By ZAKIR HUSSAIN and
NUR ASYIQIN MOHAMAD SALLEH

HE WAS a manager in a local supermarket. She was a widow who went on to marry a Malaysian.

Both are Singaporeans still believed to be in Syria – sobering reminders of how a brutal three-year conflict 8,000km away hits close to home.

In March, many were shocked when the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that the supermarket manager, Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, 37, had travelled to Syria with his wife and three young children, aged between two and 11, to join the armed conflict.

A systems analyst with a multinational company who abetted and helped Haja, former permanent resident Gul Mohamed Maracachi Maraicar, also 37, was investigated, deported and banned from entering Singapore for his role.

A few months later, in July, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean told Parliament that the former widow was in Syria with her foreign husband and teenage son and daughter.

The female Singaporean was not named, but the Malaysian authorities later highlighted the family's presence there – she was a cook, her daughter taught English to fighters' children, and her son had joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

These individuals, together with an estimated 50 Malaysians, as many as 100 Indonesians, and around 100 from the Philippines, have become a pressing concern for security agencies in the region.

Especially worrying is the thought that they could follow in the tracks of a generation of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) members who got battle experience in Afghanistan two decades ago, then returned home to plan terror attacks like the 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people.

What troubles many, too, is that ISIS has been particularly brutal and reckless, kidnapping and beheading hostages and using technology to broadcast this globally.

In August, the Indonesian government announced a crackdown on ISIS after an Indonesian fighter in Syria appeared in a YouTube video urging others to follow his example. Officials also threatened to revoke the citizenship of those who fought abroad.

And amid reports that more Malaysians had joined the group, that same month, Prime Minister Najib Razak strongly condemned ISIS, saying its actions run "counter to our faith, our culture and our common humanity". Malaysia has also designated ISIS as a terrorist group.

Singapore said that a handful of other Singaporeans had planned to join the Syrian conflict, but were stopped before they could set off.

While the epicentre of conflict has remained in the Middle East, countries from the United States to Australia and even Japan are now steeling themselves for threats from their nationals returning from Syria to wage attacks on home soil.

Why fight a faraway war?

OVER the past year, hundreds of Muslims from many parts of the world have joined armed groups in the Syrian civil war, many of them moved by graphic images of the conflict and the perceived lack of support from other countries at the plight of fellow Muslim Syrians.

A number joined Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, the al-Nusra Front, but many also gravitated to the more hardline ISIS.

ISIS' appeal grew when it captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in June this year and, soon after that, its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared it a caliphate.
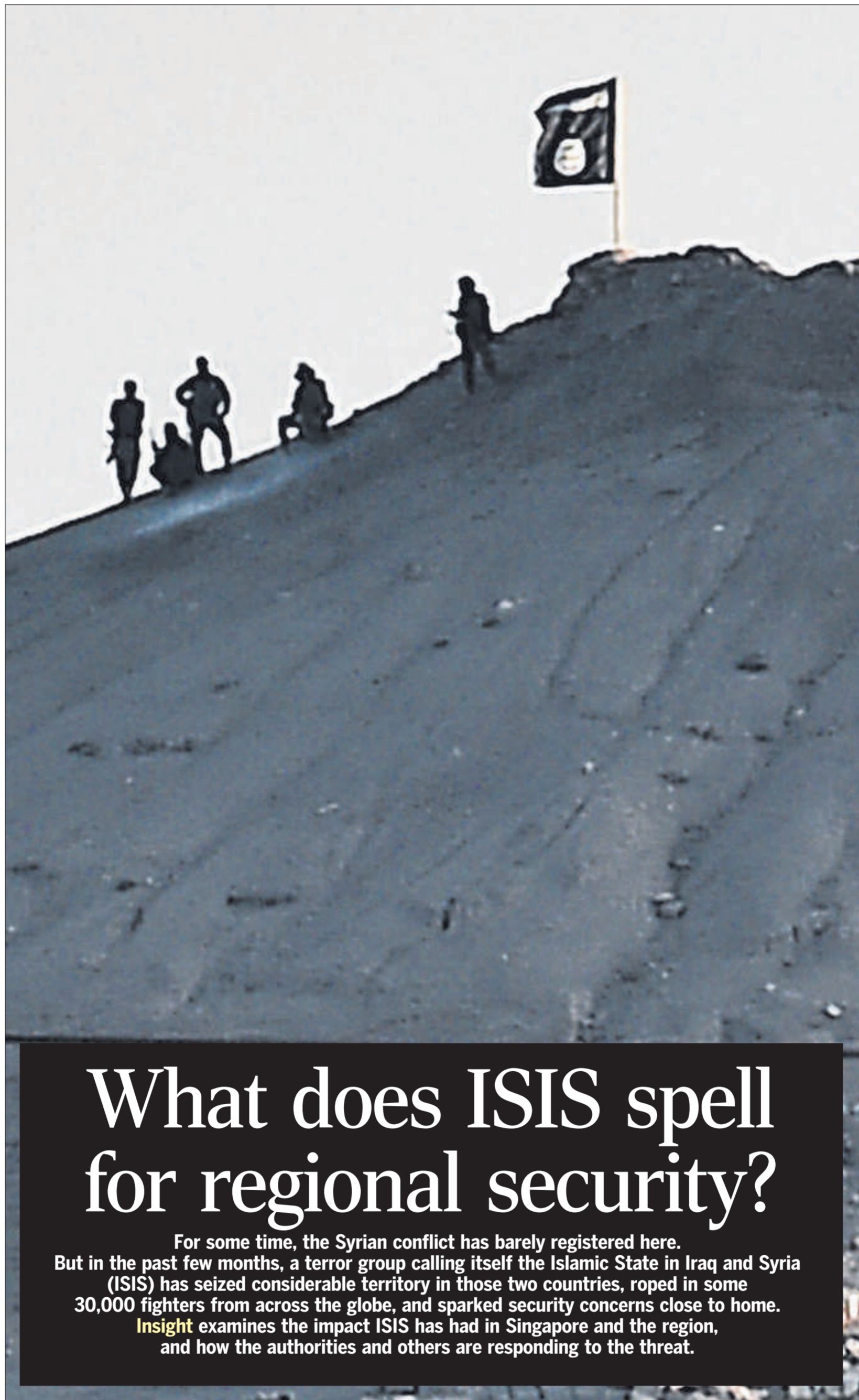
These advances prompted governments in the region and beyond to sit up and take notice of the real danger ISIS poses.

By holding on to territory, the group evoked long-held aspirations many extremists have harboured of an Islamic state or caliphate, which they believe they must fight to create.

Associate research fellow Navhat Nuraniyah from the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) tells Insight that such Islamist extremism has deep historical roots in South-east Asia.

"ISIS gained traction in the region precisely because previous extremist movements like JI have spread radical Islamist ideology in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore," she said.

The Darul Islam group in West Java, for instance, has been trying to set up an Islamic state in Indonesia since the 1940s, and has

mounted an insurgency against the government in subsequent decades. Though it was suppressed, its ideas lived on and were picked up by JI, which hardline clerics Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir set up in 1993 while on the run in Malaysia.

Several dozen Singaporeans were among those the group later inducted over the years, as it built a regional network with the goal of setting up an Islamic state in this region.

Analysts, however, point out that support for the idea of an Islamic state has far more to do with politics than it has to do with religion.

"It is a mindset that feels the 'Islamic world' has been denied what should have been its destiny of political empowerment, prosperity and cultural ascendancy," says Dr Fanar Haddad, a research fellow at the Middle East Institute (MEI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

"So many ISIS followers and defenders seem to present the ISIS phenomenon as the vengeful rebirth of Islam," he says, never mind that the idea of ISIS' caliphate offers little beyond a puritanical take on issues of public morality.

"Some are attracted to ISIS' perceived strength. If one has an ideological affinity for the idea of an uncompromising, puritanical, jihadi Islamic State, then there is no group that has more successfully tried to realise that fantasy

than ISIS," he adds.

No doubt, ISIS' rise has been helped by the collapse of the state in parts of Syria and Iraq, the proliferation of militant groups since the US-led invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the ensuing sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims over the past decade.

Some of this turbulence also feeds into an anti-Western agenda.

Dr Mohamed Ali, vice-chairman of Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) which was set up to counsel JI detainees and counter their ideas, tells Insight that some ISIS supporters are influenced because of their unhappiness and hatred towards US policy.

Therein lies the danger if these ideas are not corrected.

"They have become frustrated with what they see as the US killings of Muslims, of the West persecuting Muslims," says Dr Mohamed. "If they have hatred for the US, they will also have hatred towards its allies. They use this to justify their actions, to justify the terrorist deeds. So they will see nothing wrong with joining the fight in Syria, and they will see nothing wrong with attacking Singapore too."

Many of the Singapore JI network's targets before the members were foiled – American servicemen and Western embassies, for instance – were driven by an anti-Western agenda.

For some, fighting alongside

ISIS is seen as a way to battle Western forces who radicals see as having "subjugated Muslims" over the years.

Online battleground

BEYOND its tattered battlefield in the Middle East, ISIS has taken its fight online – winning supporters and recruiting fighters through social media.

The Internet has been a "game-changer", DPM Teo told Parliament earlier this year.

In fact, ISIS is gaining traction in the region faster than the JI did over a decade back.

In the Al-Qaeda years, its founder, Osama bin Laden, would speak at length on the group's radical ideology, gazing into a single static camera.

Now, ISIS' videos to both sway potential fighters to the cause, and to frighten its enemies, are blockbuster affairs. After the US made the decision to send troops to Iraq, ISIS responded by releasing a slickly-edited, 55-minute propaganda video called Flames Of War, complete with CGI explosions and slow-motion footage of fighters in combat.

Associate research fellow Nur Aziemah Azman from the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the RSIS says the Internet and social media have helped terrorists spread their propaganda more easily.

And ISIS is savvy enough to ex-

ploit the full arsenal of social networks at its disposal. It uploads sophisticated videos on YouTube and Facebook; posts battle summaries on JustPaste.it, a text and image-sharing site; puts up audio recordings on SoundCloud; and even has an army of fighters posting selfies of themselves on Instagram, guns in hand.

Social media is a new development, explains Ms Aziemah. In the past, Arabic online forums were the main platforms for extremist groups, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, serving as hubs for them to circulate official statements and videos. They also provided a virtual bunker for supporters and sympathisers to engage in debates and show their support.

Although these forums remain, ISIS has diversified, communicating directly with potential fighters over Facebook, Twitter, Ask.fm and via video calls.

"They speak the language of young people, and use mediums that have become an inseparable part of their lives," says Ms Navhat.

And scores of pro-extremist sites have sprouted up in the region, she adds.

These include Al-Mustaqbal.net and shoutussalam.com, which spearhead ISIS support in Indonesia and Malaysia, rapidly reproducing stories of ISIS victories on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq to recruit others. Both are accessible in Singapore.

The rise of self-radicalisation

through the Internet is serious cause for concern, says Dr Mohamed. In the JI years, the group's leaders spread their teachings by conducting religious lessons out of their homes. Sometimes, he recalls, they would ask their followers to place their shoes inside the house, instead of leaving them outside.

"They knew they were doing something wrong, and they didn't want to be traced. The Internet means we don't know who is a supporter unless they make plans to be involved in overseas conflict and the authorities catch them.

"We believe there are people quietly being influenced. But what's the true level of influence? It's hard to know."

Countering ISIS

GOVERNMENTS, Internet service providers (ISPs) and social media sites can play a more active role to stem ISIS' influence online, suggest religious leaders and academics.

Since the video of American journalist James Foley's beheading went viral, social media websites have stepped up measures to suspend and delete pro-ISIS accounts and videos, says Ms Aziemah.

But governments and ISPs should also work together to block pro-ISIS sites, suggests Ms Navhat. This, she concedes, has its limits.

"That alone won't solve the problem, considering how easy it is to just create new websites. The radical messages are still there and are widely circulated," she says. "So what we need is a counter-narrative. Jihadists rely on Islamic eschatology to mobilise local fighters to go to Syria. They cite hadith (tradition) about the Final Battle and the Last Caliphate that would take place in Syria to persuade people to join the battle.

"The Government needs to work with local Muslim scholars to counter such narratives, for instance, by refuting the accuracy of such hadith and its twisted interpretation."

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) has worked with mosques by condemning ISIS during Friday sermons.

And the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) has also urged the Muslim community not to support or sympathise with ISIS or any other groups with radical beliefs that "cause bloodshed among Muslims and murder innocent lives".

Such violence goes against the teachings of Islam and has no links to the religion, it said.

The RRG has been counselling people who actively read online material related to ISIS. Although Dr Mohamed declines to disclose the exact number, he says it is a "very small group, but growing".

And it is also planning to produce and upload videos explaining why ISIS goes against Islamic teachings.

Condemning ISIS, vocally and repeatedly, is an important step in driving home the message that the group's acts cannot be justified in any way, say religious leaders.

RSIS associate research fellow Mustazah Bahari has compiled a list of Muslim asatizah or religious scholars, leaders and countries against ISIS, alongside his colleague, Mr Muhammad Haniff Hassan. The compilation, he said, was created to address misunderstandings about whether ISIS is truly motivated by Islamic beliefs and if it's self-made Islamic state is in any way legitimate.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive – except for some netizens asking for scholars who support ISIS.

Religious teacher Mohamad Ghouse Khan Surattee says it is the duty of religious leaders here to speak out against acts that go against Islamic teachings.

"If all leaders speak up effectively, we will save our community here from any disunity. If not, there will be splits or extreme sects among us. We should continue to counter them online, and through books, articles, speeches and – most importantly – our own moderate actions and reactions," he explains.

And religious leaders also need to pay close attention to the community, identifying any "extreme" asatizah who may have adopted the ISIS ideology and preach it in a subtle way, and put an immediate stop to that through counselling, he says.

Meanwhile, there are also community efforts on the ground to identify those who may be swayed, and intervene early.

Mr Azman Kassim, chairman of the Ulu Pandan Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle, has alerted young people at his mosque to inform him if anyone

Militants with an ISIS flag atop a hill in the Syrian town of Ain al-Arab. While the fighting is concentrated in the Middle East, the battle against the terror group is a global one, with governments and communities facing the threat of extremism, both in the virtual world and on home soil. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

What does ISIS spell for regional security?

For some time, the Syrian conflict has barely registered here. But in the past few months, a terror group calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has seized considerable territory in those two countries, roped in some 30,000 fighters from across the globe, and sparked security concerns close to home. Insight examines the impact ISIS has had in Singapore and the region, and how the authorities and others are responding to the threat.