

ISS RISK SPECIAL REPORT

How Real and Extensive is the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia?

Executive Summary

The threat of ISIS in Malaysia has grown from embryonic to emergent to definitive in a few short years. ISIS operations in the country date back to 2013, a year before the group gained notoriety due to its televised beheadings and massive territorial gains in Syria and Iraq. This early and continued engagement is indicative of the important role Malaysia plays in the terror organization's aspirations for the Southeast Asian region. This report outlines the serious and growing ISIS threat facing Malaysia and how this threat ties in with the rest of the region.

Key findings include:

- **ISIS engagement in Malaysia has evolved over time**, from mid-2013 to 2014, when jihadists travelled to Syria, to late-2014 through mid-2015, when Syria combat veterans returned to recruit and spread ideology, to the present, in which ISIS maintains a significant operating presence in Malaysia.
- According to a Pew opinion poll, **11% of Malaysia's public view ISIS favourably**, indicating fertile ground for continued recruits.
- **ISIS has infiltrated Malaysia's armed forces**, with sources telling us the country's main counterterrorism force will not share its most sensitive information with the military out of security concerns. This infiltration of the armed forces means that the nation's strategic assets, such as ports, airports, and military bases, are particularly vulnerable to attacks.
- The government is taking the ISIS threat seriously, with an abundance of arrests, counterterrorism raids, and legislation aimed at protecting its people and cities from terrorist attacks. Despite these efforts, **officials say that an attack in Malaysia is inevitable**.
- Several Southeast Asian terror groups have pledged support to ISIS. As such, **the greatest threat arising from the organization's operations in the region is ISIS' agenda to unify indigenous groups and establish a Southeast Asian province of its caliphate**.

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