

# WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE ATTRACTED TO ISIS?

It has been a year since Singapore said it was seriously considering how to be a helpful partner in the global effort to counter the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While a multinational coalition of more than 60 countries has achieved some success in halting ISIS' expansion in Iraq and Syria, the terror outfit continues to hold key cities such as Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi. Nearly 30,000 foreigners have joined ISIS and other militant groups there to date, double the number a year ago. Insight looks at what threat ISIS poses to Singapore and the region.



The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has wreaked havoc on people such as these Iraqi Sunnis who had to flee the militants in Ramadi and Fallujah to a refugee camp in Baghdad. It has been able to put forward an alternate history that twists Islamic tenets to attempt to legitimise its caliphate, albeit one that calls for the deaths of even Muslims of certain schools. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Lim Yan Liang

The group's establishment of a caliphate, or Islamic state, in June last year with territory under its control in Iraq and Syria means that it has achieved a status no other terrorist organisation has managed:

something akin to nationhood.

This declaration of statehood received global media coverage and caught the imagination of other extremist groups worldwide – including in South-east Asia – many of which have since pledged their support to ISIS and helped spread its propaganda.

But unlike the approach of its predecessor Al-Qaeda, ISIS propaganda does not consist solely of spotlighting Western oppression of Muslims and exhortations to retaliate violently against the West.

Instead, ISIS has been able to put forward a persuasive alternate history that twists Islamic tenets to at-

tempt to legitimise its caliphate – albeit one that calls for the deaths of non-believers and even Muslims of certain schools – to attract "true" Muslims to the region to build a new, utopian Islamic society.

Such a story has proved irresistible to vulnerable groups, such as youth in transition, or those who

feel society has failed or alienated them, anthropologist and terror expert Scott Atran tells Insight.

"(The caliphate) represents a very real and powerful attractor for the disaffected across the Muslim world and, indeed, potentially across the entire world," he says.

"It is the only systemic, counter-

cultural global movement that is growing across the world. It is real, it is here, and it represents in the minds of tens of millions a history and destiny denied."

Coupled with the group's savvy understanding of social media, ISIS has been able to reach out to a far wider audience with a much more

## How much of a threat is ISIS to the region?

With the emergence and growing influence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the threat of transnational terrorism erupting in the region has grown significantly over the past year.

While ISIS and its affiliates threaten to destabilise the entire region, Singapore faces an outsized risk for a number of reasons, say experts.

They range from Singapore's reputation as one of the most secure countries in the world today, to its status as a global hub for finance and shipping, and its close relationships with the Western world.

The sum of these features puts Singapore in territories' sights, as any successful attack would be likely to shake global confidence in how secure people think they are.

"Although Indonesia and Malaysia oppose ISIS, Singapore is identified by the South-east Asian terrorists as the region's closest ally of the United States," says Professor Rohan Gunaratna, who heads the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR).

The support groups in South-east Asia help translate and disseminate ISIS propaganda within the region – and are also a source of fighters for the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

"Although Singapore's relations with the West and its hub status are its strengths, they also make Singapore a prized terrorist target."

Previously, the main terrorism risk in the region had been from militant group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). But it was dealt a major blow by strong security action in the decade following the Sept 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, and following the discovery a month later of a plot by JI to bomb embassies in Singapore.

"Prior to ISIS' rise in June 2014, there was a sense that the physical threat was declining because of very effective security force action within South-east Asia," says Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna, head of policy studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

But ISIS has been a game-changer, serving as a rallying force for militant groups in South-east Asia, says Dr Kumar. Experts estimate that close to 30 groups from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have taken oaths of allegiance to ISIS over the past year.

"One of the reasons for this development is that despite all the actions by the coalition against ISIS in the Iraq and Syria region, they are still there, and appear to be very resilient," he says. "They (ISIS) seem to be consolidating, so this gives the impression that they are here to stay."

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source of fighters for the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

To date, more than 700 fighters from Indonesia and 200 from Malaysia have made their way to participate in the violence in the region, a critical mass that prompted ISIS to form a dedicated South-east Asian military unit, Katibah Nusantara.

There is a real risk that these fighters could begin a fresh cycle of violence reminiscent of the JI threat after fighters returned from Afghanistan in the 1980s, says ICPVTR research analyst Jasmin Singh, who notes that a key Katibah leader is former JI member Bahrum Syah.

"While the Malay-speaking jihadists who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s formed the backbone of the Jemaah Islamiyah in the 1990s and the first decade of 2000, IS seems to have more grandiose plans for its Malay Archipelago fighters," he says.

A just-released paper co-authored by Mr Singh traces the expansion of Katibah into three geographical groupings and the assistance it has provided to Indonesian terrorist groups, including its alleged funding of several foiled bomb plots in Indonesia.

The August issue of ISIS' online magazine Dabiq has also called for the targeting of embassies in countries that are part of the global coalition against the group – a coalition that includes Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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## What is S'pore doing to counter ISIS?

The importance of Singapore's ongoing efforts to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) came into focus last month, when at the swearing-in of the new Cabinet, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a clear indication of the threat that the terrorists pose here.

Mr Lee announced that Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean would remain Coordinating Minister for National Security, a post he has held since 2011, even as he then unveiled two new coordinating ministers in other areas.

"The first area is national security, which remains a vital precondition of our success," said Mr Lee. "The SAF (Singapore Armed Forces) and Home Team have kept us safe, but new dangers and threats are emerging around us."

He singled out ISIS and jihadi terrorists as a serious threat for both South-east Asia and Singapore in terms of physical safety and racial harmony.

His latest emphasis comes nearly a year after Singapore's most

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high-profile action against ISIS – Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen's announcement last November that the Republic would join the US-led multinational coalition to combat ISIS.

There would be no SAF troops on the ground in Iraq and Syria, but instead Singapore's contribution would consist of non-combat hardware and 50 to 60 personnel operating from neighbouring countries.

These would include planning officers and an imagery analysis team. Hardware would include a tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling.

But Singapore's efforts to counter ISIS began in earnest even before it joined the global coalition, with a public stand against it on the world stage, at the United Nations General Assembly last September and at the 10th Asia-Europe Meeting a month later.

It supported a UN Security Council resolution that condemned in the strongest terms the widespread atrocities committed by ISIS, and which slapped travel bans on its leaders and froze their assets. It also co-sponsored another resolution that went one step further by requiring all nations to make it a serious, actionable crime for their nationals to join groups like ISIS.

Beyond overseas deployments and building global consensus on the world stage, Singapore also regularly drills its Home Team and the SAF in counter-terrorism exercises such as Exercise Northstar and Exercise Heartbeat, which are done on a large scale and involve multiple agencies. Next year will also see Singapore co-organise a maritime

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In a tweet, ISIS claimed this suicide attack on a Shi'ite mosque in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, in September. The terror group's media division Al-Hayat Media has put out a string of videos interspersed with religious chants that attract new fighters with a narrative of battlefield success and vengeance. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

seductive message than Al-Qaeda ever did.

From beheadings to the burning alive of a Jordanian pilot, ISIS' media division Al-Hayat Media has put out a string of videos interspersed with religious chants that attract new fighters with a narrative of battlefield success and vengeance.

It also has an online magazine called Dabiq in multiple languages, from Indonesian to Russian.

Attempts by larger platforms like Facebook and Twitter to clamp down on ISIS-related accounts have not reduced its reach, with the group and its sympathisers moving to file-sharing websites and sites

that allow anonymous content publishing.

Anyone around the world who is curious about ISIS ideology can easily find a substantial digital library of material online, whatever the medium or language, says Mr Remy Mahzam, an associate research fellow at the International Centre for Political

Violence and Terrorism Research.

"ISIS' attempt to digitise its own identity by providing a comprehensive multimedia resource online reflects a far-sighted strategy to increase its digital metabolism, in an effort to boost viewership, following and ultimate-

## What more can be done to fight ISIS' ideology?

The terror threat has been hampered home with the fact that at least seven Singaporeans have been known to have joined or planned to join ISIS.

That the allure of ISIS' warped ideology is so pervasive, even here, must come as a shock to many.

But it is a relief that the vigilance and early detection efforts of the public and agencies such as the Internal Security Department meant that this year, five people were identified and dealt with.

Last year, two travelled to Syria where they are still believed to be: Hajia Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, now 39, and an unnamed woman who went with her Malaysian husband and two children.

This year, there has been a spate of preventive detentions by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

In April, 19-year-old M. Arifil Azim Putra Norja'i was detained for making plans to join ISIS, and if he could not travel to Syria, planning to attack key facilities and assassinate the Prime Minister and President here.

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In July, Mustafa Sultan Ali, now 52, was detained for having similar plans. He had been arrested by the Turkish authorities for trying to cross into Syria to join ISIS, and was deported in June.

In August, Muhammad Shamin Mohamed Sidek, now 29, and 18-year-old Harith Jalani were detained in separate cases for planning to join ISIS. A radicalised 17-year-old student was also placed under a Restriction Order which limits his activities.

Across the world, the search for a narrative powerful enough to displace ISIS' own is a top priority today, in the face of a protracted military campaign with no end in sight.

As that global search for a counter-narrative goes on, Singapore is experimenting with its own formula. In June, the Religious Rehabilitation Group, a group of Muslim scholars who counsel terror detainees and radicalised individuals, launched a 130-page manual to help fellow counsellors.

Besides being a storehouse of information on the evolution and organisation of ISIS, it collects research done by reputable Islamic scholars worldwide that debunks its rhetoric. The manual also provides alternative arguments to the them-against-us worldview of ISIS, such as the rich tradition of co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims in South-east Asia for hundreds of years.

What makes ISIS' message such a heady concoction is its combination of the idea of a new Muslim society that transcends national

boundaries, mixed with a siren call to adventurism and rebelliousness at the end-times, says anthropologist Scott Atran, who has done field research with foreign fighters on the front lines in Syria.

In spite – or even because – of its grisly and retrograde videos of beheadings and the burning alive of its prisoners, the wider message has managed to cut a swath through age groups, backgrounds and language barriers.

"Governments need a strong alternative to the caliphate as proposed by the Islamic State, instead of just trying to undermine it and saying it's a fantasy," he says.

"You have to show them that there are possibilities for a life of significance and glory through a different interpretation of their values than what ISIS says."

Knowing that disinformation and spin are now commonplace on the Internet means that the general public also needs to be more active partner in the fight against ISIS, say experts.

Instead of shutting down accounts or websites that transmit extremist content, education and awareness efforts may be more effective, says ISIS' Dr Kumar Ramakrishna, who likens it to building "mental firewalls" to make communities more resilient against the malware that ISIS is trying to propagate.

"When it comes to dealing with the ideological threat that sustains the physical terrorist threat, there is still some way to go," he says.

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## FIVE STEPS FOR GOVTS TO TAKE

- Governments must move from cooperation to collaboration. They must do five things:
1. Have coordinated databases to share intelligence and information in real time.
  2. Exchange personnel, such as have Singaporean officials working in Thailand and Indonesia, and vice versa, from the military, national security and even intelligence agencies.
  3. Have joint training and joint partnerships.
  4. Share technology and resources.
  5. Share experience.

DR ROHAN GUNARATNA, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research

## ROLE FOR ALL IN BATTLING ISIS

Fighting ISIS on an ideological level is not something governments can do alone, but which society needs to do, with moderate religious leaders, grassroots leaders and educators within the region. Everyone has a role to play. The first order of business is to increase awareness of what are the danger signals that young people are getting radicalised.

DR KUMAR RAMAKRISHNA, head of policy studies at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

## A NEED TO LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The power of ISIS is that they have a story, a media campaign and an investment of personal time that brings people from all walks of life and nations together. You cannot, as an outsider, find out what's in the hearts of young people that might make ISIS' ideology attractive to them. You have to listen to them, you have to see what they are yearning for, then you can try to build with them a different vision of the world. But from the outside, I can't possibly say to a young Muslim, 'This is the way you should think, and this is a possible reframing.' The narrative has to come from within the communities themselves.

DR SCOTT ATRAN, an anthropologist who studies terrorists

## ISIS DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

ISIS' official media channel Al-Hayat often relies on its online 'fan base' in closed chat groups or forums who look for the most recent videos, media statements and periodicals. The data will then be pushed across social media spheres like Twitter, Facebook and Google+.

The value of ISIS' digital engagement (is) through the multiple platforms on which a posting is made available. An ISIS video would probably have an online lifespan of a few hours on YouTube before it is flagged as abusive and taken down.

However, when the content is shared through video hosting sites like Internet Archive (archive.org) or Sendvid (sendvid.com), the original file can be redistributed on other platforms for later viewing.

MR REMY MAHZAM, an associate research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research