

SOLACE GLOBAL

# EASTER

SUSPECTED ATTACK IN MAKASSAR HIGHLIGHTS  
TERRORISM RISK OVER EASTER  
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# Easter

## Suspected Attack in Makassar Highlights Terrorism Risk Over Easter

### Executive Summary

On 28 March, Palm Sunday and the first day of Easter Holy Week, two suspected suicide bombers detonated an explosive device outside the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in the port city of Makassar, South Sulawesi Province. The attack highlighted both the terrorism threat in the South East Asian country and the increased risk of terrorism over Easter.

The country's chief of the National Police has alleged that the suspects had links to the terrorist group known as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). The group has emerged as the pre-eminent Indonesian terrorist group in recent years. However, Islamist terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the nation. Over the past two decades, the country has suffered dozens of terrorist attacks, with targets including religious sites, security forces and highly populated tourist areas.

Attacks are also not uncommon globally during the Easter week, with the 2019 bombings in Sri Lanka being a notable recent incident. This year, Easter falls on 4 April for Western Christians and 2 May for Orthodox and Coptic Christians. Attacks in unstable countries with a history of terrorist incidents and/or underlying sectarian tensions are highly likely. Countries where there is a sizable Christian or Muslim minority, and already underlying tensions, also face a realistic possibility to see attacks.

### Makassar Attack

The blast occurred at around 10:30 local time on 28 March outside the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in the port city of Makassar, South Sulawesi Province. The suicide device was detonated just as a Mass for Palm Sunday was ending and congregants were beginning to exit the cathedral. Security camera footage of the incident appeared to show several people and vehicles in the vicinity at the time of the explosion.

A priest at the church, Father Wilhelmus Tulak, told local media that the suspected bombers had tried to enter the cathedral compound on a motorbike but had been stopped by a security officer, following which the explosion occurred. According to Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, the blast killed both suspected perpetrators and injured 19 people; it was not immediately clear whether any of the injuries were life-threatening.

In the wake of the explosions, police set up security cordons and launched an investigation to ascertain the circumstances surrounding the suspected bombing. A specialist disaster victim identification team had also been drafted in to assist with the investigation.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. However, hours after the incident National Police Chief Listyo Sigit Prabowo told reporters the suspects were part of the Indonesian-based Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) terrorist network.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo condemned the attack and urged the public to remain calm. During an online broadcast, the president said he had "ordered the police chief to thoroughly investigate the perpetrators' networks" and that "the state guarantees the security of religious people to worship without fear".

### Terrorism Risk Indonesia

Although investigations into the incident are ongoing and no group has yet officially claimed responsibility, given the apparent target and time/date it was carried out, as well as the suspected method of attack, the bombing in Makassar was almost certainly an act of Islamist terrorism.

Moreover, the chief of the National Police has suggested the suspects had links to the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) terrorist group. The extremist group was first established in 2015 and is considered an umbrella organisation for around two dozen Indonesian extremist groups and the largest affiliate of the so-called Islamic State in Indonesia.



The group has launched a series of attacks in Indonesia in recent years, often employing the use of suicide bombers. In 2018, JAD was blamed for suicide attacks on three churches and a police headquarters in Surabaya, killing at least 30 people and wounding dozens more. IS claimed responsibility for several JAD-attributed attacks, including the Surabaya bombings, which indicates a strong connection between the two groups.

While JAD has undoubtedly emerged as the pre-eminent Indonesian terrorist group in recent years, Islamist terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the South East Asian nation. Over the past two decades, the country has suffered dozens of terrorist attacks, with targets including religious sites, security forces and highly populated tourist areas.

In response to the rise in terror attacks since the turn of the century, the Indonesian government in 2003 formed a designated counter-terrorism unit, called Densus 88. Additionally, in the wake of the Surabaya attacks, the government implemented tougher anti-terror laws, which gave law enforcement agencies the power to pre-emptively detain suspected extremists for longer and prosecute those guilty of recruiting for militant groups.

Despite some notable successes in combatting terrorist activity, including some high-profile arrests, the state security apparatus cannot detect or disrupt every potential attack. As such, it is almost certain that Indonesia will suffer future terrorist attacks. Such attacks are likely to focus on the island of Sulawesi and in northern Sumatra. However, while less likely thanks to increase security, attacks may still look to target Jakarta and the islands of Bali and Lombok.

### **Risk of Further Attacks Globally During Easter**

The attack, which occurred on Palm Sunday, highlights the risk of terror attacks around the Christian Easter holiday. Previous years have seen a number of incidents, including the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka that killed over 280 people. In April 2020, Egyptian authorities announced they had thwarted a potential attack after receiving a tip about Islamist groups targeting Coptic Christians over the Easter weekend. As a result, it cannot be ruled out that extremists will view the holiday as an incentive to conduct attacks.

In 2019, Sri Lanka saw the worst terror attack since 1996. The incident also highlighted the threat of terrorist incidents in countries with underlying religious tensions. The Sri Lankan government had decisively defeated the Tamil insurgency in the country's north in 2009. However, bouts of ethnic and religious tensions have continued since. This has resulted in periods of violence, often involving attacks on Muslim owned businesses by elements within Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist majority.

In Egypt, hundreds of Copts have been targeted and killed in sectarian clashes. The majority of attacks have targeted Coptic churches, as well as the homes and businesses of Copts. The abduction of Coptic Christian women and girls also remains a serious ongoing problem. In 2017, the country's Coptic church was forced to cut back Easter celebrations after two bomb attacks that killed at least 45 people the weekend before.

Attacks are also a possibility in Western countries, especially those with already existing religious tensions. For example, France has seen a number of Islamic extremist attacks in recent years. The country also continues to struggle with tensions and unrest within its sizeable Muslim minority. In a number of cases, such incidents have coincided with important dates, such as Bastille Day, or have targeted religious institutions. In October 2020, the Notre Dame de Nice Church in Nice was targeted by an individual holding Islamic extremist sympathies.

Despite this threat, the counter terrorism abilities of most countries' security apparatuses should mitigate the risk posed by the majority of potential attackers. However, it remains extremely difficult for law enforcement agencies to successfully stop all incidents. Especially that of low sophistication, lone-wolf terrorism.

This year, Easter falls on 4 April for Western Christians and 2 May for Orthodox and Coptic Christians. Attacks in unstable countries with a history of terrorist incidents and/or underlying sectarian tensions are highly likely. Countries where there is a sizable Christian or Muslim minority, especially where previous incidents have occurred, also face a realistic possibility to see attacks.



## Solace Global Advice

In the coming days, and especially on Easter Sunday, individuals and businesses currently in a country vulnerable to potential lone-wolf attacks or more sophisticated coordinated incidents as well as one that has a sizable Christian or Muslim minority should:

- Exercise increased caution due to the heightened risk of Islamist terrorist attacks during Easter Holy Week.
- Limit time spent in and around places of worship in the coming days as there is potential for them to be targeted in attacks.
- Expect additional security and an increased police presence around places of worship.
- Maintain a high degree of situational awareness. Although attacks can occur with little to no warning, being alert to suspicious or unusual activity is the best way to avoid dangerous situations.
- Report all suspicious activity to the authorities if safe to do so.
- If in a higher risk country, monitor local media outlets and government advisories for updates on the situation. Local news channels may provide information on terrorist activity.
- Additionally, if travelling, ensure a trusted contact is aware of your location at all times. Arrange a daily check-in schedule when in areas deemed to be high-risk.
- Vacate any areas where police or other security forces operations are underway.
- Comply with all instructions issued by security personnel.
- If involved in an attack, individuals are advised to follow the UK government's counter terrorism policing advice of RUN HIDE TELL.
- If located near a recent attack, leave the area if safe to do so and avoid crowds due to the risk of secondary/follow-up attacks or explosions.
- Should you be unable to vacate the area, attempt to secure your immediate location, seek cover from fire (solid walls, away from windows) and call for assistance if safe to do so.
- Avoid discussing politically and religiously charged subjects when travelling.
- Despite this, normal travel can resume as long as travellers adhere to all COVID-19 restrictions.

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