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ONLINE AND ON THE GROUND:
ISIS TARGETS SOUTHEAST ASIA

BY RON WAHID

Bombs are going off in Bangkok. Protests are erupting in Kuala Lumpur. Rocked by political instability and new socioeconomic pressures, Southeast Asia has transformed into fertile ground for the Islamic State to take root. The extremist group is opening a new front and the United States is ignoring the problem -- at its peril.

 The current U.S. administration is focused on increasing cooperation with countries in the Middle East and North Africa to fight the Islamic State, but it is paying little attention to the group's growing influence in Southeast Asia, particularly online. The terrorist organization has started a local Southeast Asian branch, the Katibah Nusantara, and the Malay Archipelago Combat Unit -- specifically to recruit Indonesian and Malaysian fighters. Already, as many as 22 of the deadliest terrorist groups in Southeast Asia have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, and have been disseminating ISIS-related propaganda both online and offline. Now the Islamic State is increasing its

numbers in the Middle East by bringing its newly cyber-trained fighters from Southeast Asia to its strongholds in the region. Already more than 500 Indonesians have gone to the Middle East to join the Islamic State; as of March, authorities have also officially identified 67 Malaysians in Syria and Iraq involved in the Islamic State, though it is believed that there are many more in the area.

Many migrant workers from poorer Muslim countries reside in Southeast Asian nations, raising the concern that they could become indoctrinated and recruited and then return to their homeland to conduct Islamic-State-related activities. Malaysia, for instance, has an estimated six million migrant workers (of which only about half are legal), from countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Such a large and diverse population of disenfranchised people pose a large security risk if recruited by the Islamic State and sent back undetected to their home countries. Most of these nations do

not have the border security or counter-terrorism capability to combat such infiltration.

Once the Islamic State takes root in Southeast Asia, there will be no cost-effective way to stop the the insidious growth from spilling over into neighboring regions. Though Thailand has historically been perceived by regional terrorist groups as a neutral territory, the recent bombing at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok linked to Uighur militants potentially trained by other unknown agents shows that modern-day terrorists no longer play by the old rules. Western powers have to ensure that the global community adapts and is able to overcome the challenges posed by the new strategies propagandized by the Islamic State and other violent factions.

There is no telling when Islamic State militants will reach U.S. and European shores. The United States must realize quickly that technology transfer and counter-terrorism training in Southeast Asia is just as vital (if

not more) as airstrikes against combatants in the region in preventing the spread of Islamic State influence. After all, the group's whose first—and arguably most important—phase of indoctrination and militarization occurs online, and the US must actively work towards not just actively fighting against the organization, but preventing its growth across the globe.

Online platforms also provide the Islamic State with the opportunity to attract followers by showcasing life "under the shade of the Shariah," as the organization refers to it. This is depicted as The terror organization depicts Islamic State strongholds as stable and community-oriented, reinforcing the idea that the group will provide to its people what they claim Western states cannot: livelihoods, shelter, food, health care, spouses, and most importantly, a sense of belonging.

Social media accounts of "celebrity" users such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State commander, Yilmaz, and the young Malaysian docto-turned-jihadi-bride "Bird of Jannah," have amassed large followings -- perhaps because of the accessibility of the authors and the relatablility of their posts. Their social-media content ranges from images of guns and kittens (Yilmaz) to Disney-inspired memes and romantic quotes about being married to a jihadist (Bird of Jannah).

With European agencies clamping down on online recruitment and developing more efficient ways to fight the Islamic State's cyber campaign, the Southeast Asian region is the next logical platform for the terror group to carry out its propaganda. This is particularly likely as those governments have not yet figured out a legal way to counter the organization's social media calls to action and other communications.

In an attempt to counter pro-Islamic-State recruitment online, Malaysia and Indonesia have tried to implement measures to shut down group-related websites and online content. The measures have failed because of the many technological loopholes that exist. These solutions also raise human rights issues and have been met with harsh criticism. Indonesia's Ministry of Communications and Information, for example, "had to repeal its blockade of 22 extremist websites due to freedom of speech concerns."

The United States has developed a host of cyber technologies to moni-tor and contain the growth of the Islamic State online, from pushing out multilingual counter-messaging through the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, to implementing online operations on the ,dark web' through the military. Private U.S. companies have created niche data aggregation and analysis software that help government agencies locate, infiltrate and shut down online recruitment forums and cells.

The key to stopping the Islamic State in its tracks in Southeast Asia is a multilateral security pact that includes technology transfer agreements to provide countries with the sufficient cyber warfare infrastructure and tools to combat the group online. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia need training in developing online counter-messaging and counter-radicalization programs targeted at susceptible populations. Without this, the Islamic State will continue to spread and may take the dreaded next step: taking its efforts offline and onto the ground.

Ron Wahid is chairman of Arcanum Global, a strategic intelligence company, with offices in Washington DC, New York, London, Paris, Zurich, and Hong Kong.