

What Do Asian-Oceanic Nations Think About ISIS?

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Articles & Testimony

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Recently, I had the opportunity to travel to a number of key Asian-Oceanic nations and allies of the United States to discuss issues related to Iraq, Syria, the Islamic State (IS) and foreign fighters. While much of the focus in Washington has been on the role of Western European and Arab partners in the fight, Asian-Oceanic countries also have their own interests related to this issue. In particular, I spoke with governmental officials, academic scholars and others in Singapore, Japan, China, New Zealand and Australia. While each country looks at the problem-set through a different lens and/or interests, as well as has varying degrees of threat-levels, it is clear that all are concerned and want to take an active role in combatting it.

SINGAPORE

Although few Singaporean citizens have gone to Syria, the government takes very seriously the potential that more could go. Therefore, one of the most pressing concerns for Singapore is developing a better countering violent extremism (CVE) and community relations strategy. Officials there are attempting to craft a better understanding of the varieties of paths to radicalization to help provide the resources and contacts on the ground to find early signs for those at mosques and schools, as well as interfacing with parents, teachers, imams and others. Another concern is the use of its territory for other foreign fighters in eastern and south Asia, as a transiting point on individuals' way to Turkey to get to the Syrian battlefield.

JAPAN

Even less so than Singapore, there are scant numbers of Japanese that have gone to fight in Syria/Iraq. That said, Japan wants to use this global coalition effort as another way to maintain its close relations with the United States. It is possible that Japan hopes to later be paid back if it encounters any problems with China in the future. In

addition to this, Japan has major economic and oil interests in Iraq, as well as other areas that the Islamic State has been attempting to expand, most specifically in Algeria (Jund al-Khilafa fi Ardh al-Jiza'ir) and Libya (Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam). Japanese officials keenly remember not only the death of many of their citizens during the In Amenas attacks in southern Algeria two years ago, but also their citizens that were killed in the 9/11 attacks. These incidents help frame the worries that they now have since one of their citizens that fought with the Salafi Islamic Front rebel group is now captured by IS. Further, the recent arrest of a college graduate that converted to Islam and attempted to go to Syria also makes officials think twice about the future potential radicalization of the refugee Uyghur community, as well as migrant workers from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Pakistan. For now, they do not worry about this type of threat.

CHINA

Of all these countries, China is most bothered by these trends, in part because it has seen a spate of violence already from its community that has been involved in the global jihadi world in the past with the Turkistan Islamic Party in Xinjiang and Pakistan's tribal areas. They fear that Syria will provide a new avenue for recruitment, training and returning home for domestic terrorist attacks. It is believed that at least 100 have gone, mainly Uyghurs, though there has been a presence of a few Han Chinese, too. Beyond a group of about forty individuals fighting with TIP's branch in Syria (TIP in Bilad al-Sham), it is difficult to ascertain the membership of citizens with other groups. Beyond the foreign-fighter issue, Chinese academics believe that the recent resurgence in violence in Iraq will hurt current or future economic projects, whether in the oil sector or more infrastructure-related, including building highways. With the increasing incursions by jihadis into Lebanon, scholars also warn about the safety of Chinese military personnel that are assisting the UN peacekeeping force on the Lebanese-Israeli border -- though a senior government official did suggest China could be willing to help with training missions for the Iraqi security forces. Lastly, while the consensus holds that China is unlikely to join Western and Arab countries in conducting military operations, it is believed that Beijing is willing to support more of the humanitarian aspects of the fallout monetarily -- though its track record over the last three years in Syria puts this claim into question.

NEW ZEALAND

Historically, New Zealand has been at the bottom of the list of Western countries that have had citizens go abroad to fight. Prior to Syria, there had only been two to three known individuals involved going back to the 1980s. While the numbers remain low for New Zealand in Syria (six to eight), its officials still worry about potential blowback. Therefore, Prime Minister John Key outlined five ways his country could engage the international community and the United States' coalition:

1. Stepping up intelligence sharing/operations within the Five Eyes;
2. Using its role in the UN Security Council over the next two years to try and diplomatically solve some of the other regional issues, such as Iran's nuclear activities and Israel-Palestine, in order to potentially ease tensions;
3. Partnering more with regional actors: Indonesia, Malaysia and others;
4. Furthering humanitarian help to the refugees and internally displaced; and
5. Helping with capacity building of the new Iraqi government (policing, courts and parliamentary process).

Another key security issue that an official suggested more individuals should consider in New Zealand (as well as Australia and Britain) is related to potential security problems at the ceremony marking the 100-year anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey in 2015. The concern being that the Islamic State might try and conduct an operation against the ceremony.

AUSTRALIA

Of all the countries I spoke in, Australian officials seemed the most capable yet most worried, since there is a history of plots and attacks against their country and citizens. It is believed that anywhere from sixty to 250 Australians have gone abroad for foreign fighting. One interesting aspect: individuals were worried that with all the focus on Iraq and Syria, south and southeast Asia, which are a lot closer to them, are being ignored. There are questions for them about what capabilities Al Qaeda's new branch "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent" might bring to bear on the rest of the region, as well as what happens with Al Qaeda central after the United States withdraws from Afghanistan. That said, officials still believe they have a strong interest in engaging with the American coalition, specifically interfacing military in Iraq. Canberra also hopes to foster and solidify better relations on these issues with Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan and Malaysia. More close to home, although the issue of returning foreign fighters certainly concerns the government, homegrown plots that are inspired by the Islamic State and potential communal sectarian tensions are some more immediate issues. This is especially true in light of recent foiled plots, as well as the country's large Lebanese Sunni and Shia communities. Although these communities have remained relatively quiet, communal tensions in Germany and Scandinavia illustrate that it could happen in the future in Australia.

CONCLUSION

In addition to these nations, while in Singapore I had the opportunity to speak with Indonesian and Malaysian academics who described increasing worries about the issue in their own countries. Therefore, it is important that Washington does not get caught up in only engaging Western Europeans and Arabs on these problems. This issue is interwoven with many locations as a result of not only the foreign fighter mobilization, but also the Islamic State's pursuit of territory outside of Iraq or Syria. We have already seen, for example, groups and/or individuals in Indonesia, the Philippines and Pakistan that have pledged baya to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Consequently, this affects most countries globally and should bring in partners from all over. It obviously will not be easy trying to balance different countries' interests, capabilities and internal political limitations, but it is a worthwhile endeavor for Washington to bring everyone on board that is willing to engage on the issue in a positive manner.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and founder of the website Jihadology.net. ❖

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