environment for the activities of both political and religious extremist movements in the region. This economic meltdown, some argued, served as a catalyst in Islamist militancy, allowed the growth of Islamic “middle-class illiberalism” and transformed the ASEAN region into a vision of “a darkling plain where ignorant armies clashes by night”. The jihadist army which would appear was to some extent fuelled by the phenomenon of globalisation led by a new generation of middle-class Malay and Indonesian radicals. Indeed the region’s period of economic prosperity from the 1970s until the late 1990s and its subsequent collapse would bring millions back to the Mosque to cope with the immense loss of employment and capital.

Years after the Cold War had ended; Islamic militancy revivalism in the region would be linked to poverty, alienation of the community, reactive to secularist authoritarian and oppressive central governments, plus growing anger over Israel’s activities in the Palestinian territories. There developed the desire by many to create a pan-Islamist Southeast Asia which we can imagine may have further been enhanced as a result of Iran’s “Asian tilt” in its own foreign policy illustrated by a political and economic rapprochement with Southeast

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14 RABASA, Angel. *Introduction*. Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists, 43(358), 2003
Asia. The factors described above, growing anger with U.S. foreign policy which normally espoused democratic values but supported local political regimes that oppressed the minorities, and the expansion of global terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and their influence would pave the way for extremist ideology in the region and allow the Al Qaeda network to make significant inroads into Southeast Asia. Activities of militant groups in the region could be placed on a spectrum spanning the objectives of Muslim separatist aspirations in Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, Islamic militancy in Malaysia and Indonesia and the global anti-Western agenda adopted by Al Qaeda. Such security threats which have gathered momentum throughout the years and since ISIS’s involvement in the region, from the establishment of a Caliphate in the Middle East, are only further contributing to this modern day security issue.

2. An Experience with Islamist Terrorism

The presence of Islamist terrorists in the region is not a new phenomenon and one may find clear historical links between Southeast Asia and Islamist terrorist groups. The 2002 Bali bombings which resulted in over 200 deaths demonstrated the very existence of an Islamist terrorist network in the region despite the initial neglect or uncertainty expressed by many regarding the reality on the ground. In order to understand the rise of ISIS in Southeast Asia, it is crucial to get a grasp of the organisation’s global terrorism network predecessor, Al Qaeda, which aimed at establishing an Islamic caliphate while resorting to violence against perceived enemies of Islam and opponents to its violent agenda. The transnational terrorist hub is believed to have provided assistance to a multitude of Islamist movements in Southeast Asia. Such groups include, Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia, and the various Laskar Islamist groups operating in the region. Such movements were strong especially in Indonesia and the Philippines as both Southeast Asian nations lacked the capability to adequately respond to the threat these groups posed. This contributed to Al Qaeda further focusing on the Southeast Asia region where by 2002 one-fifth of its organisational strength was centred.

20 ALABRESE, John. Iran’s Economic Outreach to Southeast Asia. Middle East Institute, 2016
Furthermore, as archipelagic countries with thousands of islands and extremely porous borders, the lack of strong law enforcement and judicial institutions, complemented by government repression, opened the way to such phenomenon\textsuperscript{24}. These activities would not go unnoticed, especially following the September 11 attacks and the Bush Administration’s ‘War on Terror’, which eventually led the U.S. to consider the region as the so-called “Second Front” in its campaign following Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001. The region however never became a large scale battlefield against terrorism despite a series of sporadic high profile attacks orchestrated by Al Qaeda affiliated cells\textsuperscript{25}. Just as for Al Qaeda, ISIS today benefits from the same predispositions its predecessor enjoyed as the region has all the ingredients required to become the future cauldron of brutal terrorist violence due to factors previously observed and the existence of terrorist logistical bases\textsuperscript{26} hence the region being dubbed today the second front for ISIS. ISIS’s predecessor strongly contributed to professionalising local Islamist groups and allowed the forging of ties amongst them and with the Al Qaeda core itself\textsuperscript{27} which in some way can explain how some of these groups cooperate today to the same extent they did during the Marawi siege for instance.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Al-Qaeda-Networks.png}
\caption{Al Qaeda and Terrorist Networks in Southeast Asia\textsuperscript{23}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{23} RABASA, Angel. \textit{Chapter 5: Terrorist networks in Southeast Asia}. Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists, 43(358), 2003, p.62
\textsuperscript{24} RABASA, Angel. \textit{Southeast Asia: The Second Front?} Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report no. 112, 2003, p.11
\textsuperscript{25} SANDERSON, Thomas. \textit{Black Flags over Mindanao: ISIS in the Philippines}. Testimony presented before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2017, p.2
\textsuperscript{26} MOKHTAR, Faris. \textit{The Big Read: Battered in the Middle East, IS eyes Southeast Asia as next terrorism hotspot}. Channel News Asia, 2019
\textsuperscript{27} US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, \textit{Terrorism in Southeast Asia}, Congressional Research Service, 2009, p.3
Angel M. Rabasa identified three types of Islamic terrorists operating in the region but with distinct agendas and operational dynamics. Firstly, international terrorist networks (such as Al Qaeda and its regional counterpart JI) had global or regional agendas while targeting both U.S. and other international elements perceived as enemies to their objective of establishing a pan Islamic political entity. The second category includes domestic groups such as the Laskar cells and Abu Sayyaf. These radical Islamist paramilitary groups may share a similar ideology as the more regional/international actors previously mentioned but differ in terms of goals with a more local focus and with blurred lines between the political goals they may have and criminal activities they undertake. Lastly, the third group identified by Rabasa comprises separatist groups (e.g. Moro Islamic Liberation Front) which have mostly been active in both Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines and “reflect the minority position of Muslim communities within non-Muslim majority countries”.

These local groups, by collaborating directly or indirectly with Al Qaeda for two decades when ideologically compatible, hoped to establish an Islamic state that encompassed Indonesia, Malaysia and the Muslim majority islands in Southern Philippines. The revival of this aspiration through ISIS is all the more troubling as ISIS appears more organised and sophisticated than Al Qaeda, therefore representing a radically new chapter of extremism in the region with the potential of spawning a new generation of jihadists through a hub which is organisationally and ideologically more appealing to local militants.

II. The Islamic State looking East

1. An Open Door for ISIS Expansion

The surge, ascendency and concomitant territorial gains attributed to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), otherwise known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), IS (Islamic State) or occasionally Daesh in its Arabic acronym, since the June 2014 proclamation of a Caliphate by the organisation’s ‘invisible sheikh’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has resulted in
ISIS over the taking leadership of the global jihadist movement. There is a lot more to ISIS than simply having occupied a large swathe of land in Iraq and Syria roughly the size of the United Kingdom, imposing its rule on almost 8 million people under the group’s reign of terror, chaos and murderous rampages, while internally and internationally displacing millions of others. The ISIS phenomenon is not limited to Syria and Iraq only. Furthermore, despite a constant shrinking territory since the beginning of U.S. led airstrikes on the Caliphate, the group has remained active as “ISIS is at the same time a solid, a liquid, and a gas, and can move between these forms as and when it needs to”\textsuperscript{33}.

The complexity behind the group’s activities and affiliations is enough to warn us about ISIS’s aspirations in Southeast Asia. The group’s aspirations should be viewed as a global phenomenon instead of one portrayed as a local one limited to Iraq and the Levant region comprised of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. ISIS had a global aim of within two years of establishing a caliphate, had already spawned a vast network of affiliated groups and entities throughout the world capable of carrying out deadly attacks. Such a global vision can be illustrated by the three circles geographical scheme identified by the Institute for the Study of War in which the third ring, or “far abroad” covers ISIS related activities in regions far away from the Caliphate which Southeast Asia falls into\textsuperscript{34}. This phenomenon can be further highlighted by the November 2016 Baghdadi appeal to the caliphate’s “soldiers” located beyond the group’s immediate theatre of operations in Iraq and Syria. This message called on followers to perpetrate attacks in Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula, Bangladesh, the Caucasus, Egypt, Indonesia, the Khorasan, Libya, the Philippines, the Sinai, Tunisia, West Africa and Yemen. This call clearly stated that “if the roads for making hijra (emigration) to Iraq and Sham are closed or confined, then Allah had made an open path for them to make hijra to one of those other blessed wilayat”\textsuperscript{35}. These fighters come from or had fought in one of the many Islamic State wilayats or provinces which have all pledged their allegiance to the Caliph since 2014. Furthermore, since late 2015, Indonesia and Malaysia have been frequently cited in ISIS’s propaganda magazine Dabiq as potential target countries for terrorist operations\textsuperscript{36}. Southeast Asia, which is home to approximately 240 million Muslims making up around 42

\textsuperscript{33} PETERSON, Scott. The state of ISIS: shrinking territory, expanding reach. The Christian Science Monitor, 2017
\textsuperscript{34} GAMBHIR, Harleen. ISIS Global Intelligence Summary March 1 – March 7, 2017. Institute for the Study of War, 2015, p.8
\textsuperscript{35} UDANI, Catalina. A Content Analysis of Jihadist Magazines: Theoretical Perspectives. Honors Undergraduate Theses, 2018, p.115
\textsuperscript{36} FAUZI, Ahmad and HAMID, Abdul. ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalised Wahhabism is a Major Factor. Middle East Institute, 2016, p.3
percent of the world’s Muslim population\textsuperscript{37}, seems to be attractive not simply because of the large pool of recruits it may find but due to the environments previously described in the first part of this chapter which are conducive to an ISIS presence.

Interestingly enough and contrary to what has been frequently stated, Southeast Asia has to date not been declared an official ISIS province. There has been speculation of such a move having already occurred years ago with reports of one wilayat under Isnilon Hapilon (Wilayat Filipines) and another under Abu Abdillah (East Asia Wilayat)\textsuperscript{38} but thorough research has shown no evidence of such a move undertaken by the terrorist organisation except in two separate erroneous instances. ISIS official media used the term “East Asia Wilayah” on 22 June 2017 in the ISIS news bulletin al-Bayan\textsuperscript{39} and on 20 July 2018, ISIS’s weekly paper al-Naba editors casually added “wilayah” to East Asia\textsuperscript{40}, before eventually reverting back to “East Asia” in both cases suggesting a slip from confused militants. This seems contradictory to the group’s strategy of accepting pledges of allegiances and eventually officially recognising an Islamic State province in the region as such move could allow the organisation to expand its global footprint despite its continuous setbacks in the Middle East. This could arguably be due to ISIS’s past experience in Africa and South Asia of fast expansion through the acceptance of pledges and the subsequent creation of wilayats which allowed the establishment of a permanent ISIS footprint in the area but also brought further challenging dilemmas to face. This move of non-recognition, according to researchers, would allow the Islamic State to profit from the presence of local affiliates minus the burden ensued by provincial recognition\textsuperscript{41}. This however would not prevent fighters in the region from carrying on issuing statements while frequently referring to East Asia Wilayat each time they had the opportunity to. For instance, recently in March 2019 and following Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi latest appearance, ISIS affiliated cells in Indonesia claimed the existence of the Patani Province (or, Wilayat Patani) in Southern Thailand\textsuperscript{42}.

\textsuperscript{37} OWEN, Elani. The Next Frontline of the Battle Against the Islamic State? Southeast Asia. Cornell International Affairs Review, 10(2), 2017
\textsuperscript{38} SINGH, Bilveer. Southeast Asia Braces for the Post-Islamic State Era. The Diplomat, 2017
\textsuperscript{39} IPAC. Marawi, The “East Asia Wilayah” and Indonesia. Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report no. 38, 2017, p.2
\textsuperscript{40} AL-LAMI, Mina. Without fanfare or announcement, today #ISIS’s weekly paper al-Naba causally slips the term “wilayah” (province) before “East Asia” for the first time This is after years of speculation if IS will declare a “wilayah” in SEA, 2018. [twitter post]
\textsuperscript{41} NESS, Marielle. Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group’s Defined Wilayat: Southeast Asia. CTC Regional Report, 2017., p.5
\textsuperscript{42} SITE. Inspired by Baghdadi’s Appearance, IS Supporters Declare Patan Province in Thailand. SITE Intelligence Group Enterprise, 2019
Such a move would enable the province in question to possibly act as a logistical and ideological hub for ISIS affiliates in Southeast Asia. This however would not deter the group from pursuing its influence expansion in the region.

Indeed, while terrorism-related deaths decreased in 2016 according to the Institute for Economics and Peace’s 2017 Global Terrorism Index, the spread of attacks has however increased. This spread is directly connected to the increasing far reach of radical Islamic extremism mainly illustrated by ISIS. While deaths from terrorist incidents decreased by 13% in 2016, it is important to note that ISIS remained the deadliest group that same year and was directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of 50% more people than in 2015 meaning that 2016 had reportedly been the group’s deadliest year with attacks in several countries attributed to the group itself or its own affiliates. So not only the group and its allies were responsible for a considerable increase in terms of attacks, it also further expanded its reach in Southeast Asia through a new wave of allegiance pledges hence the region having been dubbed the “second front” for ISIS which was partly translated into a 36% increase in deaths related to terrorism in Southeast Asia from 2016 to 2017.

A thorough study on ISIS affiliates will be carried out in later chapters of this thesis on ISIS related groups and the nature of their activities in some countries in Southeast Asia, it is however worth noting that the Islamic State has been eclipsing the traditional influence of its global competitor Al Qaeda previously enjoyed in the region as the latter’s own affiliates have either switched allegiances or been further overshadowed by ISIS-centric groups which have gathered increasing momentum. The region faces a growing threat which does not involve a potential Al Qaeda resurgence but mostly a growing appeal of ISIS. Mapping the ISIS contagious plague using Figure 2 allows for a better visualisation of the ISIS phenomenon in the region while taking note that data produced may not be entirely accurate due to the very nature of the research itself as it focuses on groups with officially ISIS-recognised bay’ah pledges and which have maintained their pledge and not retracted their position as a result of governmental issued bans or groups dismantlement. Furthermore, Figure 2 focuses only in this instance on major or notorious ISIS cells as they may act at times as umbrella

43 EHRlich, Paul. Islamic State’s Asian offensive. Politico, 2016
45 Ibid, p.16
46 MOKHTAR, Faris. The Big Read: Battered in the Middle East, IS eyes Southeast Asia as next terrorism hotspot. Channel News Asia, 2019
organisations or support a multitude of other ISIS affiliated cells which will be touched upon in a later chapter.

Figure 2. ISIS Footprint in Southeast Asia

2. A Pool of Recruits

It should also be noted here that ISIS’s gradual expansion in the region is partly due to a population based support it has received since the beginning of its campaign in Iraq and Syria. The core organisation has benefited from a certain level of support which is illustrated by the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters which started gaining increased attention when the Syrian conflict commenced in 2011, a conflict which placed the foreign jihadist fighter phenomenon on the international agenda as one of the most pressing transnational security issues of our time. Illustrating the growing concern over the phenomenon was the adoption of Resolution 2178 during a historical high-level meeting of the U.N. Security Council in September 2014\textsuperscript{47} which defined such fighters as “individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict”\textsuperscript{48}. The meeting also emphasised the

\textsuperscript{47} UN CTITF, UNCCT. Implementing Landmark Resolution 2178, United Nations, 2015, p.1

\textsuperscript{48} UN SECURITY COUNCIL. Security Council Resolution 2178 [on threats to international peace and security caused by foreign terrorist fighters], United Nations Security Council, 2014, p.2
threat as an evolving one with significant longer term risks posed to States of origin, transit, and destination as well as neighbouring regions. Despite the considerable distance between Southeast Asia and the Syrian-Iraqi war zone, the region would not be an exception to the rule. The U.S. 2015 Country Report on Terrorism ruled that “countries in the East Asia and Pacific region faced the threat of terrorist attacks, flows of foreign terrorist fighters to and from Iraq and Syria, and groups and individuals espousing support for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)”\(^{49}\).

It is estimated that today approximately 42,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 120 countries had joined terrorist organisations between 2011 and 2016 (primarily ISIS), with a particular peak in departures for conflict zones in 2015 before observing a steady decrease in the number of fighters journeying towards Syria from 2016\(^{50}\). Amongst those, researchers for the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College (London, U.K.), had by 2018 identified 1,063 Southeast Asian individuals (including 129 women and 122 minors) who had left their homes to join ISIS in order to fill its ranks after it declared a Caliphate in 2014\(^{51}\). The report found that 800 Indonesians, between 95 and 154 Malaysians, 100 Filipinos, 8 Singaporeans and 1 Cambodian national had joined ISIS ranks\(^{52}\). Governments of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have all confirmed the journey of some of their nationals to Syria and Iraq while being acutely aware of the menace ISIS would further pose to the region as a result of foreign fighters. Many of these ISIS affiliated fighters have joined the ISIS Bahasa-speaking Indonesian and Malay brigade regularly involved in battles against the Kurdish Peshmerga, Katibah Nusantara (some members have also been identified as both Filipino and Singaporean nationals despite an overwhelming majority of Indonesians and Malaysians). Despite a limited number of members, this ISIS brigade established an “indoctrination school” providing children with an ISIS ideological background alongside military training\(^{53}\). The group not only recruited, trained and turned volunteers in battle hardened mujahedeen but also encouraged and directed local affiliates back home to carry out deadly attacks\(^{54}\). In all fairness, it could be easy to assume that these jihadist fighters have not

\(^{49}\) US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, Terrorism in Southeast Asia, Congressional Research Service, 2017, p.1  
\(^{50}\) RADICALISATION AWARENESS NETWORK. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families. RAN Centre, 2017, p.15  
\(^{51}\) COOK, Joana and VALE, Gina. From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State. International Centre for the Study and Radicalisation, 2018, p.14  
\(^{52}\) Ibid, p.18  
\(^{53}\) ABUZA, Zachary. Joining the New Caravan: ISIS and the Regeneration of Terrorism in Southeast Asia. U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2015, p.4  
particularly contributed to ISIS core battlefield efficacy simply due to the small number of fighters who reached the region, however their very existence is sufficient to wreak havoc in their home region upon their return. These men and women serve a much more complex and longer term objective due to their propaganda value. They will help ISIS core regenerate local terrorist cells as a result of their training, networking and empowerment. A recent study further highlighted the threat posed by foreign fighters to Southeast Asia. It found that 60% of attacks and plots between 2014 and 2017 in Southeast Asia were not only linked to Islamic State affiliates, but were evidently directed and/or funded by ISIS operatives based in Syria. This would also allow foreign fighters based in Iraq and Syria to play a role in remotely guiding attacks according to the same study by allegedly facilitating via directives or funds 45% of ISIS-linked attacks and plots in the region in that same period of time\textsuperscript{55}.

Furthermore, the collapse of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq has led to a serious concern over a large influx of foreign jihadist fighter returnees in Southeast Asia. These fighters pose a threat to the destination country, but their return, whether because individuals have become disillusioned, seek better living conditions, were sent to carry out attacks at home or were captured and returned unwillingly home\textsuperscript{56}, also poses a non-negligible threat to the country of origin. Indeed, returnees are often battle hardened veterans trained in terrorist tactics and equipped with new skills, networks and connections allowing them to either set up or simply join already well-established cells to commit attacks back home. This troubling fact has been accepted by all governments and institutions as exemplified by James Comey, former FBI director, who stated that “foreign fighters traveling to Syria or Iraq could, for example, gain battlefield experience and increased exposure to violent extremist elements that may lead to further radicalisation to violence; they may use these skills and exposure to radical ideology to return to their countries of origin […] to conduct attacks on the homeland”\textsuperscript{57}.

Among the approximate 1,000 individuals who had performed hijra to Syria and Iraq, an estimated 308 have returned (approximately 300 Indonesians and 8 Malaysians)\textsuperscript{58}. But while some fighters may decide to return home, others may instead decide to pursue the fight in the region and join fellow jihadists who were unable to make their way to the Middle East and

\textsuperscript{55} NESS, Marielle. Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group’s Defined Wilayat: Southeast Asia. CTC Regional Report, 2017, p.3
\textsuperscript{56} RADICALISATION AWARENESS NETWORK. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families. RAN Centre, 2017, p.23
\textsuperscript{58} COOK, Joana and VALE, Gina. From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State. International Centre for the Study and Radicalisation, 2018, p.18
instead took to the battles locally as observed with the Marawi siege in the Philippines which also witnessed the involvement of regional foreign fighters from Malaysia and Indonesia\textsuperscript{59} fighting alongside Saudi, Chechen\textsuperscript{60}, Pakistani, Yemeni, Indian, Moroccan, Turkish and European nationals\textsuperscript{61}. These regional and international foreign fighters have been travelling within the region to join ISIS affiliated groups based in the region’s “triangle comprised of Mindanao, the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, and the Malaysian and Indonesian territory of Borneo”\textsuperscript{62}.

\textsuperscript{59} SANDERSON, Thomas. \textit{Black Flags over Mindanao: ISIS in the Philippines}. Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017. P.6
\textsuperscript{60} ASSOCIATED PRESS. \textit{8 foreign fighters killed in Marawi}. Sunstar, 2017
\textsuperscript{61} ALLARD, Tom. \textit{Ominous signs of an Asian hub for Islamic State in the Philippines}. Reuters, 2017
Chapter II – Theoretical Framework

I. Literature Review

1. Shortcomings in Contemporary Literature

There are ample studies in the field of international relations which identify why and with whom some states decide to form alliances, but states are far from being the sole political actors that form military alliances, whether for security, survival, interest or other factors. It should be recognised that violent non-state armed groups such as terrorist organisations will also resort to military cooperation with other groups in order to achieve their own political agenda. A major recent contributor to the field, Tricia Bacon, has argued that the formation of a terrorist alliance emerges from terrorist groups’ unlawful status, and results from the asymmetric nature of these violent non-state armed groups and their initial power disadvantage as illustrated by terrorist groups’ reliance on terror due to their initial position of inferiority. Although studies focusing primarily on this particular phenomenon are still rare, there has been a rising interest as a result of Al Qaeda acting as the vanguard of global jihadist terrorist activities and the founding of numerous Al Qaeda franchises across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Furthermore, many studies tend to focus primarily on power-related theories when attempting to understand the rationale behind terrorist groups’ alliance, while disregarding other factors which may play a crucial role in motivating the behaviour of terrorist organisations. Factors such as identity for example have even been deemed minor by some scholars. The main reason why the field of international security suffers from this lack of research can be explained by the ‘shortage’ of alliance behaviour among terrorist groups. Mickolus argued that this was due to the lack of required resources, ideological disagreements between groups, and the increased security risks to both the alliance and the groups’ themselves due to increased visibility potentially jeopardising their activities and their very existence.

A theory of balancing is too often put forward in attempting to explain why terrorist groups form alliances with weaker groups against stronger foes to increase their chances of

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survival. Suggesting that a common enemy is a vital component for this dynamic is accurate but it is far from being the sole factor and having common foes does not necessarily lead to military cooperation. Furthermore, terrorist groups constantly see themselves under threat but terrorist alliances remain uncommon which suggests that an external and common threat cannot solely contribute to the debate. Instead, one is faced with a multi-dimensional phenomenon whether groups seek profit, security, power or other benefits. As correctly argued by Bacon, while some of the existing literature focuses on generally accepted factors for alliance such as common threats and ideology, there is a lack of contribution to the field when despite the existence of these factors, terrorist alliances fail to take place. This “illustrates the tendency even for scholars to assign the reasons for these relationships, rather than to explore them.” Conventional wisdom does not provide much information as to why terrorist groups decide to establish some kind of relationship instead much attention is focused on the existence of a common source of threat with the idea of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” whilst in parallel adding ideological similarities (“brothers in arms”) to the explanation. Neither are incorrect in respect of influencing partner selection, but this still does not provide much insight as to why groups do not cooperate despite the existence of a common enemy and common ideology. Byman for instance argued that ideology alone is far from being the only driving force for the establishment of terrorist alliances which is to some extent correct. Indeed, the majority of terrorist likeminded and compatible groups remain unaffiliated and may even become confrontational. An ironic example illustrating this fact is that right-wing extremists and Islamists could collaborate on the basis they share a common hatred towards Judaism and globalisation for instance, but unsurprisingly choose not to, although there have been reports of a rapprochement between Islamists and radical leftists based on ideological interchange for some years now. Nevertheless, relying solely on these two factors may instead mask the reality on the ground and over-simplify the phenomenon.

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67 BACON, Tricia. Strange Bedfellows: Why Terrorist Organisations Ally?. Ph.D. Dissertation: Georgetown University, 2013, p.28
68 BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.10
69 Ibid, p.11
2. Defining a Terrorist Group Alliance

Before further expanding the debate on why some groups will choose to form an alliance with ISIS core, a brief part of this chapter will be devoted to understanding how one may conceptualise a terrorist group alliance. While cooperation between terrorist groups seems to have escaped much of the academics’ attention, recent events have led some scholars to look more closely at the phenomenon. However, due to the lack of work devoted to this particular field, the few scholars who have devoted time and effort to this phenomenon have relied on the concept of military alliance between states as a basis for their contribution. While alliances play a crucial part in world politics and have done so throughout history, it is striking to find that there is no widely accepted definition of what an alliance is despite a wide broad consensus about the concept’s meaning. Adding further complication to this thesis, Fedder adds that “the concept of alliance in the literature of international relations is ambiguous and amorphous”\textsuperscript{73}. By looking into the definitions provided by Holsti, Hopmann and Sullivan, it is Ely Karmon, an important contributor to the field of terrorist alliance, who helps readers by providing a short but comprehensive summarised definition of a military alliance as “a formal agreement between two or more states for the purposes of cooperation on national defence issues, or as a formal or informal settlement for the purposes of cooperation between two or more sovereign states on defence issues”\textsuperscript{74}, a way for states to complement each other’s capability against a perceived threat. Upon looking at various definitions of alliances between states, one may now define a terrorist group alliance, by ridding ourselves of the state aspect, as a cooperative or supportive strategic or tactical action for a similar objective with shared desired outcomes. This is somewhat similar to definitions of terrorist groups alliances provided by scholars including Bacon who explained that such settings were “relationships of cooperation between terrorist groups that involve mutual expectations of coordination or consultation in the future” and further added that the setting would “offer opportunities for deeper and more sustained exchanges”\textsuperscript{75}. Bacon however went one step further than many of her colleagues as she added to her definition the international setting in which alliances occur. As a result of globalisation and the internationalisation of the

\textsuperscript{73} FEDDER, Edwin. The Concept of Alliance. International Studies Quarterly, 12(1), 1968, p.70
\textsuperscript{75} BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.6
phenomenon of terrorism, alliances between militant groups have resulted in “some of the most prolific terrorist attacks and defined the terrorist threat for the past decade”76.

While the theoretical framework will provide further detailed factors brought forward by academics on why terrorist groups may be incentivised to enter into an alliance with a third group, Bruno Tertrais offers two factors for the formation of alliances between states which will resonate in later parts of the thesis. The two factors he found were (1) idealism, in which states will form an alliance when they share common values and a common identity, and (2) realism in which states will commit to a military alliance when they can reduce costs and increase benefits77.

Although this phenomenon occurs between states, it should be argued that terrorist groups are to some extent political actors. In fact, acts of terrorism are undertaken for a political objective, a factor which separates terrorist groups from criminal enterprises. Bacon also concludes that an act of terrorism contains three important components, one of which is political aims and motives78. Interestingly though, Karmon chooses not to rely on the term alliance in his study involving cooperation between terrorist groups but instead relies on the concept of “coalition” after defining it as an “ideological, material and operational cooperation between two or more terrorist organisations directed against a common enemy”. Karmon chooses to use coalition instead of alliance in the context of terrorist groups’ cooperation simply because terrorist groups do not have the same formal agreements governments have when forging alliance relationships with third states79. While this may be the case for smaller cells, this could be debatable to some extent when looking at larger organisations and ISIS’s relationship with other terrorist groups throughout the world. Some conditions, explicitly listed by ISIS operatives, are needed for allegiance pledges to be recognised by the core organisation’s leader and where possible, pledges will be made in the presence of ISIS officials representing the Islamic State’s leadership. While there might not always be a State-like formal aspect to this dynamic such as the case in alliances between states, it could be argued that the Al Qaeda and later ISIS network seem well organised with respect to their affiliates.

76 Ibid, p.6
78 BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.6
Moghadam further contributes to the under-theorised field by providing an insight into the types of terrorist alliances counterterrorist operations will encounter. Moghadam provides a typology of terrorist group cooperation: mergers and strategic alliance (both identified as “high-end cooperation”) and tactical and transactional cooperation (or “low-end cooperation”){80}. One could argue that Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia and elsewhere that have courted ISIS leadership could have been hoping for a strategic alliance with ISIS core as this relationship allows groups to share skills and resources and even possibly fighters while remaining at the same time independent and retaining control over their own respective organisation unlike situations in which groups merge together{81}. The implication of this type of cooperation is all the more worrisome for counter-terrorism efforts as this partnership is aimed at continuing for an extended period of time as groups enjoy a combination of shared interests and a common ideology unlike tactical alliances which, while based on some similar aspects of a strategic partnership, lack the basis for long term cooperation as they could collapse as early as they emerged. Some scholars would argue that allegiances pledges to the Islamic State are instead a “marriage of convenience”, or Moghadam’s tactical alliance, based on shared interests rather than ideological affinity and unlikely to last{82}.

Finally, benefits or disadvantages of alliances for terrorist groups will not be discussed here as they will be touched upon in the theoretical approach of this thesis; however Tricia Bacon provides a perfect summary of the dynamic in which “by allying with another organisation, groups can access assets that may otherwise be unavailable. Under some conditions, the potential benefits warrant the risks […] the resources and skills acquired through an alliance can be the difference between survival and extinction or between victory and defeat”{83}.

II. Why do Terrorists Ally? Balancing and Bandwagoning Behaviours

When focusing on factors leading some non-state armed groups to seek alliances with other organisations, one will find several theories in the political science literature which mostly concentrate on the power factor as a primary driving force for such intergroup interactions. A

{80} MOGHADAM, Assaf. Terrorist Affiliations in Context: A Typology of Terrorist Inter-Group Cooperation. CTC Sentinel, 8(3), 2015, p.22
{81} Ibid, p.23
{82} KARMON, Ely. Islamic State and al-Qaeda Competing for Hearts & Minds. Perspectives on Terrorism, 9(2), 2015, p.75
{83} BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.8
number of prominent researchers including, Walt, Waltz and Schweller have devoted much effort to this daunting field. Many international relations scholars offer clear insights into the nature of and rationale for state alliance and give much prominence to power-related hypotheses regarding the bandwagon and balance theories, both broadly seen as the most accepted options. While Walt advanced a theory of balance of threat to better grasp State alliance behaviour against a perceived threat, he also presented distinctions between balancing and bandwagoning to understand the nature of the choice when choosing an ally.

Power-balancing and bandwagoning theories are both crucial branches of political science and international relations theory as both strategic behaviours will be used by states or violent non-state armed groups when confronted by an external threat. It can however be arduous to accurately comprehend and distinguish between both behaviours when looking into terrorist groups alliances since perceived motives may be somewhat different from reality. While many studies do not specifically address interactions between armed groups, such as terrorist groups in this particular case, they instead address interactions between sovereign states. However, these theories could and should be used if one considers that non-state armed groups behave like sovereign states in the international system. Several authors (including Bacon) characterise terrorist groups as entities which share similarities with other types of organisations when seeking profit and power. As found by Keohane and Nye, non-state actors, which include terrorist organisations, have an important role as they have contributed to developing “autonomous actors with private foreign policies that may deliberately oppose or impinge on state politics”. Furthermore, some terrorist organisations will go as far as having their own “foreign relations department” when handling foreign policy interactions with other organisation and other foreign actors, a particularly noticeable feature with major organisations including Al Qaeda and ISIS. This behaviour therefore illustrates terrorist groups’ willingness and ability to pursue transnational relations which may take the form of a military alliance between the actors themselves which could strengthen their legitimacy in their political struggle.

Research in this field is all the more important as terrorist organisations have been previously believed to divide the world into a “with us or against us” setting in which neutrality remains

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84 BYMAN, Daniel. Remaking Alliances for the War on Terrorism. The Journal of Strategic Studies, 29(5), 2006, p.769
quasi impossible\textsuperscript{88} hence the need to understand the nature of groups’ motives for an alliance. Whilst terrorist groups which ally will seek one or more common outcomes due to similar, not necessarily identical objectives, it has been observed that alliances between these groups are far from being the norm. It was determined that approximately 0.50 percent out of the 81,799 executed terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2007 involved more than a single terrorist group\textsuperscript{89}. The lack of cooperation between groups could be explained by various factors such as the increased risks from conducting joint activities and it will make them more visible to states and eventually fall victim to intense counter-terrorism campaigns, disagreements among groups’ leaders and members based on ideological motivation, and lastly cooperation between groups may eventually turn either into dependence or competition between parties therefore negatively impacting the groups in question\textsuperscript{90}.

1. Balancing Against a Common Enemy?

The balancing theory in international relations suggests that international security can only be achieved when there is no one nation state strong enough to dominate all others according to Waltz. This theory predicts that the gain of a disproportionate amount of power by one state could incentivise it to attack its weaker neighbours. Thus, these potentially preyed states will seek a defensive alliance and power-balance against their powerful rival(s). Whilst balancing cannot possibly be applied to non-state actors simply due to the fact that terrorist groups are unable to overpower or overthrow a state in a conventional manner, Asal et al. suggested that balancing may be used in the context of terrorism if one observes that “terrorists might hope to partially offset the power advantages or perceived threat of the state (or other enemy) through an alliance with another subnational actor”\textsuperscript{91}.

In the context of terrorist alliances, a possible implication for balancing theory could be the need to balance against a common stronger enemy. This dynamic could allow groups to considerably increase their military capabilities. Balancing theory could imply a stronger likelihood of cooperation between smaller groups and larger terrorist organisations as smaller terrorist organisations will be more vulnerable to intense counter terrorism activities, leading


these groups to be further willing to share their profit with a far larger and more successful organisation.

While the first attempts by Morgenthau and Waltz through the balance of power theory were central in the field, Walt’s contribution allows a renewed focus on alliance making. Walt’s balance of threat theory is undeniably a crucial contribution to the neorealist thought in international relations as his research focused on states’ desire to ally by balancing against perceived security threats. This is a shift from the balance of power theory as Walt argued that states alliance formation occurs when states seek balance against threats instead of power. In Origins of Alliances, Walt attempted to complete Waltz’s previous contribution to explaining state alliance behaviour and brought forward his theory of balance of threat in which states ally in response to imbalances of threat. His approach was novel compared to Waltz’s as he included not only power, but factors of threat to his own approach.

As stated by Walt, “when there is an imbalance of threat, states will form alliances or increase their internal efforts in order to reduce their vulnerability.” This conclusion came as Walt found that states tend to balance against threatening foes instead of bandwagoning, a balance against a powerful but most importantly threatening enemy. While this theory only relates to alliances involving states, Walt’s balance of threat theory could be seen as the most suitable starting point in looking at alliances between non-state actors.

Once again, this theory only focused on state actors and did not take into account non-state actors’ alliance behaviour. Some scholars have however attempted to fill the gap by looking at terrorist group alliances and have relied on balance of threat theory in study cases, including Karmon’s 2005 research on the alliance relationship between militant Palestinian organisations and some European revolutionary groups of the 1970s. His application of Walt’s theory also led him to tentatively look into Islamist terrorism in the 1980s and relations between terrorist groups and Al Qaeda, which had a common enemy described as “global crusaders” and evidence tend to show that terrorist groups will be more likely to ally in response to a perceived common threat. However, Karmon seemed to have provided a rather elementary reasoning behind Islamist terrorist groups alliance as he would find that “virtually all the organisations and groups feel threatened by their own regimes, viewed as inefficient,

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93 Ibid, p.263
corrupt, oppressive, collaborators of the ‘Zionist Crusaders alliance’\textsuperscript{95}, a simplistic approach in which the US was unsurprisingly the common perceived enemy. Even though this factor is undeniably important in understanding relations between terrorist groups and Al Qaeda, and between Southeast Asian terrorist groups and ISIS in this particular scenario, bay’ah pledges to ISIS core could not possibly be explained solely by the existence of a common threat or a common enemy.

While there are various elements which could lead terrorist groups to collaborate, this strategic incentive could also be due to an immediate threat such as countering the US-led war on terror or more general perceived threats which enhance the need for some terrorist groups to increase their own capabilities, possibly through the establishment of an alliance\textsuperscript{96}. Also, Bacon would later add that terrorist groups remain in a competitive climate and the greater the existence of a common threat, the more likely they will form a partnership against it. An important contribution here would be the role of alliance hubs which “act as a central force confronting a threat that also concerns numerous organisations”\textsuperscript{97} and which could play a central role in the coalition formed in response to the perceived shared threat.

2. Bandwagoning

While some terrorist groups may occasionally seek alliances exclusively for material gains, other groups undeniably will seek instead prestige through the creation or joining of an already established alliance. The term “bandwagoning” in this scenario occurs when a weaker entity aligns itself with a more powerful and successful party. This rational choice is made in the hope of increasing the smaller and less powerful group’s own status by associating itself with success and power and for the sake of possible payoffs. Unlike the balancing theory, bandwagoning seems to be the best option for weaker entities as they align themselves with a much stronger party at the expense of balancing with weaker states. It has been further argued that bandwagoning should even be the preferable strategy for weaker entities when seeking profit other than simply security\textsuperscript{98} despite the eventual sacrifice of some extent of independence, although military alliances will allow smaller entities to bandwagon with larger

\textsuperscript{96} HOROWITZ, Michael and POTTER, Philip. Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 58(2), 2013, p.204
\textsuperscript{97} BACON, Tricia. Strange Bedfellows: Why Terrorist Organisations Ally?. Ph.D. Dissertation: Georgetown University, 2013, p.30
groups to increase the likelihood of their own survival. By bandwagoning, these eludes the defensive neo-realist approach of balance of power which identifies states as reasoned actors seeking balance against external threat, and survive while remaining sovereign.

Walt argues that the bandwagoning option in alliances is optimal when an entity is weak (-er) contrarily to Mearsheimer who instead suggests that bandwagoning is a strategy of the weak which occurs when the weaker party recognises its own lacuna hence the need to align with the stronger party99, a defeatist attitude or capitulation, a position which could not apply in the case of terrorist groups aligning themselves with a powerful hub. However, Mearsheimer adds that bandwagoning actors may achieve more “absolute power” and the larger and dangerous State, in the context of State alliance will gain more. But terrorist groups cannot bandwagon with a source of danger, as formulated by Bacon, as they will cooperate with other groups in order to balance against their common enemies100. ‘Jumping on the bandwagon’ with a stronger but also threatening enemy will simply contradict terrorist groups’ own raison-d’être101. Instead, one may see this terrorist bandwagon as an offensive one in which alignment with a dominant group entails a share of the spoils of victory in lieu of a defensive approach which is a form of appeasement102. Indeed the purpose of bandwagoning according to Schweller is “usually self-extension: to obtain values coveted”103.

Furthermore, bandwagoning may also allow terrorist groups to profit from the relationship by acquiring new skills and practices from its more powerful partner104, a factor which could ultimately be observed by studying the operational dynamics of terrorist organisations subsequent to formally joining an alliance. Schweller himself argued that alliances should be seen as a response, not only to threats, but also to possible opportunities which may arise from this relationship. This could explain why bandwagoning could be the leading theory for this behaviour as “balancing is an extremely costly activity but bandwagoning rarely involves costs”105. What Schweller omits to mention is the possibility that more powerful partners may

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100 Bacon, Tricia. Strange Bedfellows: Why Terrorist Organisations Ally?. Ph.D. Dissertation: Georgetown University, 2013, p.28
demand a “joining fee” such as funds, resources, expertise or possibly a sacrifice of one’s operational autonomy before allowing groups to join the bandwagon. While the factors described above have been mostly associated with nation states and even businesses, one may conceive a similar scenario in the terrorism context in which a terrorist group may respond favourably to an alliance with a more successful, powerful and renowned terrorist organisation, as a means of attaining its own objectives. One way of measuring the success of a terrorist alliance according to Asal et al. could be through the study of the scope, lethality and effectiveness of the group’s terrorist attacks prior and following its alliance with another terrorist organisation; an exercise which will be reproduced in last chapter of this study. Terrorist attacks and their resulting casualties arguably illustrate a form of competence, resourcefulness and knowledge which makes an alliance more likely between terrorist groups. This possibly signifies that a group which has the capacity of drawing attention via deadly attacks prior to its cooperation with a second party may accept or seek such alliance. Conversely, the lack of attention a group receives may turn it into a less attractive partner for future collaboration due to the lack of experience and of value added.

It is however important to note in the context of pledges of allegiances to ISIS that bay’ahs will invariably draw attention from the international community and global counter-terrorism campaigns which ultimately could render the choice of an alliance counter-productive and even perilous for smaller groups; this is why survival and prestige only cannot explain the need for some groups to bandwagon the ISIS phenomenon hence the need to understand other factors which could explain this alliance dynamic. While some scholars including Tricia Bacon do not identify bandwagoning as the main theory justifying terrorist groups’ alliances due to the nature of the approach, others have identified it as being an intrinsic part of the analysis. After all, Walt himself had found that bandwagoning was far less common than the balancing behaviour in military alliances between states and remained an option most likely adopted by weaker and isolated states. It could be insinuated that weaker states or

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groups in this case have nothing to lose but instead only to gain by “jumping on the bandwagon”.

**Hypothesis 1:** Terrorist groups are more likely to ally with other terrorist groups who have a common enemy.

**Hypothesis 2:** Terrorist groups which have perpetrated deadly attacks are likely to be an attractive partner for other terrorist organisations.

### III. Further Conducive Factors for an Alliance Between Terrorist Groups

In attempting to understand why terrorist groups form alliances, Day found that many scholars had previously focused intensively on the survival criteria. This had been demonstrated in the case of sovereign states bandwagoning large states to increase their likelihood of survival in the international arena. By using this logic, alliances indeed will “provide a joint order of battle, coordination of attack, and diffusion of new technologies and weapons.” But this phenomenon is not reserved to sovereign states only as argued by Idler who demonstrated various arrangements, whether long-term or short-term, observed between violent non-state armed groups. However, it has been found in his study that threats only cannot be the premise for an alliance arrangement between groups as other factors, in particular trust in this case is necessary, and the more groups trust each other, the more likely groups will engage in stable relationships. One may find various factors which would lead terrorist groups to foster partnerships, thus allowing them to benefit from the relationship by gaining access to knowledge, information, sources of income, equipment and possibly fighters, benefits which might otherwise be inaccessible. Indeed, relying solely on threat-based theory to explain why terrorist groups ally may be counterproductive as these groups, like many other violent non-state armed groups, constantly consider themselves threatened by greater powers but alliances, despite this dynamic, remain rare to this day.

While the factors noted below are far from being novel in studying alliance dynamics maintained by terrorist groups as they have previously been advanced by several authors such as Bacon, Phillips, Asal et al., their theoretical approach and the focus of this research on

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113 IDLER, Annette. Exploring Agreements of Convenience Made among Violent Non-State Actors. Perspectives on Terrorism, 6(4-5), 2012, p.68-70
ISIS affiliates in Southeast Asia will be an important starting point in understanding what factors have led some Islamist groups in the region to seek partnership with the ISIS hub while complementing current research on this issue, allowing for a better insight into local Islamist terrorist groups reasoning.

1. Terrorist Group Organisational Needs

While the term ‘organisational needs’ has been extensively used by Bacon, the factor in itself has been found in various other scholars’ studies. Bacon has however provided a more detailed clarification as she agreed with other scholars on the idea of alliances becoming a response to organisational weaknesses and vulnerabilities which may not be overcome independently, assets which may be provided by major organisations such as terrorist hubs\textsuperscript{114}. These hubs have the capability of providing what smaller groups seek which explains why they are regularly sought out.

Thus, one potential robust explanation as to why terrorist groups ally with one another could simply be to acquire new capabilities and gain access to both human and financial capital. It has been observed that military alliances between nation states allow for a share of resources, military equipment and knowledge therefore not only providing a sense of security but also bolstering mutual power. Horowitz and Potter addressed this dynamic when exploring the relationship between terrorist intergroup cooperation and its consequence in terms of lethality and suggested that this very process would act as a stimulus for terrorist groups’ alliance\textsuperscript{115} in which a terrorist group will accept the leadership of another larger terrorist organisation while remaining organisationally distinct as found by Byman\textsuperscript{116}.

Similarly, Karmon argued that “a major way a terrorist organisation can tip the balance in its favour is through the acquisition of new resources, such as an alliance with a wealthier revolutionary organisation or a friendly government”\textsuperscript{117}, a reflection which only further echoes past neoliberal studies which found that states allied in order to obtain military,

\textsuperscript{114} BACON, Tricia. Strange Bedfellows: Why Terrorist Organisations Ally?. Ph.D. Dissertation: Georgetown University, 2013, p.37
\textsuperscript{115} HOROWITZ, Michael and POTTER, Philip. Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 58(2), 2013, p.200
\textsuperscript{116} BYMAN, Daniel. Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organisations. Security Studies, 23(3), p.434
economic and/or political support\textsuperscript{118}. One may now assume that terrorist groups, just like states, seek some physical benefits from an alliance in relation to its organisational needs. This hypothesis finds further momentum once we observe ISIS acting as a terrorist hub, and despite possible risks which may coincide with a partnership, Bacon observed that many groups will still opt for an alliance in order to gain access to knowledge and resources which are paramount to the group’s own survival\textsuperscript{119}, turning ISIS into a perfect (and imperfect) partner for groups seeking to increase their operational capabilities. After all, this organisational-based theory could also explain why larger organisations including the Islamic State, could also supposedly profit from this relationship as it will seek affiliates “to expand the scope and scale of its operations, gain the benefits and greater local expertise, better spread innovation and – most important – endow itself and its mission with greater legitimacy”\textsuperscript{120}. This theoretical approach is however somewhat contrary to Day’s hypothesis of material assistance as not being an important factor in groups’ decision to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State\textsuperscript{121}.

\textit{Hypothesis 3:} A terrorist alliance is more likely when a terrorist group suffers from organisational gaps and seeks material gains.

Furthermore, the smaller the terrorist groups are, the more chances of them seeking an alliance with a bigger terrorist organisation as they already have the desired technical expertise, weaponry and military capabilities smaller entities need in order to survive\textsuperscript{122}. Group membership size therefore can be seen as a potential factor for considering an alliance with a larger terrorist group, or hub. Smaller groups may lack the knowledge and capabilities to effectively conduct terrorist attacks, thus compensating its organisational gaps by seeking aid from desirable larger organisations\textsuperscript{123}. One may further assert that break-away factions are also more likely to seek an alliance with a stronger terrorist organisation as they will attempt to assert themselves and survive as they will face, not only government counter-terrorism efforts due their operational weakness, but also rival terrorist groups with whom they may

\textsuperscript{118} KEOHANE, Robert. \textit{The Big Influence of Small Allies}. Foreign Policy no. 2, 1971, p.168
\textsuperscript{119} BACON, Tricia. \textit{Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape}. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014 , p.15
\textsuperscript{120} BYMAN, Daniel. \textit{Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organisations}. Security Studies, 23(3), p.431
\textsuperscript{121} DAY, Joel. \textit{The ISIS Bandwagon: Under What Conditions Do Groups Pledge Support?} Boston University Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs, 2016, p.6
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, p.3
\textsuperscript{123} PHILLIPS, Brian. \textit{Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations}. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2018, p7
share ideational similarities. Smaller groups will thus need to find external sources to compensate for their own limitations.

**Hypothesis 4:** Smaller terrorist groups are more likely to seek partnership with a larger terrorist organisation.

**Hypothesis 5:** Break-Away factions are more likely to seek partnership with another, larger terrorist organisation.

2. **A Common Identity**

While many have argued that organisational needs and potential material contribution to group’s survival are necessary in alliance making, there is undeniably a need of mutual trust between actors, which may develop through interaction, commitment and compatibility between relevant groups. Indeed, the idea that interactions between terrorist organisations are purely motivated by power and survival is preposterous. In observing alliance relations between non-state armed groups, Christia argued that the identity factors had not played an important role in alliance formation, while overlooking the very fact that many alliances featured in her research functioned on the basis of shared objectives and shared enemies. Despite her major contribution in the field, one may find that her final findings do not seem to support the reasoning of identity not being a relevant factor in alliance formation between violent non-state armed groups, especially in the case of Fundamentalist terrorist organisations. ¹²⁴

Some consider that such argumentation is too primitive, instead emphasising the need to also take into account identity related factors which could include ideology, religious motivation and possibly ethnicity (although the latter would not apply in the case of ISIS affiliates based in Southeast Asia), elements further contributing towards a sense of trust between groups and which may even be dominant in shaping such interaction between terrorist groups. Barnett added that “a natural security partner cannot be derived from material force alone, for the degree of naturalness is highly dependent on identity”¹²⁵. This suggests that violent non-state armed groups are likely to interact with other groups on the premise of a common shared identity, but few studies have actually empirically tested the role of ideology in shaping terrorist group alliance interactions.

Bacon however found that identity affinity between terrorist groups contributed to mitigating four issues met by terrorist groups when seeking alliance. She found that a shared identity (1) will help encourage cooperation and discourage defection, (2) allows a reliable source of information, (3) allows for trust building, and (4) increases groups’ willingness to share skills, knowledge and resources\textsuperscript{126}.

A correlation has been observed between the degree of trust and the durability of partnerships between terrorist groups. Idler found that violent non-state armed groups, including terrorist groups, were more likely to fight each other when trust was non-existent hence turning trust as a minimal requirement to engage in alliance arrangement\textsuperscript{127}, while keeping in mind that trust alone does not suffice for alliances to form but remains a necessary component\textsuperscript{128}. Asal et al. also brought much attention to the role of identity as they found that many large terrorist networks rely on some commonalities including shared enemies and a shared ideology\textsuperscript{129}, something which had been observed with Al Qaeda and more recently may have occurred with ISIS. Similarly. Karmon concluded that “a minimal ideological common denominator” is needed in order for a terrorist alliance to emerge\textsuperscript{130}, a position which has been a source of debate amongst scholars focusing in this field, but still demonstrates the need to some extent for ideological commonality.

As described by terrorism expert Byman, the role of ideology accounts for “the world’s conditions and offering a blueprint for action. Ideology helps an individual to formulate, consider and respond to political problems”\textsuperscript{131}, or as set forth by Bacon, ideology serves as “a lens through which groups view and interpret their environment”\textsuperscript{132}. While some may think that an alliance between two or more geographically distant terrorist groups would be impossible, or at the very least gruelling and possibly inconvenient, it was instead found that distance will not prevent the formation of an alliance between terrorist groups given that they

\textsuperscript{126} BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.45
\textsuperscript{127} IDLER, Annette. Exploring Agreements of Convenience Made among Violent Non-State Actors. Perspectives on Terrorism, 6(4-5), 2012, p.70
\textsuperscript{128} BACON, Tricia. Strange Bedfellows: Why Terrorist Organisations Ally?. Ph.D. Dissertation: Georgetown University, 2013, p.36
\textsuperscript{131} BACON, Tricia. Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.46
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid
share a common ideology\textsuperscript{133}. Ideology therefore is an important part of alliance formation processes between terrorist groups. In his own typology of types of cooperation between terrorist groups, Karmon also found that simple expressions of solidarity based on ideological similarity would sow the seeds for a more practical and visible form of cooperation between these groups\textsuperscript{134}, this hypothesis is far from novel though. Moghadam himself also identified ideological affinity as one of the key determinants for an alliance to emerge\textsuperscript{135}

While realists have put less emphasis on this denominator than on other conditions such as external threat, constructivist scholars have instead followed a different path. Walt argued that states which shared similar beliefs were more likely to form alliances against their foes while having one less reason to fear one another thus allowing an atmosphere of trust to thrive within the alliance, despite some instances of ideology becoming divisive rather than playing a unifying role putting states alliances at risk\textsuperscript{136}. This could explain why Bacon found that terrorist groups tend to define their identity parameters for alliance building which will include the degree of ideological compatibility needed to meet the threshold, therefore resulting in groups sometimes interpreting their own ideologies in order to adapt them to their conditions\textsuperscript{137}. Bacon referred to such process as “identity convergence”, a process in which terrorist groups will go as far as extending their ideology and modifying their interpretation allowing a linkage between groups’ narratives and ultimately produce a shared identity, enhance trust resulting in the creation of an alliance.

\textit{Hypothesis 6:} Terrorist groups which share a common ideology are more likely to partake in an alliance.

3. **Territorial Control**

Lastly, an interesting component put forward by a number of scholars involves territorial control as it involves both capacity but also needs\textsuperscript{138}. While territorial control might not sound relevant in alliance formation between states, territory may enable terrorist groups to be more

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, p.49
\textsuperscript{135} MOGHADAM, Assaf. \textit{Terrorist Affiliations in Context: A Typology of Terrorist Inter-Group Cooperation}. CTC Sentinel, 8(3), 2015, p.22
\textsuperscript{137} BACON, Tricia. \textit{Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape}. Perspectives on Terrorism, 8(4), 2014, p.14
\textsuperscript{138} PHILLIPS, Brian. \textit{Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations}. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2018, p.6
lethal\textsuperscript{139}, but the control of territory most importantly enables the potential supply of resources to other terrorist groups, provides training grounds and even offers a terrorist safe haven which can be extended to a group’s partner(s). Such safe havens may serve the purpose of “training, recruiting, fundraising, and communications with limited fear of sustained counterterror retaliation or pressure”\textsuperscript{140}. Makarenko characterised States acting as safe havens for terrorist groups as “black holes”, where sovereign state control over its territory is either weak or non-existent. Some Southeast Asian states at risk included Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia due to weak government control over some of their territories\textsuperscript{141} allowing local groups to become potentially attractive alliance partners. It is however interesting to note that Makarenko’s study excluded the Philippines despite acknowledging activities of some groups including the Abu Sayyaf group which, on top of its criminal and terrorist activities, seeks to establish an Islamic state in areas surrounding Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago\textsuperscript{142}.

Nominally maintained boundaries and inefficient control over parts of a State’s territory could leave a vacuum which may benefit terrorist groups. This has already been experienced by taking Al Qaeda as an example when the terrorist hub profited from its control of territory in Afghanistan to establish training facilities and operational bases. This could imply that it would be advantageous for both the large organisation hub and the smaller terrorist group as territorial control could be mutually beneficial. The following hypothesis will also explore the possibility of a terrorist hub such as ISIS predominantly accepting pledges of allegiances from local terrorist groups which, to some extent, control territory prior to a bay’ah pledge.

\textit{Hypothesis 7:} Territorial control increases the probability of terrorist groups’ alliance.

\textsuperscript{139} HOROWITZ, Michael and POTTER, Philip. \textit{Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality}. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 58(2), 2013, p.215
\textsuperscript{140} ARSENAULT, Elizabeth and BACON, Tricia. \textit{Eliminating terrorist safe havens: One size does not fit all}. The Brookings Institute, 2015
\textsuperscript{141} MAKARENKO, Tamara. \textit{The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism}. Global Crime, 6(1), 2004, p.138
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, p.137
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Terrorist groups are more likely to ally with other terrorist groups who have a common enemy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Terrorist groups which have perpetrated deadly attacks are likely to be an attractive partner for other terrorist organisations.</td>
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<td>H3</td>
<td>A terrorist alliance is more likely when a terrorist group suffers from organisational gaps and seeks material gains.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Smaller terrorist groups are more likely to seek partnership with a larger terrorist organisation.</td>
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<td>H5</td>
<td>Break-Away factions are more likely to seek partnership with another, larger terrorist organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Terrorist groups which share a common ideology are more likely to partake in an alliance.</td>
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<td>H7</td>
<td>Territorial control increases the probability of terrorist group alliance.</td>
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Chapter III – From Theory to Practice: A Focus on ISIS and its Affiliates in the ‘Islamist Tropical Crescent’

I. Understanding the Concept of Bay’ah

Before exploring factors which may lead local groups to pledge bay’ah or allegiance to ISIS and its leader, it is important to firstly understand what a bay’ah means and entails and to also distinguish it from the simple pledge of support. This is particularly relevant in this study as it has been observed that many who report these events tend to ignore this difference leading to misconceptions, and ultimately erroneous figures which may potentially have a negative impact on future studies in this already complex field when it comes to studying these particular groups.

Broadly speaking, a bay’ah to the (Islamic) Caliphate suggests a direct pledge of allegiance, an oath of fealty which, once recognised and accepted, formally brings the entities that have pledged allegiance under the authority of the Caliph. This concept, with roots in the Qu’ran and which was mostly practiced by Medieval Muslims, is in other words a kind of reciprocal contract between a leader and followers whose allegiance insinuate protection coupled with military and political leadership. The action of pledging bay’ah, which finds its roots from the dawn of Islam in the 7th century, is an important Muslim tradition as it recognised the authority of the Caliph and expressed a willingness of obedience. While the act was initially applied to the Prophet Muhammad, it would later be applied to leaders of the Muslim community succeeding the Prophet. It would take place through the organisation of elections or at times by appointment of the caliph who needed first to satisfy a set of conditions which included possessing knowledge of Islamic law, mental and physical fitness, being just, waging jihad and being a descendent of the Meccan Quraysh tribe which the Prophet himself was a member of.\(^{143}\) This important practice carried on until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. While this pledge is primarily a symbolic act which may also entail physical advantages and allow some leverage, in this scenario it is used as a way of forming an alliance with the ISIS core.

In its second Dabiq issue, ISIS described, while referring to Qu’ran verses each time, two benefits of publicly pledging bay’ah to the group and its leader. First and foremost, this act demonstrates Muslims’ loyalty to each other while abandoning rifts and divisions. Secondly, a

\(^{143}\) WAGEMAKERS, Joas. *The Concept of Bay’a in the Islamic State’s Ideology*. Perspectives in Terrorism, 9(4), 2015
bay’ah pledge will also “fill the hearts of the kuffar with painful agony”, spreading concern or even fear amongst non-Muslims. Following Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in June 2014, the leader’s spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stated that “pledging allegiance and giving assistance to the caliph […] has become incumbent upon all Muslims”. This call would be further reinforced by other ISIS-aligned scholars who would go as far as suggesting that non-obedience to and non-allegiance to the Islamic State would ultimately result in corruption and division amongst Muslims.

The organisation’s call for allegiance resonated among Muslim communities in the Middle East and in the Muslim Diaspora, including Southeast Asia. Despite disagreement voiced by a number of scholars and individuals, it was taken up by thousands of followers as illustrated by the subsequent allegiance pledges which enfolded in the following years by a great number of individuals, scholars and Islamist militant groups, many of which were previously affiliated with Al Qaeda, thus indicating a shift in global jihadist leadership. Many bay’ah pledges, whether announced via social media or through various other means, would first be carefully vetted by ISIS’s leadership before being potentially approved by al-Baghdadi hence the uncertainty as to the status of some groups having pledged a non-binding form of support to the organisation’s leader. Indeed support and allegiance may not entail the same degree of partisanship and may lead to different degrees of assistance from or to the core organisation, whether material, armed, financial and/or simply moral. As pointed out by some researchers, a bay’ah pledge may also result differently amongst various groups.

Furthermore, bay’ah pledges also ensure a two-way profiting system as both parties, whether the allegiance seeker or the receiver, will both enjoy some level of advantages. This may explain why ISIS has not blindly and immediately accepted all of its pledges as those also have an impact on the core group itself. The group’s scrutiny over some pledges may come as a result of fear of defections of either individuals or cells, a trend Al Qaeda had previously suffered from when many of its own affiliates switched sides to join a growing and stronger Islamic State, but which has later also affected ISIS to some extent. An example of this is Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid’s founder (previously co-founder and former leader of Indonesia’s JI) Abu Bakr Bashir who had pledged allegiance to ISIS while in prison in 2014 and also

144 ISIS. The Flood. Dabiq Issue no.2, 2014, p.3
145 WAGEMAKERS, Joas. The Concept of Bay’a in the Islamic State’s Ideology. Perspectives in Terrorism, 9(4), 2015
146 MILTON, Daniel and AL-UBAYDI, Muhammad. Pledging Bay’a: A Benefit or Burden to the Islamic State? CTC Sentinel, 8(3), 2015, p.3
147 Ibid, p.4
148 Ibid, p.2
made it mandatory for all JAT members to follow the same path despite deep internal divisions on the matter. He however allegedly removed his pledge early 2016 due to disagreement with some of ISIS’s activities in the Middle East150.

ISIS had recognised and welcomed in its fifth Dabiq issue titled “Remaining and Expanding” bay’ah pledges from various countries, including from both Indonesia and the Philippines, but without the announcement of the creation of a new wilayat. The core organisation may “accept their noble oath” but ISIS added that an official province would be announced once leadership of the province is appointed by the hub’s leader or upon the establishment of a direct line of communication between “the khilafah and the mujahid leadership”151.

Pledges of allegiance in Southeast Asia have come from a multitude of groups located in both Indonesia and the Philippines. While some individuals have also pledged bay’ah from Malaysia, there is no strong evidence of ISIS affiliated groups from other countries in the region. However, this has not prevented the planning and perpetration of attacks all throughout the peninsula, an area which could be identified as the ‘Islamist Tropical Crescent’, a fictional area in the south of the region encompassing Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines which has regrouped the majority of ISIS affiliated groups’ criminal activities, plots and attacks, and a region which is also marked by the presence of numerous local indigenous ISIS cells that will further be explored in this chapter. The area has also experienced countless plots and attacks which were simply ISIS inspired. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the area in question but also allows for a better focus on Indonesia and the Philippines, the latter especially seen by many as the epicentre of ISIS affiliated groups’ activities in the region particularly during the 2017 Marawi siege, a larger scale expression of ISIS affiliates activities since their allegiance pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

It is worth noting that Figure 4 and recent activities of ISIS affiliates in the area highly coincide with past activities of a number of Islamist militant groups including Al Qaeda affiliates which, for decades harboured plans to establish an archipelagic Southeast Asian Islamic Caliphate that would incorporate Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines and inevitably both Brunei and Singapore under the name of Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara.

150 SOERIAATMADJA, Wahyudi. Bashir withdraws support for ISIS. The Strait Times, 2016
II. ISIS Affiliated Groups in the Islamist Tropical Crescent

1. ISIS in Indonesia

Indonesia has for a long time been vulnerable to Islamist ideologies and armed movements as extremist groups have continuously emerged in the country from Darul Islam in 1942 to the more recent Jemaah Ansharut Daulah in 2015 despite past governments’ attempts at curbing their activities and extensive experience of dealing with transnational jihadist inspired terrorist groups. However, ISIS’s rapid land grab in Syria and Iraq, and its activities as a transnational terrorist organisation have permitted a violent resurgence of Islamic extremist groups and terrorist activities in the country and have seen a steady growth of sympathisers and support for its cause from 2015 in particular in the provinces of South, West and Central Sulawesi, East Java, Sumatra and Lampung. It has been reported that ISIS affiliated and unaffiliated cells

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152 SULASTIANA. Indonesia: The Emerging Daesh-Centric Threat Landscape. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, p.17-19
have benefited from safe houses in the provinces allowing the training and supply of fighters and funds to groups including Mujahidin Indonesia Timur\textsuperscript{153}.

While the world’s most populous Muslim nation has banned any form of support for the Islamic State, it has still witnessed the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters being drawn towards Syria and Iraq, but also in more local areas of operations including Marawi\textsuperscript{154} and has also suffered from a number of attacks on its own soil, many of which had been claimed by ISIS core while executed by the organisation’s own affiliates in the country. Fears of an ISIS permanent foothold in Indonesia were expressed by some government officials including Indonesian General Ansyaad Mbai, the head of counter-terrorism, who warned that ISIS had been successful, is attracting many sympathisers and recruits in the country who posed a threat both abroad and at home\textsuperscript{155}.

The country also saw a flow of funds to Indonesian-based individuals and organisations supporting and/or directly affiliated to ISIS core, funds used to ease the travel of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq as well as for the further spread of ISIS influence in the country\textsuperscript{156}. Ultimately, Indonesia could serve as part of ISIS’s longer term aspiration of spreading worldwide by relying on local groups united under the same banner as illustrated by ISIS’s June 2016 Al Bunyan al Marsull (A Solid Structure) video by ISIS fighters in Southeast Asia calling on groups in the region, including those based in Indonesia, to unite\textsuperscript{157}.

While there have been various attempts at identifying Indonesian groups affiliated to ISIS core, it seems there is to this day uncertainty as to the exact number of officially recognised affiliates due to the sheer number of affiliated ISIS cells, unaffiliated pro-ISIS cells and due to the hub’s “mastery of technology, especially encryption, [which] constrained governments from detecting some networks, cells and personalities”\textsuperscript{158}. Out of the dozen of groups which are believed to have pledged allegiance to ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, at least four have captured world attention as a result of their activities prior and after pledging their allegiance, these include Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), Forum of Islamic Law Activists

\textsuperscript{153} TAUFIQURROHMAN, Muh. Annual Threat Assessment – Indonesia. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis, 8(1), 2016, p.13
\textsuperscript{154} GUNARATNA, Rohan. Marawi: Southeast Asia’s Game Changer in Terrorism. Benar News, 2017
\textsuperscript{155} SHAUL, Shay. The Islamic State and its Allies in Southeast Asia. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2014
\textsuperscript{156} TANQUINTIC-MISA, Esther. Money trails Implies Australia’s been ending Terror Funds to Indonesia ISIS Daesh Fighters. International Business Times, 2015
\textsuperscript{157} ARIANTI, V. and TAUFIQURROHMAN, Muh. Annual Threat Assessment – Indonesia. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis, 9(1), 2017, p.14
\textsuperscript{158} SULASTIANA. Indonesia: The Emerging Daesh-Centric Threat Landscape. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, p.17
(FAKSI), Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), two of which will be studied in this chapter to better understand what incentives could have lead both groups to pledge an oath of loyalty to ISIS’s Caliph.

a. Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)

JAD, the “Partisans of the Islamic State Group”, is composed of two dozen Indonesian terrorist groups which have all pledged allegiance to ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi¹⁵⁹ and had previously and publicly, pledged its allegiance to ISIS in 2015 with aims consistent with those of the Islamic State. The group is reportedly the largest ISIS affiliated terrorist group active in Indonesia, and is formed of various ISIS affiliated cells including members from Tawhid Wal Jihad, Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam, Mujahidin Indonesia Barat, Jemaah Islamiyah splinter groups, and so forth¹⁶⁰. The unification of pro-ISIS Islamist groups in Indonesia by JAD’s leader Aman Abdurrahman might have been a result of ISIS’s conditions for the establishment of a wilayat subsequent to the acceptance of a bay’ah pledge which indicated the need for unity under a single leadership¹⁶¹.

Since its establishment, the group has been responsible for directly or indirectly engaging in, planning, assisting and/or executing of terrorist acts in the country. The group’s primary objective is to establish an Islamic State in Indonesia which would be under strict Sharia Law. Its interpretation of Islam promotes sectarian violence and is seen as anti-Western and identifies those who do not align with their doctrine as legitimate targets for attacks. The advocacy of takfiri by JAD is also shared by ISIS to justify attacks on other Muslims and other movements accused of apostasy. This doctrine is the same as that which has been promoted by ISIS in territories it has occupied in both Syria and Iraq. In order to fulfil its fundamentalist objective, the umbrella organization JAD was founded in 2015 and had, by 2017 been active in Greater Jakarta, Banten, Central Java, East Java, West Java, Lampung and Kalimantan, as well as having cells in both Toli Toli and Medan¹⁶². The group has been active in 18 out of 34 provinces in Indonesia and seems to enjoy strong operational capabilities.

¹⁶⁰ ARIANTI, V. Aman Abdurrahman: Ideologue and ‘Commander’ of IS Supporters in Indonesia. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 9(2), 2017, p.6
¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.5
One year after pledging bay’ah to ISIS, JAD called for the perpetration of terrorist attacks in Indonesia through a fatwa issued by the cell’s leader and founder, Aman Abdurrahman in January 2016 hence the group being considered as ISIS’s main weapon in Indonesia\textsuperscript{163}. Aman called on Indonesian extremists to travel to the Islamic State in Syria, conduct jihad at home or support morally and financially those participating in such terrorist activities. In his own words, Aman reportedly urged other extremists to “migrate to the Islamic State and if you cannot emigrate, then wage jihad with spirit wherever you are, and if you cannot wage war or you lack the courage to do so, then contribute your wealth to those willing to do so. And if you cannot contribute, then urge others to undertake jihad. And if you cannot do that, then what is the meaning of your loyalty oath?”\textsuperscript{164} This call to arms would be soon followed by the January 2016 Jakarta bombings which he allegedly directed\textsuperscript{165}.

A series of bombings in 2018 in East and West Java committed by the ISIS affiliated terrorist cell catapulted JAD into notoriety, allowing the main supporter of ISIS in the country to be branded as the most lethal terrorist organization in Indonesia\textsuperscript{166}. This status would only be reinforced as the group believes that all security forces of a so-called ansharut thoghut (or, idolatrous state) should be identified as non-believers and should be targeted, killed and their properties be seized\textsuperscript{167}. The group’s founder and spiritual leader however continues to play a key role in promoting radicalism in Indonesia, and has remained the emir of the group and continued communicating with militants and followers in spite of being in prison. Aman Abdurrahman was sentenced in June 2018 to death by firing squad for his role in the 2016 Jakarta bombings and there is fear that his death as a potentially perceived “martyr” could backfire as his teaching could further spread and even proliferate like wildfire\textsuperscript{168}.

Despite the atmosphere of fear the group has spread throughout the country, there is still limited information as to the group’s membership due in part to the structure of the organisation itself as a result of the decentralised nature of the group. Furthermore, despite possessing a covert operational presence throughout the country, the group has also been subject to intense Indonesian counter terror efforts through mass arrests and killings by

\textsuperscript{163} TRAC. Bahrun Naim Cell Network (Jemaah Ansharut Daulah in Java, Indonesia/JAD/IS Indonesia) – Cell Profile. Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, 2016

\textsuperscript{164} TEHUSIJARANA, Karina and OMPUSINGGU, Moses. What is JAD? Terror group behind Mako Brimob riot, Surabaya bombings. The Jakarta Post, 2018

\textsuperscript{165} SOERIAATMADJA, Wahyudi. Indonesia declares radical cleric a suspect in 2016 Jakarta attack. Strait Times, 2017

\textsuperscript{166} TEHUSIJARANA, Karina and OMPUSINGGU, Moses. What is JAD? Terror group behind Mako Brimob riot, Surabaya bombings. The Jakarta Post, 2018

\textsuperscript{167} BBC MONITORING. Surabaya attacks: Family of five bomb Indonesia police headquarters. BBC News, 2018

\textsuperscript{168} SINGH, Bilveer. Will Aman Abdurrahman’s Death Sentence Backfire? The Diplomat, 2018
security forces. Some estimate that the number of members in the region of 1,000 with several hundred of them currently detained\textsuperscript{169}, including many of the cell’s ideologues and senior members.

Lastly, it seems that there is a direct line of communication between JAD and ISIS. Indeed, some attacks have allegedly been directed by ISIS and later claimed by ISIS core in both its Dabiq and Rumiyah magazines which give some indication of the cooperation between both groups\textsuperscript{170}. There is also evidence of financial relations between the group and ISIS core, especially due to the willingness of the group’s leader to avoid reliance on criminal activities as a means of financing terrorist activities as it could alienate their movement, interfere with the group’s effort and harm any support it may receive from local communities\textsuperscript{171} thus the need for other sources of finance. Financial support can be illustrated by the January 2016 Jakarta attacks which were not only attributed to JAD militants, but which had also been claimed by ISIS core and allegedly financially supported by an Indonesian ISIS official in Syria. Funds have also been sent from JAD Syrian-based leading figures such as Bahrun Naim who was believed to have transferred vast amount of funds to Indonesian ISIS affiliated cells, including JAD, via PayPal and in bitcoin to fund terrorist activities, funds which are suspected to have been provided by ISIS itself\textsuperscript{172}.

\textbf{b. Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT)}

MIT, established in 2011 following a break up of JAT after losing control of territory and of military training camps in Aceh\textsuperscript{173}, has been designated by the US as a foreign terrorist organization since September 2015, and is active in Poso and Central Sulawesi. The militant group was the first in Indonesia to pledge its allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghadi\textsuperscript{174} in July 2014, only a few days after Baghdadi announced the creation of the

\textsuperscript{169} OTTO, Ben and RACHMAN, Anita. \textit{Indonesia Bans Islamic State-Linked Terror Group Behind Child Suicide Bombings}. The Wall Street Journal, 2018

\textsuperscript{170} ARIANTI, V. \textit{Aman Abdirrahman: Ideologue and ‘Commander’ of IS Supporters in Indonesia}. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 9(2), 2017, p.6

\textsuperscript{171} ARIANTI, V. \textit{Indonesian Terrorism Financing: Resorting to Robberies}. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2013, p.2

\textsuperscript{172} SOERIAATMADJA, Wahyudi. \textit{Militant Bahrun Naim used PayPal, bitcoin to transfer funds for terror attacks in Indonesia}. The Strait Times, 2017

\textsuperscript{173} SUGARA, Robi. \textit{Santoso: The Terrorist Leader from Nowhere}. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 6(10), 2014, p.25

Islamic State and was himself named its Caliph.\textsuperscript{175} MIT emerged from the Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) group’s Poso branch drawing upon the grievances of the armed communal conflict between Christian Protestants and Muslims between 1997 and 2001\textsuperscript{176} which affected thousands of people in Sulawesi and neighbouring Maluku Islands, and despite the signing of a government sponsored truce, still witnessed sporadic episodes of terror and violence\textsuperscript{177}.

MIT aims to establish an Islamic State in the country under the leadership of its own emir Santoso by mostly targeting Indonesian security forces and infidels which they regard as obstructing elements to their Islamic goal\textsuperscript{178}. The group received international attention in 2012 following the bombing of a police station and the killing of seven members of the police force between the months of August and December\textsuperscript{179}.

This virulent group, comprised of a multitude of terrorist cells in Central Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara and East Kalimantan, was formed by former JAT commander Santoso (otherwise known as Abu Wardah al-Syarqi) who earned the title of Indonesia’s most wanted militant until his death in 2016 in a jungle gun fight with Indonesian security forces, an operation which was to be seen as a major step forward in the fight against Islamic extremism in the country and that could potentially “demoralize Islamic State supporters in Indonesia” despite reports that the impact of Santoso’s death is being overestimated today\textsuperscript{180}. Prior to his death, Santoso had called for further attacks and warned the Indonesian government that “[it] will not be safe until [it] stops diplomatic relations with America, Australia and the other countries that take part in the massacre against Muslims around the world […],” while reaffirming the group’s determination to target security forces, especially the country’s counter-terrorism squad Special Detachment 88 which had been operational since 2005 and which had been successful in the capture and killing of numerous Indonesian jihadists, hence the squad being identified as a Western instrument used to destabilise the country and eradicate the Islamic community in Indonesia\textsuperscript{182}.

\textsuperscript{175} ROGGIO, Bill. \textit{US adds emir of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur to list of global terrorists}, Long War Journal, 2016
\textsuperscript{177} HARIYADI, Mathias. \textit{Decapitated body brings back terror nightmare to Poso}. Asia News, 2019
\textsuperscript{178} SOERIAATMADJA, Wahyudi. Indonesia jails three Uighurs for terror ties. The Strait Times, 2015
\textsuperscript{179} ROGGIO, Bill. \textit{US adds emir of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur to list of global terrorists}, Long War Journal, 2016
\textsuperscript{180} BBC MONITORING. Santoso: Indonesia police ‘kills most wanted militant’. BBC News, 2016
\textsuperscript{181} ROGGIO, Bill. \textit{US adds emir of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur to list of global terrorists}, Long War Journal, 2016
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid
Santoso was considered a dangerously effective jihadist commander and was respected amongst jihadist circles as he was able to control the Biru Mountain, a limited area of land near Poso city with only around 30 to 40 men to defend their territory and uphold Sharia Law in their ‘safe haven’. MIT, which was comprised of approximately 50 fighters at the height of its strength, has mostly acted domestically but there were reports of potential MIT fighters taking part in the Marawi Siege in the Philippines in 2017 which is indeed a possibility as relations between the MIT leadership and Mindanao based militants go back to the mid-1990s. The group also benefited from the influx of Uighur foreign fighters directed to Poso in Central Sulawesi as an alternative to joining ISIS in Iraq or Syria. Four Uighur fighters were arrested by Indonesian authorities in 2014; one was arrested in West Java the same year and there had been reports of the killing of at least eight Uighur combatants in 2016 in fire fights with Indonesian security forces. MIT appears to be a good example of ISIS affiliation as the group received ISIS logistical support to pursue its attacks, it collaborated with other militants and openly declared it would “welcome Islamic fighters from abroad” and even act as a major transit route, source of manpower and moral support for ISIS and related groups.

The terrorist group evidently reached out to ISIS in order to strengthen its credentials and receive logistical and financial resources from ISIS core as a way of pursuing its fight against Indonesian security forces. This need for support was expressed in Santoso’s bay’ah pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in which he stated that “We who are from eastern Indonesia are your soldiers and are waiting for your orders and also need your hand to help our jihad in Poso which is still weak and needs weapons. MIT is a part of ISIS because Muslims are like one body”. This appeal is believed to have “touched the hearts” of the Islamic State’s officials as there have been reports of ISIS funds funneled to MIT militants.

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183 ISS RISK. Existent Terrorism in Indonesia and the Opportunities for the Growth of Radical Islam and ISIS. ISS Risk Special Report, 2016, p.19
185 ABUZA, Zachary. The Uighurs and China’s Regional Counter-Terrorism Efforts. Terrorism Monitor 15(6), 2017
187 SOERIAATMADJA, Wahyudi. Indonesia jails three Uighurs for terror ties. The Strait Times, 2015
189 SUGARA, Robi. Santoso: The Terrorist Leader from Nowhere. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 6(10), 2014, p.26
190 MOORE, Jack. Who was Santoso, Indonesia’s Most-Wanted Radical Islamist Militant? Newsweek, 2016
Along with the need for material and financial support, the late-MIT leader desperately needed fighters to join his gradually depleting ranks, a necessity reflected by the group’s allegiance to ISIS while the group could provide in return a closer and cheaper destination than Syria and Iraq.

2. ISIS in the Philippines

While Islam is the oldest monotheistic religion in the Philippines, the Muslim community only accounts for approximately 6% of the country’s mostly Roman Catholic 108 million nationals. The great majority of Filipino Muslims are based in the Southwest area of the country; an area which has been witness to numerous terrorist activities of ISIS affiliated groups based in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

A multitude of southern-based Islamist cells have pledged allegiance to ISIS, many of whom have combined forces with four major ISIS affiliated terrorist groups which have also pledged allegiance following the establishment of a Caliphate: The Maute Group (MG), Abu Sayyaf (ASG), Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)\(^1\), four groups which had in December 2015 jointly publicised their pledge of allegiance to ISIS while led by Isnilon Hapilon designated as the hub’s emir to the Philippines. An ISIS statement further reinforced the need for unity amongst local cells by saying that “the unification of the Mujahidin under one leadership and banner of the Caliphate is seen as a huge threat to the tyrants of the Philippines and is an important step in order to liberate areas in Southeast Asia in general”\(^2\).

Pledges of allegiance, the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters and the organisation’s call for fighters who cannot make hijrah to Syria and Iraq to instead head to the Philippines, all demonstrate ISIS’s interest in the country and especially its southern Muslim majority areas which could serve as a sanctuary for ISIS Southeast Asian fighters and operations\(^3\). While the majority of ISIS affiliates found refuge in rural areas and small islands in the south of the country, the Philippines witnessed a shift of tactics when ISIS affiliated groups attempted in 2017 to take control for a period of five months the city of Marawi in Mindanao, a city of over 200,000 inhabitants. This was the first time a major city temporarily fell under ISIS

\(^{1}\) BUAN, Lian. 20 ISIS cell groups operate in Mindanao – Calida. Rappler, 2015
\(^{2}\) GUNARATNA, Rohan. Annual Threat Assessment - Philippines. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis, 8(1), 2016, p.28
control outside the Middle East and Africa\textsuperscript{194}, a daring and deadly attempt at getting closer to declaring the region an official Islamic State wilayat. While the capture of the highly-populated city ultimately failed, it however showed the level of training, knowledge and funding directly (and indirectly) provided by ISIS to its regional affiliates. The Philippines remain the epicentre of ISIS activities in the region, attracting a growing number of foreign fighters from Southeast Asia and outside due to porous borders and the lack of governmental control over areas under strong terrorist influence, a country which had been used as a training ground for Southeast Asian and Arab militants by Jemaah Islamiyah and Al Qaeda thus playing a crucial part in domestic, regional and global terrorist groups now reinvigorated by ISIS core.

\textbf{a. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)}

The ASG (or, ‘Bearer of the Sword’ in Arabic) is an Islamist terrorist organisation based in the Philippines which was founded in the early 1990s as a separatist militant Islamist movement seeking to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern part of the Philippines for the Filipino Muslim minority known as the Moro people mostly located in the Mindanao region\textsuperscript{195}. This Islamic State would encompass the region in its entirety including its non-Muslim regions without however aspiring to extend beyond the Philippines\textsuperscript{196}. The group was formed as a result of a split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which is considered as one of the major Muslim separatist movements in the region, after the separatist organisation itself and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) both failed to appropriately respond to the Moro’s perceived grievances due to the 1989 Agreement between the Philippines government and the MNLF on the establishment of an Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao\textsuperscript{197}. As a result of a series of bomb attacks and kidnappings, of which the latter would eventually become a crucial part of the ASG’s own identity, the group was finally classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation on October 8, 1997\textsuperscript{198}. ASG, which is considered by many as the smallest but most feared and violent terrorist organisation

\textsuperscript{194} HABULAn, Angelica. \textit{Annual Threat Assessment –Philippines}. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 10(1), 2018, p.8
\textsuperscript{195} BBC. \textit{Guide to the Philippines conflict}. BBC News, 2012
\textsuperscript{197} COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT. \textit{Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) Report}. Counter Extremism Project, 2018
\textsuperscript{198} UNHCR. \textit{Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 – Foreign Terrorist Organisations: Abu Sayyaf Group}. U.S. Department of State, 2018
operating in the Philippines\textsuperscript{199}, was founded by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, who was eventually killed on December 18, 1998 in a police raid on the island of Basilan\textsuperscript{200} with the hope of bringing an end to the ASG and its criminal activities. ASG has been active primarily on the country’s southern islands, including in their traditional stronghold in the Sulu chain of islands and the easternmost island of Mindanao\textsuperscript{201}. The group has however also crossed the sea to Malaysia in some instances\textsuperscript{202}.

The original motivation behind the ASG’s creation was to seek justice for all Muslims, with a focus however on the Muslims in Southern Philippines and to combat “the marginalisation of Islamised ethno-linguistic groups, collectively called Moro”\textsuperscript{203}. Santos et al. identified the organisation as an Islamic revivalist movement promoting a return to the fundamentals of Islam through a strict adherence to the Qu’ran and the Hadith minus any modern day innovations\textsuperscript{204} allowing a revival of Islam to its former glory which has been perceived by such groups as being eclipsed by Western influence, modernism and secularism. Besides unifying Muslim provinces and establishing an Islamic State under strict Sharia Law, the group also sought to eliminate non-Muslim people from Mindanao and the Sulu islands. In order to succeed, the group was primarily supported through both Al Qaeda’s military and financial assistance, an aid which might have been mutual after an Al Qaeda operative found shelter in Manila where he prepared a plot which involved the blowing up of several U.S. passenger jets over the Pacific Ocean in 1994\textsuperscript{205}.

The group is believed to be mostly funded through kidnapping-for-ransom related operations and extortion, however external funding from sympathisers and other organisations cannot be excluded\textsuperscript{206} as it had already received material and financial support from larger regional terrorist organisations including AQ and Jemaah Islamiya (JI). The group has gained notoriety through high-profile assassinations and bombings. The brutal beheadings of both local and foreign hostages whose ransoms had not been paid lead the group to gain a reputation of being the most violent group in the country, and has not followed the MILF and MNLF path

\textsuperscript{199} BBC MONITORING. Philippines unrest: Who are the Abu Sayyaf group?. BBC News, 2016
\textsuperscript{200} ANON. Philippine Terrorist Leader Killed – But is Celebration Premature?. Stratfor, 1998
\textsuperscript{202} CFR. Abu Sayyaf Group (Philippines Islamist separatists). Council on Foreign Relations, 2009
\textsuperscript{206} UNHCR. Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 – Foreign Terrorist Organisations: Abu Sayyaf Group. U.S. Department of State, 2018
of taking part in peace talks with the Philippines government as the group advocates an armed struggle to establish an Islamic State. As a result of the group’s activities and the level of violent acts, the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has not only promised a total crackdown on extremist groups operating in the country, but has also refused any forms of peace negotiations with ASG, a position that would be repeated in 2019 despite hints of an easing attitude towards individuals renouncing violence.

While the group of only several hundred fighters is divided into two main factions, only one formerly spearheaded by Isnilon Hapilon, pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014. This split has not prevented the Basilan-based ASG leader to coordinate activities between both groups while boundaries between factions has been mostly fluid. However disunity and a tendency towards criminal activities may have led the ASG to pledge an oath of allegiance to ISIS core in order to rejuvenate its jihadist status and its credibility. Before joining the ‘ISIS trend’, the group had heavily relied on criminal activities as a source of income, suffered from splits along clan lines and the loss of its leader in a Filipino counter-terrorism operation in 2006 which led to a lack of strong leadership thereby “creating a power vacuum and plunging the group into disarray”.

In 2016, ISIS leadership confirmed Hapilon as the leader of ISIS in Southeast Asia although not officially proclaiming a wilayat in the Philippines. Despite the group’s defeat in the Marawi siege, a battle which lasted from May to October 2017 in the country’s largest southern island of Mindanao, alongside other ISIS-affiliated groups such as the Maute and other smaller extremist groups, and the eventual death of many ASG militants including the ISIS Emir in the region Hapilon, the group is known for its fierce resilience throughout the years of its existence. While there are reports that the group has more recently only taken part in sporadic clashes with local security personnel and has since the battle for Marawi been reduced and superseded by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Maute Group, ASG has however conducted numerous attacks in both 2018 and 2019. A recent US

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208 ROMERO, Alexis. Duterte says Abu Sayyaf threat driving away investments. Philstar, 2019
210 IPAC. Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia. Institute for Policy Analysis of conflict, Report no. 33, 2016, p.2
211 HAMMERBERG, Kathleen and FABER, Pamela. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG): An Al-Qaeda Associate Case Study. CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2017, p.9
212 COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT. Isnilon Hapilon, Counter Extremism Project, 2017
213 BBC MONITORING. Philippines military ‘kills Islamist Isnilon Hapilon’. BBC News, 2017
214 HART, Michael. Is Abu Sayyaf Really Defeated?. The Diplomat, 2017
215 HART, Michael. The Post-Marawi Decline of Abu Sayyaf. Asia Sentinel, 2018
INDOPACOM report has suggested an ASG sub-unit commander named Hatib Sawadjaan could be the acting ISIS emir to the region despite no actual update on the status of an ISIS emir in the region by ISIS-core\textsuperscript{216} and in spite of media reports identifying a Maute Group leader Abu Dar as a potential ISIS emir for the region\textsuperscript{217}.

At the time of its allegiance pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group had approximately 400 fighters, a sharp decrease in membership as a result of successful counterterrorism operations between 2001 and 2014 and it had lost any form of traceable relationship with Al Qaeda core which had until then been an important source of material and financial support alongside Jemaah Islamiya.

This gap might have been filled by ISIS as there have been reports of both material and financial aid provided by ISIS core directly to the ASG but also to other Islamist militant groups involved in the Marawi siege, of which the ASG was a part\textsuperscript{218}. Furthermore, Filipino authorities have also characterised ASG’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS as an opportunist move and an attempt at obtaining a new source of funding which the group had already sought in the past with other terrorist hubs such as Al Qaeda. The millions of US dollars that the group has obtained throughout the years seem to confirm this belief and the group’s ideological weakness overshadowed by its profit-making tendencies.

b. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)

The BIFF, also known as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), has its roots in the Muslim separatist insurgency fought on the Philippines’ southern island of Mindanao. Like ASG, it emerged from within the ranks of the MILF in 2010 with the objective of pursuing the fight for full independence for Muslim Mindanao rather than only autonomy from the Philippines\textsuperscript{219} initially with only a few hundred fighters\textsuperscript{220} following the initiation of peace negotiations between MILF and the Philippines government. BIFF has prioritised armed struggle instead of a political solution and negotiated settlement which both the MILF and MNLF have been resorting to in order to meet their political goals leading the group to


\textsuperscript{217} HART, Michael. A Year After Marawi, What’s Left of ISIS in the Philippines?. The Diplomat, 2018

\textsuperscript{218} GUTIERREZ, Natashya. Via Telegram, Western Union: How ISIS in Syria funded Marawi terrorists. Rappler, 2017


\textsuperscript{220} CHALK, Peter. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedome Fighters: The Newest Obstacles to Peace in the Southern Philippines. CTC Sentinel, 6(11-12), 2013, p.16
have a far greater impact on the peace process. BIFF’s Saudi Arabian-educated and trained scholar Ameril Umbra Kato who embraced an extreme version of Islam and Wahhabism, formed the new organisation while insisting that the armed wing of the MILF was “no longer worthy of the title ‘mujahidin’” due to its involvement in activities perceived as contrary to jihadist methods. This narrative was illustrated in 2011 when the BIFF declared a full jihad in order to “pursue the genuine aspiration of the Bangsamoro people for self-determination, freedom and independence” and once again rejected progress made by the MILF with the Philippines government as regard to the peace process.

Ultimately, BIFF aspires to the creation of an Islamic State in Mindanao through armed struggle. Despite the group being larger and better equipped than the ASG, the BIFF tends to limit its influence to two areas in Maguindanao. The group has significantly increased attacks between 2011 and 2014 before eventually pledging allegiance to ISIS in a video recording on August 2014, a pledge which would later be confirmed by BIFF spokesperson Abu Misry Mama. The alliance between both groups might not seem much of a surprise as stated by Mama as “in the alliance, we have agreed that we are brother under the same sky […] that if one finger is hurt the entire body will feel the pain”, but, unlike the ASG’s pledge of full obedience to ISIS-core leadership, the group seemingly declared it would not “impose the Islamic State’s highly radical brand of Sunni Islam in the Philippines” leading many to question the nature of both organisations’ alliance, an atmosphere of uncertainty which would be reinforced by Misry’s statement to AFP regarding BIFF’s role in providing support to ISIS despite the group allegedly not having sent any of its fighters from the Philippines to help ISIS.

There is however less available information as to the nature of the BIFF’s relations with other extremist militant groups operating in the region. Since breaking away from the MILF in

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222 CHALK, Peter. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedome Fighters: The Newest Obstacles to Peace in the Southern Philippines. CTC Sentinel, 6(11-12), 2013, p.15
224 CHALK, Peter. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedome Fighters: The Newest Obstacles to Peace in the Southern Philippines. CTC Sentinel, 6(11-12), 2013, p.16
225 STRACHAN, Anna. Conflict analysis of Muslim Mindanao.GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2015, p.10
226 AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE. BIFF, Abus pledge allegiance to Isis. Inquirer.net, 2014
227 INQUIRER. Breakaway Moro group admits alliance with ISIS. Inquirer.net, 2014
228 CHALK, Peter. The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming shadow in Southeast Asia? CTC Sentinel, 9(3), 2016, p.10
229 AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE. BIFF, Abus pledge allegiance to Isis. Inquirer.net, 2014
2010, relations between both groups have been hostile and clashes between both the MILF and BIFF armed wings have occurred over control of territory in Maguindanao\textsuperscript{230}, although some reports indicate both groups may have cooperated such as during the Mamasapano incident in 2015 which lead to the deaths of 44 elite Filipino police commandos\textsuperscript{231}.

As a result of having mostly abstained from the brutal fight which took place during the Marawi siege, many fear BIFF could by default emerge as the Islamic State’s new standard-bearer in the Philippines as it had not suffered the heavy losses experienced by other ISIS affiliated groups such as the Maute Group and ASG\textsuperscript{232}. Such concern has only been amplified by clashes between security forces and BIFF fighters in the provinces of Maguindanao and North Cotabato following the end of the battle for Marawi. Reports of foreign fighters having bolstered BIFF ranks following Maute Group and ASG ground losses further confirm such presumptions\textsuperscript{233} with fears of a second Marawi episode in the city of Cotabato\textsuperscript{234} as BIFF militants have been involved in attacks as recently as March 2019\textsuperscript{235}. BIFF has also been involved in clashes with law enforcement operations against terrorist groups in the province of Maguindanao with fighting taking place in Salbu, Pagatin, Mamasapano and Shariff Aguak leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of people thereby further increasing the group’s visibility.

Similarly to the ASG, the BIFF only has a few hundred militants within its ranks, approximately 300 fighters according to some reports, but the group does enjoy access to a large armoury of weapons and ammunition taken from MILF before their split\textsuperscript{236}. The BIFF’s spokesperson has mentioned that the group will not seek any financial benefit from the alliance with ISIS and that “if we will ask them for money, they might send millions but we are not asking for any” adding that the BIFF can rely on its own local source of income\textsuperscript{237}. However, it seems hard to believe that the terrorist group pledged allegiance to ISIS amidst uncertainty over its direction and leadership without expecting any financial return. This

\textsuperscript{230} STANFORD UNIVERSITY. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2015
\textsuperscript{231} GONZALES, Yuji. MILF, BIFF names involved in SAF 44 killing forwarded to DOJ-PNP. Inquirer.net, 2015
\textsuperscript{232} WEST, Ben. After the Siege of Marawi, Another Fight Plays Out. Stratfor, 2017
\textsuperscript{233} HART, Michael. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters Assume ISIS’ Mantle in Philippines’ Troubled South. Geopolitical Monitor, 2018
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid
\textsuperscript{235} CABRERA, Ferdinand. 3 Killed, 2 hurt in BIFF attacks. MindaNews, 2019
\textsuperscript{236} CHALK, Peter. Black flag rising. ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2015, p.15
\textsuperscript{237} INQUIRER. Breakaway Moro group admits alliance with ISIS. Inquirer.net, 2014
position also seems to contradict the spokesperson’s own response in a 2017 interview about the Marawi battle and admitted the group had received assistance “from the Middle East”\(^{238}\).

### III. Findings

While the following chapter may further shed light on why groups will choose to get involved in terrorist groups alliances by looking into Southeast Asian militant groups terrorist activities in the region prior and following their bay’ah pledge to ISIS, this chapter will attempt to answer some of the hypotheses made in this thesis.

The next chapter will explore in greater detail the targets of attacks perpetrated by the groups described in this current chapter. However, these groups to some extent share a common enemy. Indonesian and Filipino terrorist cells all see their respective governments as enemies and to this one may add they will also consider any State which sponsors or assists in counter-terrorism activities in the region as enemies of their Islamist goals such as the US, Australia and the Western countries involved in the international coalition against terrorism. These are foes that local groups share with ISIS core. While similar foes may allow Hypothesis 1 to be validated, it should be noted that this condition alone should not be taken for granted as other Southeast Asian Islamist groups who share identical enemies have in some cases decided not to align with ISIS in some cases and at times even challenged ISIS leadership. This does not mean that this hypothesis is not relevant as common foes will still make an alliance more likely, allowing a building up of trust between groups.

As regard to Hypothesis 4 groups’ membership size, there seem to be some discrepancies. BIFF and ASG both have a few hundred known members while JAD possesses fewer than 1,000 active militants. The alliance behaviour between ISIS and Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia seem to be consistent with Phillips’ findings\(^{239}\). Terrorist groups with a membership of between 100 and 999 members just like JAD, ASG and BIFF all fit within this pattern as intermediate sized groups. By assuming that seeking an alliance was possibly an indication of weakness of small groups such as MIT, an explanation of this factor needed to be explored. Conversely, while smaller groups will seek an alliance with larger organisations,

\(^{238}\) RAJAGOPALAN, Megha. *ISIS is Losing Ground in the Middle East. This is Where it could Turn Next.* Buzzfeed News, 2017

mid-sized groups will also seek such partnerships but possibly for different reasons than smaller groups.

Interestingly, all groups studied above have emerged from a split with another, very often far larger organisation with the exception of JAD which was established in 2015 with the aim of uniting pro-ISIS cells and militants in the region under one leadership. Generally speaking, break-away factions could indeed increase the likelihood of terrorist alliance as suggested in Hypothesis 5 as groups will suffer from various organisational gaps including leadership issues, lack of equipment and funds which may translate into a search for partnership in order to overcome internal defaults.

Radical Islam is a powerful ideological force which has allowed Southeast Asian Islamist groups to form trusted bonds. All groups identified are ideologically similar to ISIS and all aim towards the establishment of an Islamic State. Their goal is however local and they do not aspire to the establishment of a global Islamic Caliphate. One may therefore suggest that embracing a radical interpretation of Islam, the aspiration for the creation of an Islamic Caliphate ruled by strict Sharia law may support Hypothesis 6 which is consistent with expectations. However, it is worth noting that BIFF, despite sharing a common aim with its Indonesian and Filipino counterparts of establishing a local Islamic State, seems to differ in term of the level of violence it intends to inflict on the local population as it had previously made obvious it would not seek to impose the highly radical brand of Islam that ISIS has imposed in areas it occupied across Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, a common identity through religious affiliation (radical Islam in this scenario) plays a crucial role in alliance connections among terrorist organisations.

Lastly, territorial control may explain why some terrorist groups in the region have pledged bay’ah to ISIS. All pledges of oaths of loyalty were made following the declaration of the establishment of a Caliphate once ISIS had conquered territories in both Syria and Iraq and upon the declaration of a Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Notwithstanding this, territorial control is more questionable as to why a terrorist hub would want to establish an alliance with smaller terrorist groups. Groups in Indonesia do not seem to control territory but instead enjoy the archipelagic feature of the country and its porous border which allow militants to move freely. The inhospitable environments may also provide shelter and base camps for these groups. On the other hand, the only ISIS affiliates that, to some degree, control territory are based in the Philippines. The Southern islands of Tawi-Tawi, Jolo and Basilan are known to
have harboured ASG militants for decades due to their isolated location and because of the lack of security forces access and control over southern parts of the country. Other Islamist cells have relied on the environment and the lack of government control over the south, including the island of Mindanao, to establish safe houses, training camps and operational bases in the countryside and small hamlets which attract militants from other countries in the region, encourage foreign fighters and most importantly attract ISIS core’s attention as the perfect area to open a new front and establishing a permanent foothold in the region. **Hypothesis 7** therefore seems to suggest that indeed many groups have pledged their allegiance to ISIS because the terrorist hub controlled territory at the time, but evidence remains too weak to support the hypothesis the other way round. Indeed, Indonesian groups do not control territory and ISIS cells in the Philippines have to some degree control over small hamlets, but this seems insignificant compared to what ISIS controlled in the Middle East and to what ISIS cells later achieved in 2017 in the Philippines. It is instead the lack of government access to and control over inhospitable areas, porous borders, and a rural environment allowing militants to move with ease which may seem attractive.

The two remaining hypotheses to be studied in the next chapter will look into each ISIS affiliates’ terrorist activities in the region prior and following their pledge of allegiance. While Hypothesis 3 could be discussed here as there has been proof of groups seeking and receiving funds from ISIS core to finance their activities despite the lack of reliable information and little evidence available to the public, the aim of the last chapter of this study will possibly shed further light on how the extent of organisational needs play a role in the formation of an alliance.
Chapter IV – A Review and Analysis of ISIS Affiliates Operational Dynamics in Southeast Asia

I. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the impact the Islamic State has had in the Southeast Asia region through its violent extremist network comprised of groups which have openly pledged allegiance to ISIS following the establishment of an Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The terrorist hub not only attracted a network of global supporters but it also received pledges of bay’ah in several countries which were followed by a series of attacks either directly attributed to ISIS itself or to individuals, groups and entities inspired or directly affiliated to ISIS.

The study in this chapter will therefore focus on the activities of Islamic extremist groups which have pledged allegiance to ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Southeast Asia with a focus again on both Indonesia and the Philippines. Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand are not included in this study as mostly nationalist separatist movements have been acting in the country and there is insufficient evidence today of Thailand acting as a jihadist focal point due partly to the very nature of internal insurgency mostly aimed towards creating an independent state. Furthermore, in November 2016 ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged his followers or “soldiers” of the Caliphate to initiate attacks outside of the ISIS main conflict area in Syria and Iraq and instead suggested other possible areas for activities, such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh but made no mention of Thailand. Thailand’s main vulnerability is its status as a transit and facilitation hub for terrorist activities due to its particular location in the region, the presence of an available market of illegal goods, the presence of an enduring separatist insurgency in the south, and poor banking oversight from local officials. Thailand seen as a transit hub can be illustrated by the presence of Chinese individuals belonging to the Uighur minority who have been involved in Southeast Asian extremist cells with many taking part in attacks in Indonesia, and in the Philippines. They are known to have made contact with several ISIS affiliated cells such with BIFF, ASG plus others, and are likely to have made the journey through countries such as Thailand.

Similarly, neither Malaysia nor Myanmar have been included as there is still today no strong

evidence of the presence of affiliated groups within these countries. Instead, attacks or plots in Malaysia were usually ISIS inspired or carried out by individuals who had pledged their support to the group but were not the direct result of an official Malaysian-based ISIS affiliated group. Instead, this chapter will focus on two ISIS affiliates known to operate in Indonesia and two others in the Philippines. Both of these groups active in Indonesia and the Philippines are identical to the ones which have been studied in Chapter III.

This chapter will also include a section focusing on the Marawi siege. Analysing the frequency and nature of attacks and the nature of targets alongside an overview of the Marawi siege allows us to have a better understanding of ISIS affiliates dynamics following pledges of bay’ah. However, it should also be noted that findings will also give insights as to why the groups in question have pledged an oath of loyalty to ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi therefore further bringing answers to the initial research question.

The study focuses only on two countries- Indonesia and the Philippines and with an emphasis on four previously described militant extremist groups:

- Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD – Indonesia);
- Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT – Indonesia);
- Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG – Philippines);
- Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF – Philippines).

II. ISIS Affiliated Terrorist Activities in Indonesia

1. Frequency of JAD & MIT Attacks in Indonesia

When gathering information and data mining related to the number of attacks committed by ISIS-affiliated cells studied in this chapter, the total included both the number of successful and unsuccessful attacks. Such data demonstrates that the studied cell is still active despite the failure of its terrorist attempts.

As illustrated below, JAD has been active since its formation in 2015 and attacks have steadily increased since then until 2017. The frequency of JAD attacks however remains low with 5 attacks in 2016 and 9 attacks in 2017. While it would be complex to compare JAD activities with other ISIS affiliated cells, the fact the group has been involved in terrorist activities since its allegiance demonstrates the impact the move of loyalty has had on the cell.
However, its Indonesian counterpart, MIT has had more experience with terrorist attacks in Indonesia as the establishment of its cell dates from 2011 allowing the group to be more visible graphically speaking as seen on Figure 6. MIT, despite its longer presence in the field, has been slightly less active. The group has doubled the number of attacks from the year it pledged its allegiance to ISIS from 3 to 6 attacks and peaked in 2015 with approximately 7 attacks, this increasing trend came to an end in 2016 as the group would return to an average of 3 reported attacks a year as a result of intensive counter terrorism pressure.
2. Nature of JAD & MIT Attacks and Targets

a. Nature of Attacks

An analysis of Figure 7 illustrating data available on the GTD database gives an insight into the nature of JAD related attacks. The cell, since its establishment up until 2017, has focused approximately 42% of its activities on armed assaults, closely followed by bombings which represent around 37% of the group’s overall criminal activities while other illegal activities, including assassinations, have remained quite low.

Just as for JAD, Figure 8 shows that MIT also has had a clear focus on armed assaults. The group overwhelmingly relied on this method until 2013 (80%) while it only occasionally carried out bombings. Since the group’s bay’ah pledge, armed assaults and bombings have remained an important part of the group’s attack method but the organisation has also started diversifying by also including kidnapping (hostage situations) to its portfolio potentially as a way of financing some of its activities by resorting to kidnapping-for-ransom activities.

![Figure 7. Nature of Attacks - JAD](image)

![Figure 8. Nature of Attacks - MIT](image)
b. Nature of Targets

An analysis of data provided by the GTD database illustrate that JAD and its counterpart MIT both mainly focus on targeting police forces. While JAD attacks have only taken place from 2015 due to the group’s recent entry into terrorism, it has since then been active in mostly targeting the police force (61%) and individuals/private property (21%) while other targets have remained limited.

On the other hand, MIT’s activities before its bay’ah pledge had entirely focused on the police force. It seems that the group changed focus after its alliance with ISIS core and instead targeted both individuals/private property (50%) and the police force (46%) as seen in Figure 10.

III. ISIS Affiliated Terrorist Activities in the Philippines

1. Frequency of ASG & BIFF Attacks in the Philippines

Unlike the Indonesian cells studied above, the frequency of ASG of attacks in the Philippines is much higher. From its establishment until the early 2000s, the group’s activities have been sustained but limited. This trend changed in 2000 with 17 attacks, followed by a total of 31 attacks quite evenly distributed between 2001 and 2002 before regressing again. From 2007,
the frequency of ASG-related attacks tripled before reaching unparalleled levels from 2014 onwards, the year the group pledged its allegiance to ISIS-core. 42 attacks were committed in 2014, 74 in 2015 before regressing to 45 and 53 in both 2016 and 2017 respectively. This frequency of ASG attacks is dramatically different to what was experienced prior to the group’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS-core in 2014 which may provide a clue as to ISIS’s impact on the group’s organisational needs.

Finally, the frequency of BIFF attributed attacks has steadily increased from the group’s formation from 15 attacks in 2012 to 52 in 2015 before dropping to 29 attacks in 2016. Despite a rise again of BIFF terrorist acts in 2017, the group witnessed a drop in its activities in 2016 as did both MIT and ASG. The 2017 increase in the group’s activities could explain government’s fear of BIFF taking on the role of ISIS’s regional banner bearer following ASG losses as a result of the failed attempt at taking full control of Marawi city in Mindanao in 2017.
2. Nature of ASG & BIFF Attacks and Targets

a. Nature of Attacks

Figure 13 provides an insight into ASG’s nature of attacks between 1994 and 2013 and from 2014 to 2017 in the Philippines. Figure 13 illustrated a number of interesting elements. The vast majority of ASG attacks, both before and after the group’s pledge of allegiance to ISIS have involved hostage taking situations, closely followed by bombings. Direct confrontation with security forces via armed assaults has not been the group’s preferred strategy.

On the other hand, despite starting its activities much later than ASG, a study of BIFF activities between the year of its formation and 2017 reveals that BIFF also has an important focus on bombing related activities representing approximately half of the group’s overall criminal activities. According to Figure 14, armed assaults have also to some degree been an important tactic used by the terrorist group.

**Figure 13. Nature of Attacks - ASG**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASG Nature of Attacks until 2013</th>
<th>ASG Nature of Attacks from 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostage taking 40%</td>
<td>Hostage taking 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombing 35%</td>
<td>Bombing 31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed assault 20% Others 5%</td>
<td>Armed assault 14% Assassination 5% Facility 5% Other 7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 14. Nature of Attacks - BIFF**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIFF Nature of Attacks until 2013</th>
<th>BIFF Nature of Attacks from 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bombing 59%</td>
<td>Bombing 49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed assault 26% Hostage Situation 15%</td>
<td>Armed assault 14% Assassination 6% Facility 9% Other 8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b. Nature of Targets

As to the nature of ASG’s targets, Figure 15 indicates a few elements. ASG has remained committed to a multitude of targets unlike its Indonesian counterparts. Targets prior and following the group’s allegiance pledge to ISIS do not seem to have changed much. The group has continued targeting individuals/private property on a larger scale, followed by attacks on businesses. While there has been a slight increase since 2014 in terms of attacks directly targeting government institutions, the police force and the military, these numbers remained much lower than other targets. The nature of ASG attacks and targets seems to confirm what has been revealed by some that ASG had committed much of its efforts towards profit-driven related criminal activities.

Quantitative analysis of BIFF’s targets illustrated in Figure 16 reveals that the cell has continuously prioritised attacks on individuals/private property, the military and businesses before 2013 and after 2014. Figure 16 however suggests that BIFF militants have reduced their focus on businesses (from 26% until 2013 to only 9% since 2014) and instead began targeting police forces, which just like the military are an expression of the government counter terrorism efforts.
IV. Marawi – A Turning Point for ISIS and its affiliates in Southeast Asia

1. Brief Description of the Marawi Siege

On 23 May 2017, a firefight broke out between Filipino security forces and ISIS affiliated Islamists predominantly belonging to the Maute Group (otherwise referred to as ISIS-Lanao) in Marawi City, an economic hub of just over 200,000 in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao but since 2019 known as the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The botched raid by the Armed Forces of the Philippines was aimed at capturing a local ISIS commander, Isnilon Hapilon, who had been declared ISIS’s local Emir to the region in 2016. However intense fighting soon spread quickly throughout the city after Hapilon ASG’s forces resisted and called for reinforcements from the MG which was a relatively new grouping affiliated to ISIS and which had pledged allegiance to the terrorist hub in 2015 along with Ansar Khalifa Philippines. It has been suggested that MG’s affiliation had less to do with any form of affinity for ISIS’s radical ideology but was a way for the group to polish its fading image.

Islamist militants fought back leaving the Basak Malutlut area where the raid initially took place, taking over large parts of the city including government buildings while the AFP were driven out of the city by armed militants who then drove around in pickup trucks mounted with 50mm-calibre machine guns and armed with high-powered rifles, destroying civilian infrastructure, desecrating churches, freeing prisoners, taking hundreds of hostages and raising the infamously feared ISIS black banner in most parts of the city, over 8,000 kilometres away from where it first originated. Militants involved in the siege did not only come from the ASG and the MG, but also reportedly included members of several Islamist militant groups which had recently sworn allegiance to ISIS and reportedly had received support from the terrorist hub. It is also estimated that around 80 foreign combatants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Chechnya, China and Yemen reached the Philippines to take part in the fighting which is a reminder that Marawi was identified by ISIS core as a land of hijrah and jihad for all “soldiers of the Caliphate”.

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244 INQUIRER. Key facts about a tumultuous Tuesday in Marawi City. Inquirer.net, 2017
245 FRANCO, Joseph. Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi. International Crisis Group, 2018
It was to take more than a month for the AFP to regain control of approximately 80% of the city according to some reports, forcing militants to retreat to the dense Eastern part of the city which the militants used as their defensive position until the end of the conflict\(^{248}\). After a five-month intense battle, the AFP eventually regained control over Marawi but the conflict had claimed the lives of over 1,000 people (mostly Islamist militants), displaced around 360,000 and left the city in ruins which are still evident today\(^{249}\).

**Figure 17. Marawi Siege – 2017**

*The map has been created following a timeline of territorial control and firefights related to the Marawi siege, while trusting the accuracy and truthfulness of various international and local news sources reporting the events as they enfolded.*

The daring attempt by ISIS affiliated groups of seizing Marawi demonstrated the unity of the several groups under one and only banner and illustrated the extent of coordination and ambition from Islamist militants in the region following their pledges of bay’ah to ISIS core. This was clearly a step-up from the MG occupation of Butig, a town of 19,300, for a period of six days towards the end of 2016. This was also the first time local militants had attempted to capture territory and also apply strict Sharia law in a major urban environment as opposed to the more rural setting they were used to. It is possible this shift by local ISIS groups was strategically made in the hopes to gain territory and ultimately allow for the formal declaration of a wilayat in the region.

\(^{249}\) AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. *The Battle of Marawi’ Death and Destruction in the Philippines*. Amnesty International, 2017, p.6
While the AFP eventually regained total control over Marawi and militant groups suffered a major blow, this siege still demonstrated ISIS affiliates’ fighting capability and the extent of their support for ISIS in the wake of its military defeats in both Syria and Iraq. The groups’ defeat does not mean ISIS affiliates no longer pose a threat to the region. While both the ASG and MG have been weakened following heavy losses, this has not decreased the level of threat posed by ISIS and its affiliates. Instead, both the ASG and MG and their allies have perpetrated attacks after the Marawi episode; they continue to recruit members both from and outside of the region, and BIFF, which had mostly abstained from the fighting, emerged as a dominant force. The International Institute for Strategic Studies found that out of the estimated 119 reported clashes on mainland Mindanao involving Islamist groups in 2018, BIFF had been involved in at least 83 of them\textsuperscript{250}. Furthermore, it seems that “IS-aligned terrorists in the region have learned from their advisers in the Middle East that small numbers are capable of causing considerable physical and social damage”\textsuperscript{251}. While the military has been successful in a protracted battle which ultimately resulted in the militant’s defeat and the deaths of several ISIS-affiliated key leaders, the five months siege has also set off alarm bells throughout the region. The Marawi siege was much bigger in scope and magnitude than the AFP had ever experienced, and the fact that militants were able to overrun a major city and fiercely held it for a period of five months does not only illustrate government forces deficiencies, but most importantly it suggests that these groups were well financed, trained and prepared for this larger scale offensive.

2. **ISIS core Involvement in the Marawi Siege**

Firstly, it is important to note that monitoring terrorist-related flows of funding to the Philippines is incredibly complicated as acknowledged by Marawi ground commander Lieutenant General Danilo Pamonag; this is further amplified by the porosity of the country’s borders and the Philippines’ poor record in tracking the entry of militants and their source of financing\textsuperscript{252}. There is today credible evidence of funds directly attributed to ISIS core reaching the militants but it remains however unclear how much operational guidance ISIS affiliates in Marawi received from their Middle Eastern counterpart during the siege. Militant

\textsuperscript{250} HART, Michael. *Deciphering the jihadist threat to Mindanao’s Moro peace process*. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019

\textsuperscript{251} SINGH, Jasminder and JANi, Muhammad. *The Siege of Marawi City: Some Lessons*. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, no.153, 2017

\textsuperscript{252} FORREST, Nicole. *Marawi, Mindanao: ISIS in our region*. The Australian Naval Institute, 2018
groups have been guided by the core organisation as they implemented methods and policies which had been previously relied upon by ISIS core in areas it occupied in the Middle East. After all, local militants were attempting to replicate ISIS’s utopian vision of a pure Islamic state ruled by strict Islamic law promoting justice for Muslims, equality among men and prosperity. While the tactical decisions made during the siege may have been attributed to ASG and MG leaders, it is believed that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi not only praised the offensive but possibly directed it himself. As reported by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, plans for a takeover of Marawi by ISIS militants were made as early as April 2017 with instructions directly emanating from the hub’s leader via a video showing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi calling on local affiliates to attack and seize the strategically important city253. This is reinforced by claims made in June 2017 by the Philippines’ President Rodrigo Duterte who attributed the Marawi crisis to ISIS’s leader based on information he had received from his security officials. This was a way for local ISIS affiliates to replicate ISIS’s Mosul success in Marawi254. After all, the siege proved to be a valuable propaganda asset for an Islamic State which had suffered successive setbacks in the Middle East and the conquest of Marawi would attract international attention, instead of an attack on smaller towns in the more remote parts of the country such as ASG strongholds on the islands of Sulu or Basilan where the message would have had far less impact.

Furthermore, the battle had such an important strategic implication for ISIS that the core organisation jumped on the occasion with the publication of the June edition of Rumiyah ISIS propaganda magazine titled “The Jihad in East Asia” which was aimed at recruiting further combatants and inspiring militants to join the jihad in the Philippines if they could not make their way to Syria or Iraq. This edition, which was followed by a number of propaganda videos in a series “Inside the Khilafah”255, must have contributed to providing an incentive for Southeast Asian, as well as international, fighters to make the journey to Marawi and join the struggle by publishing its militants’ successes and by including an interview with the Emir of the soldiers of the Caliphate in East Asia256. ISIS core also possibly aimed at reinforcing a feeling of rapprochement between ISIS and its affiliates with their respective operations and the Middle East and successes in the Philippines when it released a video showing a beheaded Filipino soldier and at the same time showed the beheading of soldiers by Filipino, Malaysian

254 SANTOS, David. Duterte: ISIS leader ordered terrorist activities in PH. CNN Philippines, 2017
and Indonesian ISIS militants in the city of Raqqah in Syria. This possibly could have been a way for ISIS to demonstrate the clear connection between the core organisation and its Southeast Asian affiliates thus inspiring further foreign fighters to head for the region if they could not make it to Syria or Iraq. 

Lastly, one way of investigating the extent of physical support provided by ISIS core leading to and during the Marawi siege is by looking at the source of funding these groups benefited from. It has been established that funds directly attributed to the Marawi siege have come both from ISIS core as well as local sources via kidnap-for-ransom operations, extortion and donation from some locals who were possibly sympathetic to the militants’ cause. As regards to funds channelled by ISIS, it is believed that hundreds of thousands of US dollars flowed into the region from ISIS core in order to fund some of its affiliate’s activities including the Marawi battle. The AFP estimated that the group had sent approximately $600,000 through a so-called Dr. Mahmud, a Malay ISIS militant who acted as a channel between the core organisation and affiliated groups involved in the battle for Marawi. A report by the IPAC found that much of the funds directed to the Philippines were first sent from Syria through Indonesia before reaching militants in the Philippines and supporting them in their endeavour and possibly were used for the preparation of the attack on Marawi. Other reports have estimated that the provision of funds exceeded a million dollars.

It is worth noting though that local fundraising and recruiting played a much more significant role in the affiliates’ successes in Marawi, and direct support from Syria remained rather minor in spite of the local command structure in Marawi having received some undisclosed amount of money from ISIS in Syria. However, the raising of the black banner in the city, the implementation of similar fighting tactics employed by ISIS core in the Middle East and the seizure of the city for a period of five months meant that local affiliates could no longer be considered “ISIS wannabes” who had little in common with the ideologically-driven Islamic State. Local affiliates have much greater ambitions rather than just being criminal enterprises, and ISIS core provided direct support to militants in the Philippines and in Indonesia to aid their spectacular seizure of Marawi.

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257 ZENN, Jacob. The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines. Perspectives on Terrorism, 13(1), 2019, p.98


V. Findings

There are a number of considerations which can be gathered by studying the four ISIS affiliated cells active in Indonesia and the Philippines. Whilst a comparison between JAD and the three other groups might be complicated due to its recent establishment, much can be said about the groups’ activities in terms of both frequency and methods employed.

Whether successful or not, it is worth noting that ISIS affiliated cells in Indonesia and the Philippines have all experienced an upward trend in terms of perpetrated attacks until 2016. This increase in terms of frequency of attacks is noticeable from the year the cells pledged their allegiance to ISIS core, something especially visible by looking at the record of ASG terrorist attacks as it appears that its bay’ah is followed by a dramatic increase of attacks reaching an all-time high in 2015 with approximately 74 attacks. This trend was similar to BIFF which perpetrated around 52 attacks in the same year. While this trend is also visible for MIT, the numbers are far less ambitious despite also witnessing the same logic. Data therefore tends to suggest that allegiance to ISIS and an alliance with the Islamic State would be followed by an increase in attacks in both Indonesia and the Philippines, whilst remembering the fact that attacks in the Philippines have been far more significant in terms of numbers than experienced in Indonesia. However, all groups had resorted to lethal methods prior to their bay’ah pledge and therefore had gained national and at times international attention. Although these groups might have perpetrated less attacks prior to their oath, they still remained visible therefore suggesting that their lethality and visibility may have played a part in ISIS accepting their pledges as put forward by Hypothesis 2. Naturally, ISIS being the most violent and deadliest terrorist organisation has therefore gained incredible international attention thus possibly explaining why local cells would want to form an alliance with the hub.

As regards to Hypothesis 3 which explored the possibility of groups seeking an alliance when they suffer from organisational limitations and/or are incentivised by material gains, the previous chapter has already tentatively suggested that material benefits such as funds, fighters and military equipment could explain why some groups may seek an alliance with another, far larger terrorist organisation. Some groups after all had openly called for such material support due to their own internal limitations. This chapter however brings further insight to this particular factor. When looking at the frequency of attacks, nature of attacks and of targets, it was believed that on top of illustrating how groups would behave after their
bay’ah pledge, it would also provide some clues as to the relationship between ISIS core and its affiliates. Many attacks perpetrated in both the Philippines and Indonesia have reportedly been directed and/or funded to some extent by ISIS operatives in Syria and Iraq. There is solid evidence of Southeast Asian operatives based in Syria facilitating attacks back home either by providing funds or simply sharing skills they acquired in the battlefield in the Middle East. It is also possible that an increase in the number of attacks could be a result of new recruits, sometimes battle-hardened combatants joining ISIS affiliated groups in Southeast Asia responding to calls from ISIS core for militants to join local Islamists in their jihad. Something which is quite interesting here is the timing of attacks in the region. While JAD was established in 2015 and took its first tentative steps in the terrorist arena, MIT, BIFF and ASG all saw an increase in their terrorist activities from the year they pledged allegiance to ISIS core. Most importantly, 2015 was an especially an important year for these groups as it would be their most active before regressing in 2016. An analysis by the New York Times found that the great majority of terrorist attacks either directed or simply enabled by ISIS outside of the Caliphate took place between 2015 and 2016. While the report says little about Southeast Asian militants’ activities, it seems that terrorist activities and attacks in the region during that same period of time could have indeed followed the same pattern and have been at the very least enabled or even directed by the core organisation and not simply inspired. This suggests that militant groups may need some sort of leadership or guidance in order to conduct attacks and remain visible thus gaining further exposure. Furthermore, investigations into some attacks in Southeast Asia in both Malaysia and Indonesia have revealed that recruits, whether members of a local ISIS affiliated cell or not, were often directly communicating with ISIS operatives who helped them mount and mould the plots and at times would arrange logistics and funding.

The Case of Marawi is a perfect illustration of funds and directives provided by ISIS core to its regional affiliates. This potentially suggests that these groups might not have been able to undertake such an ambitious operation if it weren’t for ISIS. The support whether physical or simply motivational, the level of fluidity and cooperation among local ISIS affiliates as a result of the Islamic State’s unifying goal and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s “wise” leadership, call for unity and for hijrah to the Philippines all suggest that many groups may have indeed


decided to affiliate themselves with ISIS in order to compensate for their own organisational deficiencies, lack of leadership and direction, lack of funding, lack of skills and so forth.

Finally, looking into the methods used by and the targets of Southeast Asian ISIS affiliates terrorist groups, one can find a number of elements which may explain why such cells have decided to commit to an alliance with the terrorist hub. The majority of the groups studied have relied heavily on bombings and armed assaults both prior and following pledges of bay’ah with the exception of ASG. Indeed the Philippines-based group, while also relying on bombings and occasionally armed assaults, has mostly focused its activities on hostage situations. It is worth noting that kidnap-for-ransom has been a lucrative source of funding for the terrorist group. The fact the group has also heavily relied on this method following its pledge of allegiance to ISIS does not necessarily suggest the group has received no or little funding from ISIS core. However, what it may suggest is that affiliation to ISIS may have increased its source of illegal revenue as its pledge of allegiance having bolstered the group’s visibility may have entailed higher ransom demands. For instance, the abduction of two Canadians, a Norwegian and a Filipino national in 2016 was followed by a ransom set at $60 million\(^\text{263}\). This is a profitable operational tactic the group has resorted to which could suggest the connection it has to ISIS is mostly a case of opportunism by seeking material benefits rather than simply being ideologically motivated. Last but not least, when specifically looking at the targets of these groups’ activities, there has been in all cases an increase (sometimes very small such as with ASG) in the targeting of security forces, whether military or police force, which indicates that these groups may have, as a result of their alliance with ISIS, increased their capabilities possibly thanks to the provision of resources or motivation by ISIS core operatives.

Conclusion

Factors that motivate Southeast Asian Islamist groups to pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State’s Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi are complex, but most importantly multi-dimensional as seen in this thesis. For many groups in the region, an alignment with ISIS seems to be a logical path to take as it would reinvigorate the groups’ commitment to their own ideological component, to their religiously driven doctrine and ultimately bring them one step closer to their ultimate objective, that of the establishment of an Islamic State in the archipelagic Southern part of the region. After all, various militant groups in the region had pledged bay'ah to the leader of ISIS, an oath of loyalty which recognises the establishment of a new Caliphate but also it is also seen as a quid pro quo for financial and/or material support, physical protection and even possibly spiritual guidance. The very act of pledging an official oath of loyalty to ISIS and its leader following the proclamation of a Caliphate in the Middle East already suggests a multifaceted rationale for such a move. Implying that the phenomenon is based on a limited number of factors or is purely based on survival and/or profit would mean adopting too much of a simplistic and primitive approach, something many governments in the region have relied on before the Marawi Siege broke out. This study has found that the reason for an alliance formation between Southeast Asian Islamist terrorist groups and the Islamic State is a combination of factors which all need to be considered and addressed. The phenomenon is far more complex than attributing an alliance between these groups and the core organisation to survival, ideology, or simply opportunity to gain more power or exposure by allying with the winning party. Instead, it is a network of factors led by a rational choice required for groups to even consider pledging their allegiance and establishing an alliance with ISIS as such an action could result in opposite outcomes or could even jeopardise their efforts and possibly their own survival following the attention they will receive from counter-terrorism efforts.

Findings in this study suggest that trust between groups is enabled by some commonalities, including ideational ones. A common ideology may be seen as the starting point for intergroup interaction and may increase the likelihood of cooperation between terrorist groups. On top of their common fundamentalist approach and goal of establishing an Islamic State ruled by strict Sharia law, the similarity between all groups studied here can also be observed in the nature of their enemy. Indeed, they all reject what they identify as an Idolatrous State and vow to combat, defeat and destroy their perceived corrupt and cruel
governments as well as assistants of idolatry who could be identified as any State which supports Southeast Asian governments. Thus, one may observe that such factors undeniably will increase trust amongst groups therefore paving the way for the establishment of a terrorist alliance.

Ideological affiliation and common foes are both catalysts for cooperation between terrorist groups. However, other factors such as membership size, organisational and military weaknesses, groups’ lethality and so forth may explain why some groups in particular will seek out partnerships with others or become attractive to larger organisations in the context of Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia. This also implies that some indicators may be valid for one terrorist group but not for another as they may have different incentives as to why they seek such alliance. Holding territory for instance could also be seen as an important criterion. While ISIS overran large swathes of both Iraq and Syria, allowing for the creation of an Islamic Caliphate with global aspirations, various groups, including those based in Southeast Asia, immediately pledged bay’ah to the core organisation, and many of which were subsequently recognised and accepted by ISIS. While ISIS may have incentives to recognise many of these pledges, the fact the core organisation has been especially involved with affiliated groups in the Philippines and called on its’ soldiers to head to Mindanao to join the local struggle suggests that local groups which to some extent control territory as well, must have been more attractive partners than their Indonesian counterpart.

Whether terrorist groups align themselves with ISIS for material gains remains an unanswered question. All of these groups suffer from organisational dysfunctions, whether a lack of leadership, of funding, of experience, of military equipment, and a lack of cohesion. This suggests that rather than due to a lack of confidence, the bay’ah pledges emerged from groups suffering from some level of insecurity. Both Chapters III and IV provide indications that local militant groups to a limited degree expected some kind of material beneficial return from this partnership, but the lack of available information and the new character of this phenomenon prevent a more thorough study of this particular factor. It could take years, if not decades before more data is made available. Organisational needs however do not only suggest material gains but that groups could have also been looking for something different. Spiritual and operational guidance could possibly be an important reason for terrorist groups alliance to emerge as pledging bay’ah has not only resulted in an increase of attacks, but has also allowed for more ambitious operations, more unity amongst local militants and greater exposure which has in part also indirectly allowed physical gain for some groups which
became more attractive to militants and sympathisers. After all, terrorists groups located outside of ISIS’s Caliphate cannot necessarily expect much financial and military support from the Islamic State simply due to geographical constraints and any direct financial contribution should be seen as only a periodic benefit during their collaboration. However, groups will undoubtedly benefit from their association with the ISIS brand, whether ISIS actually provides them direct support or not, as they will gain further exposure and potentially legitimacy amongst other Islamist entities and individuals thus filling internal organisational gaps and responding to their internal needs. The phenomenon remains multi-dimensional but one may argue one of the primary reason for Southeast Asian Islamist militants to seek out an alliance with the Islamic State could indeed be to satisfy organisational needs as found by Tricia Bacon.

It can therefore be suggested that while some factors leading many Southeast Asian terrorist groups to seek out an alliance with ISIS are quite straightforward, the ultimate reasoning for the move is far more long-term and deadly than initially believed. ISIS may have benefited from the short-term publicity it has received from the conquest of Marawi, local Islamist groups will benefit from it in the longer term. Not only may they receive some material aid such as funds, skills, strategic directives and fighters, the move undeniably has allowed them to revive their fundamentalist cause thus leading to a “rebirth” of Islamist terrorism in the region. The groups’ failure to keep control over Marawi and intense counter-terrorism efforts in the region may have led affiliates to lose their element of surprise; however to this day they still remain a threat to stability in a region prone to Islamist groups’ activities and religious unrest. The cells are far from being defeated and reports of renewed terrorist activities and recruitment of new fighters only further demonstrates this long-term threat. While governments have already missed their first opportunity, intense counter-terrorism efforts against these terrorist groups and further studies on the nature, the functioning and internal composition of such Islamist groups are needed to prevent a second, better prepared and more ambitious Marawi episode. Indeed, there have been growing fears of copycat attacks targeting other sensitive towns and cities in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The combination of newly-acquired combat skills in urban environment coupled with the motivational strength groups have profited from their allegiance to ISIS can be a deadly potent mix against government security forces in Southeast Asia. Besides, before its military defeat, the Islamic State’s territorial gains had less to do with military strategic brilliance but more to do with government collapse and religious turmoil allowing the terrorist organisation
to fill the vacuum left within a vulnerable region. This may have occurred in the Middle East, but over 8,000 kilometres away, Marawi city fell under ISIS control as a result of its capture by Islamic State affiliates based in the Philippines. The context in which local groups pledged allegiance to ISIS allowed for a mobilisation of terrorist cells under a common banner which demonstrates the potential for pockets of ISIS-linked insurgency to emerge across the region.

While it may be unlikely that we will observe many further officially recognised bay’ah pledges coming from the region due to the Islamic State’s setbacks in the Middle East and its shift towards a more conventional Islamist insurgency, the core organisation and its regional allies have paved the way for future unrest. ISIS-affiliated cells from across the world have renewed their allegiance pledges to ISIS and its leader, especially since the 2019 Sri Lanka deadly attacks, and Southeast Asian affiliated groups based in the Philippines and Indonesia have followed the trend. Local Islamists are seeking legitimacy, credibility, spiritual guidance, strategic directives and possibly material gains in order to operate in a region that has a long history of Muslim persecution which could be exploited in jihadist campaigns to support Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims, Mindanao’s Moro community, Thailand’s Malay Muslims and even Vietnam’s Muslim Cham community. It is thus imperative for Southeast Asian governments and their international partners to develop long-term policies for dealing with the spread of Islamist terrorism in the region as firepower alone is unlikely to crush local ISIS-affiliated cells. It is necessary to prevent the internationalisation of terrorism by relying on intense counter-terrorism efforts, regaining control over territorial borders, reducing internal political turmoil and further analysing local terrorist groups’ activities and dynamics.

It is also crucial for governments to deny local Islamist cells a favourable environment for affiliation to ISIS or any other major terrorist hub. Asserting control over areas which have slipped free of sovereign authority is especially important in order to deny terrorist groups a safe haven, where they can spread their message, move equipment, transfer funds, regroup fighters and plan future deadly attacks. Particular attention from both policy-makers and academics is needed in the study of the nature of alliances between terrorist groups in order to provide counter-terrorism practitioners with all necessary tools to become more effective in disrupting terrorist activities and possibly dismantling such alliances. However, before finding a way of inducing a terrorist alliance collapse, a better focus on terrorist alliances is needed. By understanding what local Islamist cells expect from an alliance with ISIS, counter-terrorism experts will be able to disrupt their relationship, degrade their operational capabilities, thus hampering terrorist activities and creating friction between allied groups.
Following the defeat of ISIS in the Middle East, Southeast Asia with its title of “Second front in the War on Terrorism” could well become the main focus for the continued ideological struggle, unless the opponents of terror are prepared for the next phase of Islamist militancy which has already persisted for generations.
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88


