

# INSIGHT REPORT

## Terrorism, militancy trends in Southeast Asia

### KEY JUDGEMENTS



- There is a persistent risk posed by separatist insurgency and extremist militant activity in the Southeast Asia region. Countries such as **Malaysia** and **Indonesia** have exhibited effective counterterrorism capabilities, whereas **Thailand** and the **Philippines** have been the most affected.

- **Over the coming years**, the threat of terrorism and militancy may be limited to unsophisticated and semi-autonomous attacks, primarily in high-risk areas, as militant groups' capabilities could be reduced by aggressive counterterrorism operations.

- Thailand, however, may continue to see unchanged levels of these attacks due to the

sophisticated operational capabilities of militant groups in the southern provinces.

- Managers should understand the threat environments in locations which workforce operate in and travel to, work with local security partners to implement safety controls and be prepared to respond to security incidents.



## OVERVIEW

Despite improvements in counterterrorism capabilities, the Southeast Asia region continues to face terrorism and militancy challenges posed by extremist groups with diverse motivations. Islamist extremism has been a consistent trend across Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Meanwhile, separatist groups continue to be actively involved in Thailand and Indonesia. Militants in Thailand display sophisticated capabilities, while the environment in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines is characterised by a mix of organised groups and fragmented cells. Apart from robust security measures and counter-radicalisation efforts, effective counterterrorism operations, especially for militant activity close to the border areas, also require regional co-operation.

## THAILAND

There is a persistent risk posed by the ongoing southern separatist insurgency in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces. The conflict is most intense in Narathiwat and Pattani. There is also occasional insurgent activity in the southern parts of Songkhla province, namely in Chana, Na Thawi, Saba Yoi and Thepha districts.

Assaults on 'soft' targets are infrequent. However, militant groups have previously claimed responsibility for attacks in the capital Bangkok, and heightened security can be anticipated in the city during periods of escalated tension between the government and militant groups in the southern provinces.

### Militancy – southern provinces

The National Revolutionary Front (BRN), the region's most capable militant group, recently replaced the militant umbrella organisation MARA Patani in the ongoing peace process.

Pattani and Narathiwat have been the worst-affected provinces due to the separatist insurgency, with a sustained consistency in incidents. While also significantly impacted, Yala province has recorded a steady decrease in the number of incidents since its peak in 2022. Incidents in Songkhla continue to be reported, but at a much lower frequency than the other three provinces (see figure 1).

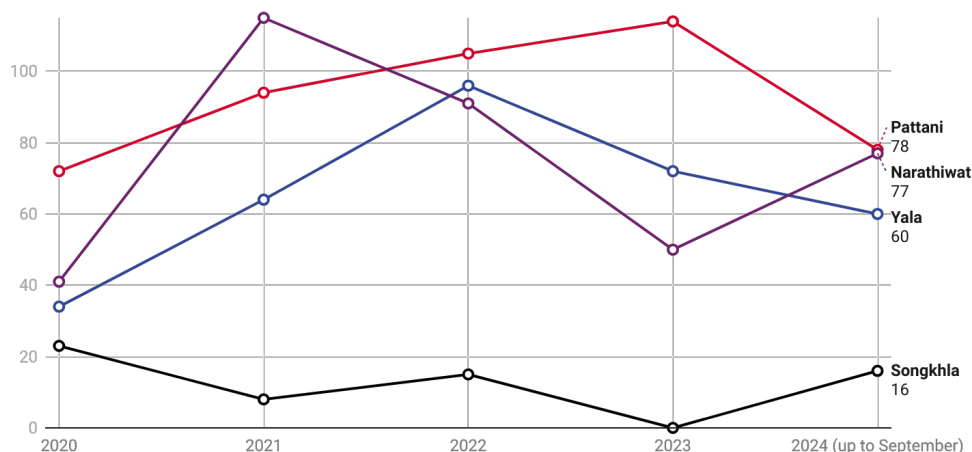


Chart: International SOS • Source: Deep South Watch (DSW) • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Number of separatist-related incidents in Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla and Yala provinces recorded between 2020 and 2024



### Affected districts

According to Deep South Watch, a private research organisation covering Thailand, these are the districts in Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla and Yala that were most affected by BRN activity (ranging from crime, drug-related and militant operations) between January 2023 and July 2024:

- **Narathiwat province:** Rueso district (53) stands out as most affected, followed by Tak Bai (37), Si Sakhon (34), Chanae (27) and Ra-ngae (25) districts.
- **Pattani province:** All districts in Pattani province record a considerable number of incidents. Sai Buri (45), Nong Chik (34), Yarang (34), Thung Yang Daeng (33) and Panare (29) are the worst affected due to BRN separatist activity.
- **Songkhla province:** Four out of 16 districts are primarily impacted, namely Saba Yoi (25), Thepha 22, Chana (10) and Na Thawi (5).
- **Yala province:** Mueang Yala (56) and Bannang Sata (53) are disproportionately impacted, followed by Yaha (30), Raman (29) and Than To (24).

Flashpoint periods	Assessment
<b>Breakdown of peace talks</b>	After the breakdown of peace talks and ceasefire agreements, during key periods such as the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the BRN is likely to carry out co-ordinated strikes across the southern provinces. On 22 March, the BRN attacked more than 40 locations across Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, as well as parts of Songkhla.
<b>Anniversary of the 2004 'Tak Bai incident', falling during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan</b>	On 25 October 2004, 85 local anti-government protesters were killed in trucks, mainly by suffocation, after their arrest following a riot outside a Tak Bai police station in Narathiwat. Gatherings are held every year around the date and there is an escalation in attacks during this period.
<b>Anniversary of the 2004 Krue Se Siege (28 April)</b>	On 28 April 2004, insurgents attempted to overrun police and military facilities in the southern provinces. More than 100 attackers were killed following the incident. Heightened security and an increase in incidents are likely around the anniversary date, especially in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces.
<b>Election period</b>	The election period can exacerbate tensions as elections are seen as a symbol of the central government's authority, which the BRN rejects. On 12 May 2023, the BRN carried out an explosion close to a school that was being used as a polling station during the general election. Such attacks can be seen as an attempt to deter local residents from voting, as well as undermine the government and attract international attention.



### Peace process

While the government has been involved in peace talks with several militant groups since 2014, there has not been substantial progress. The latest peace negotiations involve three stakeholders: the dialogue partner representatives of the government, the BRN and Malaysia-based facilitators.

Peace negotiations are obstructed by militant violence against the security forces, a lack of unity among militant groups and the frequent changes of government. The next round of talks will focus on three aspects, namely the cessation of violence, public consultations with all stakeholders and a political solution. Autonomy for the southern provinces will not be explicitly mentioned. As such, unless a political solution that provides the southern provinces with a level of autonomy is accepted by the government, it is unlikely that the peace plan will be signed.

### Modus operandi

- **Explosions:** In 2023, at least 30 out of 59 violent incidents recorded in Narathiwat were explosions. Militant groups are known to plant bombs to target the security forces and perceived collaborators. However, incidental exposure to nearby civilians has also been reported during explosions.
- **Arson:** Arson attacks occur frequently in the southern provinces. They are often part of a broader strategy of co-ordinated assaults that may include bombings, shootings and other forms of violence. While arson attacks primarily aim to damage property, they sometimes result in casualties, especially if they target populated areas or shops and other public buildings.
- **Shootings:** Shootings are common and often unpredictable. Insurgent groups' most-frequent tactics include ambushes and setting up attacks along roadsides, in marketplaces or near government buildings.

Militants primarily focus on the security forces and perceived collaborators, such as local officials, teachers and monks. However, 'soft' targets, such as hotels, hospitals, schools and crowded markets in regional urban centres, are also periodically attacked. An intermittent targeting of transport infrastructure has also been reported. Such incidents can pose incidental risks to civilians.



## INDONESIA

There is a credible risk of terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists in the country. These incidents are conducted by extremists affiliated to cells of terror groups operating in a specific region, primarily in Central Java, Central Sulawesi, South Sulawesi and West Java provinces. Major areas of militant activity include Bandung (West Java province), Makassar (South Sulawesi province) and Surabaya (West Java province). Moreover, longstanding separatist violence and associated attacks pose a credible threat in the Papua provinces (Central Papua, Highland Papua, Papua, South Papua, Southwest Papua and West Papua).

In the capital Jakarta, terrorism poses a persistent risk as the city is the business and political centre of the country. Counter-terrorism operations intensify around flashpoint dates and events, such as the 2024 general election, and highlight the underlying risk posed by terrorism. However, it is important to note that the capital has not been affected by incidents in recent years, and a major terror attack is unlikely during flashpoint periods. In Bali (Bali province), no major terror incidents have been reported since the 2002 bombings. However, given the volume of tourism and travel, there remains a persistent risk of terrorism in the city.

### Islamist militancy

The capabilities of militant groups have been significantly degraded due to strong counterterrorism efforts in recent years. However, smaller extremist networks and cells still operate in the country. Active groups include Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) also had considerable influence in the country, but senior members recently announced the group's disbandment. Both the JAD and the MIT have voiced support for the extremist Islamic State (IS) group, whereas the JI was affiliated with al-Qaida.

### Jemaah Islamiyah

In a significant development, senior JI leaders announced on 30 June that the al-Qaida-affiliated group would be dissolved and would focus on non-violent means of engagement. The group was a major actor in Indonesia's terror landscape and had co-ordinated some of the deadliest attacks in the country, including the 2002 Bali nightclub bombing that killed more than 200 people. JI leaders have expressed their intent to contribute positively to society and revise educational curricula in their affiliated institutions to remove extremist content. While the announcement suggests a reduction in the threat posed by the JI as an organised entity, there are concerns about the emergence of splinter groups that could reject the disbandment and continue or escalate violent activities.

### Jamaah Ansharut Daulah

JAD and its main leadership have struggled to recover after the arrest of senior members of its command structure in 2018 and the group now operates in a decentralised manner. Individual cells spread across Indonesia take the lead in planning and executing attacks. Close co-ordination and mobilisation between multiple JAD cells are rare. In October 2023, the authorities arrested 59 JAD suspects across the country suspected to be planning an attack linked to the 2024 general election. These incidents highlight the intent of individual, semi-autonomous JAD cells to carry out low-level attacks during flashpoint dates.



### Mujahidin Indonesia Timur

Following the killing of its last-known member in September 2022, the MIT has been inactive. However, the group still poses a concern as it has previously showcased its capability to recover and rebuild its ranks, as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a recruitment drive would almost certainly be pursued through MIT strongholds in Poso (Central Sulawesi).

### Papua insurgency

Free Papua Movement's armed wing, the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) is the most influential group in the Papua provinces. The presence of other armed separatist groups, such as the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, has complicated the peace process in the region.

Most militant activity is concentrated in Intan Jaya, Mimika, Paniai, Puncak, Puncak Jaya (Central Papua) and Lanny Jaya and Nduga (Highland Papua) regencies. Out of these, Puncak and Intan Jaya have been the worst affected and serve as primary TPNPB strongholds. While the risk of spillover violence to other provinces in Papua remains low, there have been occasional incidents in neighbouring regencies and urban areas such as Papua's provincial capital Jayapura. Since 2020, incidents have been consistent in Intan Jaya and Puncak regencies, whereas Nduga regency has recorded a steady increase after a temporary decline in frequency during the pandemic.

#### Indonesia - Incidents (2020-2023)

Most affected regencies in Central Papua and Highland Papua provinces



Regency	Province	2020	2021	2022	2023
Intan Jaya	Central Papua	33	34	9	23
Lanny jaya	Highland Papua	0	0	1	6
Mimika	Central Papua	30	8	2	2
Ngduga	Highland Papua	9	6	11	20
Paniai	Central Papua	33	34	9	23
Puncak	Central Papua	1	41	21	38
Puncak Jaya	Central Papua	0	1	1	6

Table: International SOS • Source: ACLED • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Number of incidents in Central Papua and Highland Papua provinces between 2020 and 2023





### Modus operandi

#### Islamist militancy

Most terror attacks and plots in Indonesia revolve around three methods: explosives, firearms and handheld weapons, such as machetes. While firearms and handheld weapons are commonly used, there was a slight increase in the intended use of explosives in 2023. This was discovered by the security forces through foiled terror plots across several decentralised militant cells operating at reduced capacity. While there may be a motive to use explosives, the security forces' success indicates that cells do not have adequate operational capability to conduct such attacks.

Usually, targets include civilians, military and police officials, and less-guarded security force infrastructure (such as checkpoints and military posts). Government officials have also been occasionally targeted.

#### Papua insurgency

Separatist activity in the Papua region involves frequent clashes between the security forces and militant groups within their strongholds. Moreover, militants specifically target industrial buildings with guerrilla ambush tactics to reject government-enabled projects. These ambushes may involve vandalism, arson and armed assault on workers. In October 2023, members of the West Papua Liberation Army ambushed a gold mining camp. They set fire to three excavators and two trucks, and killed seven workers. The ambush was followed by a two-hour-long shoot-out between the security forces and the militants.

Separatists have also been known to target foreign nationals in the region through abductions and armed assaults. Two high-profile incidents were recently reported in Central Papua and Highland Papua:

- On 7 February 2023, a New Zealand pilot was kidnapped by TPNPB militants in Nduga regency (Highland Papua) and held hostage. The attack was carried out to demand the complete independence of the Papua provinces. After more than a year in captivity, the TPNPB and the government reached an agreement and the foreign national was released on 21 September.
- On 5 August, a New Zealand helicopter pilot was shot and killed by TPNPB militants in Alama district (Central Papua). Its four remaining passengers, all local nationals, were initially taken hostage, but subsequently released unharmed.



## PHILIPPINES

There is a credible threat of militant activity in the Philippines, particularly in the south-western part of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the Sulu archipelago. This activity can be divided between Islamist and leftist militancy. Islamist militancy is carried out through the presence of the Sulu-based extremist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Dawlah Islamiya (DI) terror organisation, the Dawlah Islamiya-Maute Group (DI-MG), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP) and associated factions. Leftist militancy is primarily conducted through the New People's Army (NPA), which is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. While counterterrorism efforts have diminished the operational capacity of extremist groups, occasional attacks underscore the persistent level of militant activity in the region.

There have been no recent major incidents in Metro Manila or other urban centres (such as Davao City or Cebu City) amid the continued capability of the security forces to pre-empt complex terrorist plots. However, disrupted plots linked to Mindanao-based militants have taken place in recent years. Possible terrorist targets include public transport terminals and buses, government buildings, police stations and military outposts, as well as crowded public spaces such shopping centres, markets and entertainment venues.

### Islamist militancy

The military continues to engage in operations against various insurgent groups, including those affiliated with IS, such as the DI-MG and the ASG. The death of prominent leaders, including DI-MG leader Abu Zacariah and ASG senior leader Pasil Bayali, as well as the arrest of BIFF-faction leader Abu Turaife in 2023 indicate effective counterterrorism capabilities in the province. However, while the military has made strides in weakening these groups, their presence in rural and remote areas remains a challenge. The military has focused on dismantling strongholds and cutting off supply routes, which has led to a reduction in large-scale attacks, but sporadic violence persists.

### Sulu archipelago

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)'s 11th Infantry Division (11D) has carried out aggressive military operations in the Sulu archipelago over the past few years. These have successfully diminished ASG presence in the region. On 6 September 2023, Governor Abdulsakur Tan declared the region an 'Abu Sayyaf-free' area. The government's statement that Sulu is 'Abu Sayyaf-free' is largely accurate, but it does not indicate a complete removal of ASG elements from the broader region. The ASG continues to operate in nearby Basilan province. While northern areas of Basilan province, such as Isabella City and Lamitan City, are mostly secure, the ASG remains active in southern Basilan, particularly around Sumisip.

### South-western Mindanao

The security situation in south-western Mindanao has seen significant developments in recent months. The BIFF has been the most active group in the region. Its Karialan faction is reportedly more focused on local interests, particularly fighting for an independent Bangsamoro homeland in the southern Philippines. The other two BIFF factions, led by Ismael Abubakar and Abu Turaife, have pledged their allegiance to IS.





While the capabilities of the BIFF have been significantly degraded by the government's counter-terrorism operations, periodic flare-ups of violence and instability will continue to impact the security landscape in Maguindanao del Sur province and the broader BARMM. Notwithstanding the decline in the BIFF's capabilities under constant security forces pressure, the group continues to be a persistent security threat in the region against the largely successful Bangsamoro peace process.

The establishment of BARMM in 2019 triggered a transition within the armed insurgency in the region. Several BIFF members cited that the establishment of the autonomous region aligned with the objectives of the group's armed struggle and therefore began to demobilise in preparation for the BARMM elections scheduled for **2025**. There was also a subsequent increase in surrenders by militants across DI-MG, ASG and BIFF in the aftermath of the 2017 Marawi siege incident, a five-month-long armed conflict between the government's security forces and IS-affiliated militants. This can be attributed to various key factors, such as loss of local support, internal friction, exhaustion, military pressure and availability of rehabilitation programmes. However, the following indicators should be kept in mind:

- The December 2023 bombing of a gymnasium in Marawi city (BARMM) underscores that, despite the overall decreasing trend in militancy across the Philippines, the threat of terrorism still persists in the region.
- There is a persistent threat of violence ahead of the 2025 BARMM elections. Isolated incidents were also recorded in the lead-up to the 2023 barangay (village-level) elections in Mindanao. We expect Cotabato city, Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte to be hot spots for electoral violence. Operations by the DI-MG in Lanao del Sur further highlight the persistent risk of terror activity in the region during the electoral process.
- Rido (family/clan disputes) violence has been a longstanding concern in Mindanao and has been exacerbated by extremist groups. Terrorist organisations aim to exploit clan feuds to recruit fighters, create chaos or gain support from local factions. The ASG and the DI-MG have been known to leverage existing rido conflicts to further their agendas in local strongholds. The interplay between rido and terrorism has led to heightened security concerns and challenges for the government.

### Leftist militancy

The NPA continues to operate primarily in rural and remote areas of the country. Its influence has generally been on the decline, particularly due to intensified military campaigns by the AFP. While the NPA's operational capacity has been reduced, it remains a persistent threat in its stronghold areas, particularly in Caraga, Davao, Eastern Visayas, southern Luzon and northern Mindanao regions. These areas have historically provided the NPA with the geographic advantage necessary for guerrilla warfare, including mountainous terrains and dense forests, which complicate military operations against it.

### Modus operandi

Bombings, particularly entailing the use of improvised explosive devices, are a frequent method employed by terrorist groups in the Philippines. These attacks are often aimed at crowded public places, such as markets, public transport and religious sites, to maximise casualties.



The ASG is also involved in kidnapping, especially of foreign nationals, for ransom activities. These operations typically involve abducting victims from remote or poorly guarded areas and holding them in jungle hideouts until a ransom is paid.

Some groups, such as the DI-MG and the BIFF, have conducted armed assaults on military and police installation, as well as civilian targets. These attacks are often co-ordinated and involve the use of small arms and, in some cases, explosives.

The NPA typically employs guerrilla warfare tactics, which include ambushes, extortion activities and raids on security outposts or police stations. Although the group may seek to target major urban centres **in the coming months**, its threat currently remains mostly confined to rural areas.

## MALAYSIA

There is a latent threat of terrorism in Malaysia. Militants also pose a risk of semi-autonomous attacks/plots in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Johor, Sabah and Selangor states. The threat is relatively more persistent in eastern Sabah state.

### Recent trends

Foreign events, particularly related to Islam and the West Asia region, have consistently had a strong influence on the threat landscape in Malaysia. For example, the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent influence of the extremist IS groups were significant factors that triggered Malaysians to join IS in Syria and Iraq. As a result, the relative weakening of groups such as IS and the extremist Al-Qaida in recent years within their respective strongholds have decreased their influence in Malaysia. The decreasing trend of terror activity is also attributed to the lack of local senior leadership for extremists and potential terror groups in the country.

However, the attack by a lone gunman targeting a police post in Johor state on 17 May highlights the underlying risks posed by militancy in Malaysia. Two police officers were killed during the incident, and the perpetrator was shot dead by the police. Despite suspected links to the JI, investigations by the authorities indicate that the perpetrator acted alone. However, the nature and style of the attack was similar to those conducted or associated with the JAD group in Indonesia.

Robust counter-terrorism capabilities of the security forces in Malaysia have nevertheless significantly limited the ability of terrorists to conduct large-scale and/or sophisticated attacks. As a result, recent incidents, including the one on 17 May in Johor state, have indicated a trend of such attacks being semi-autonomous in nature, signifying low capabilities of potential perpetrators.



### Sabah state

Terrorist activity by the ASG and other pro-IS affiliated terror groups has declined in Sabah state. Apart from the ASG's presence and instability in southern Philippines, Sabah also faces a threat from separatist groups such as the Royal Sulu Force (RSF). The RSF has significant support in the state. In 2013, the group carried out the invasion of Lahad Datu town. Given that the government won the legal dispute against the now defunct Sultanate of Sulu over its claim on Sabah in June 2023, we do not anticipate similar incidents **in the coming years**.

## SINGAPORE

There is an underlying threat of terrorism in the country. According to Singapore's Internal Security Department, Islamist extremism remains the primary concern. The Ministry of Home Affairs has previously warned of a persistent threat from IS. While the Indonesia-based terrorist network JI used to maintain the capacity to stage attacks, its disbandment has reduced its threat. In recent years, far-right extremism has also been recognised as an emerging threat in the country.

Singapore's small size, robust counterterrorism capabilities and strong and stable government indicate that the likelihood of an attack is low. However, concerns linked to Islamist extremism are still persistent due to a trend of online self-radicalisation of Singaporean nationals. Local nationals have been detained periodically under the Internal Security Act for supporting Islamist extremists and intending to fight with militant groups abroad. In April 2022, the authorities detained a self-radicalised Singaporean national who was planning to travel overseas for this purpose. Similarly, far-right extremism ideology is also propagated through online platforms. In January 2021, the security forces arrested a self-radicalised youth influenced by far-right extremism. The youth was allegedly planning to carry out machete attacks at two mosques in northern Singapore. Although far-right extremism is an emerging threat, most arrests are linked to Islamist extremist ideology.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MANAGERS

- Prior to approving travel, conduct risk assessments considering the profile and itineraries of workforce to determine their potential exposure to militancy and other risks.
- Closely monitor developments in locations where workforce is present through reliable local sources and International SOS alerts. Communicate verified information and a response plan to workforce in a timely manner, to mitigate the risk of misinformation.
- Determine and monitor key indicators that could signify a marked deterioration of the security environment and influence the ability for workforce to travel to and/or remain in affected areas. These may include an increase in militant operations targeting the security forces and civilians or a prolonged deterioration of socio-economic conditions. Regularly reassess the requirement for workforce to travel to and remain in areas frequently affected by militant activity.
- Workforce in militancy-affected areas should be trained to face higher risks from kidnap-for-ransom, ambush, armed assault, explosion and disruption from security checkpoints. Maintain heightened vigilance around potential targets such as crowded areas, markets and transport hubs due to the risk of terrorism.
- Ensure your emergency plan is up to date and includes the ability to quickly notify and account for workforce potentially impacted by a security incident. The plan should ensure that all travellers have robust communication plans in place and know whom to contact, where to go and how to move securely around their location following an incident. Workforce should have sufficient provisions in place at their accommodation in case they are required to shelter in place, including food, water and first-aid kits.
- Ensure in-country workforce is well informed about your organisation's security protocols. They should understand the types of support your organisation will be able to provide and receive briefings on their role when responding to critical incidents and crises.



# INSIGHT REPORT

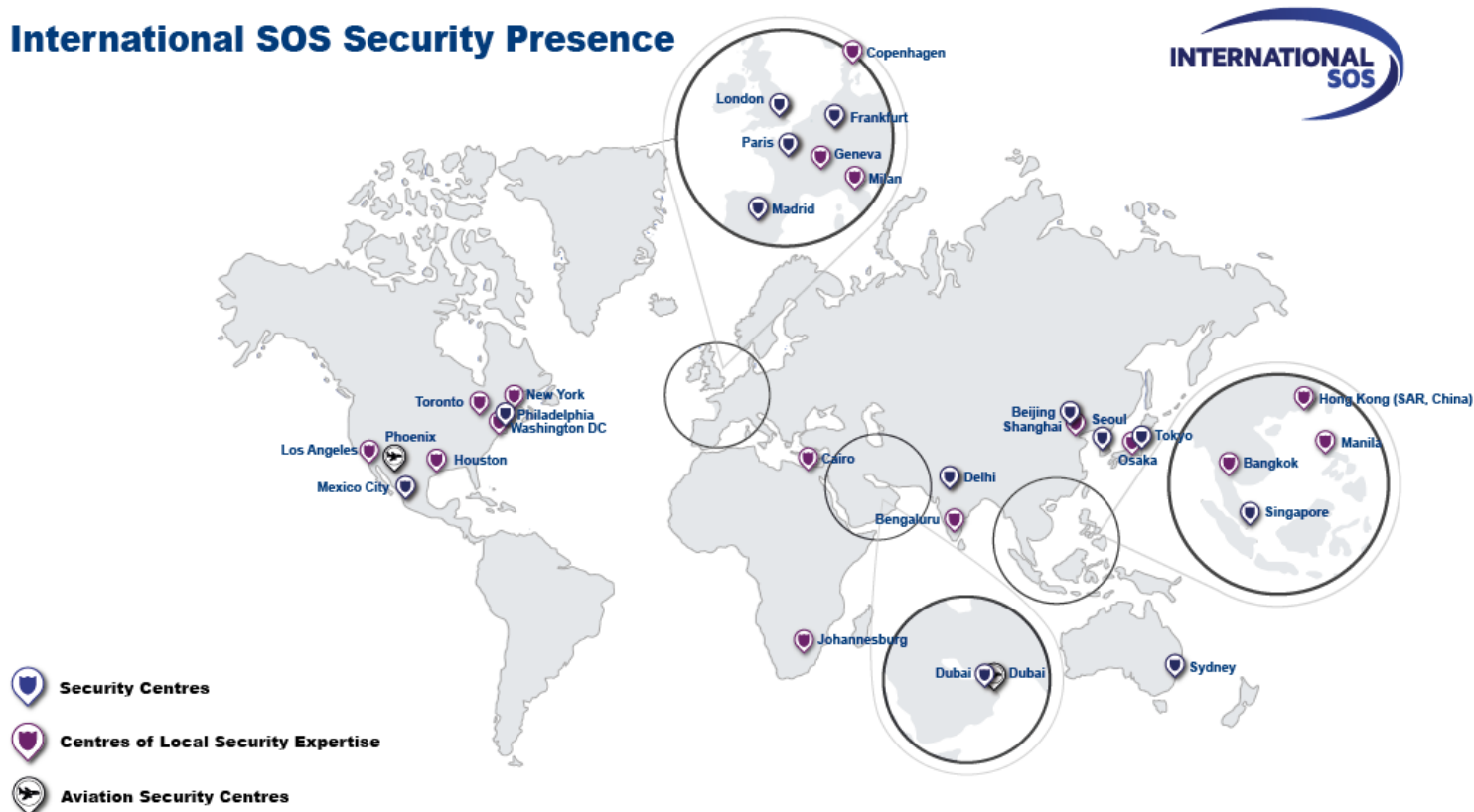
Southeast Asia - October 2024



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