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No. 193/2013 dated 14 October 2013

Indonesian Jihadists and Syria: Training Ground?

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Synopsis

Syria is becoming a “university for jihad education”, a term coined by Indonesian jihadist ideologue and leader of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) Abu Bakar Baasyir, referring to Islamist foreign fighters who continue to flock into Syria. Despite no reports of Indonesians fighting there, the civil war has triggered fundraising activities and extended the international contacts of the Indonesian jihadists.

Commentary

INDONESIAN JIHADISTS have been paying close attention to the Syrian civil war since mid-2012. They have disseminated news on atrocities committed by the Shia-backed Bashar al-Assad regime against the predominantly Sunni Muslim Syria population through their websites, seminars, and demonstrations.

They view the Syrian civil strife beyond merely overthrowing the Assad regime, but also a war against the Shias. For them, Syria is akin to Afghanistan during the war against the Soviet Union in late 1980s, offering them an opportunity for training and martyrdom.

Increasing funds for Syria

In response to the Syrian civil war, the activities of Hilal Ahmar Society, the charity body linked to Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), and JI's splinter the Jamaat Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) led by Abu Bakar Baasyir, have a bearing on the terrorist threat in Indonesia. In the last decade, JI was responsible for a series of bomb attacks in the country but intensive counter terrorism operations have forced it to switch to *dakwah* (religious outreach) activities instead. JAT members on the other hand, have been involved in some terrorist attacks in Indonesia in the last few years.

By exposing the atrocities committed by the Syrian government against its Sunni people, the militants have successfully amassed significant donations to help the Sunni Muslims in Syria amidst a lack of similar initiatives by mainstream Muslim organisations. Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI) has emerged as the leading humanitarian organisation on the Syrian issue. It has sent eight batches of volunteers to Syria to disburse aid.

Donations are collected through on-going seminars in 58 cities across Indonesia. The seminars are sponsored by a JI-linked and other jihadi websites and feature JI senior figures such as Abu Rusydan. HASI's spokesman is Bambang Sukirno, a JI member whose company published a book written by Imam Samudra, the perpetrator

of the 2002 Bali Bombing. Bambang led a fifth team of HASI volunteers to Syria in early 2013. One of the medical volunteers sent to Syria was a doctor working for a JI-linked pesantren.

Each batch usually comprised five people (medical workers, preacher, translator) who would stay in Syria for approximately a month. While HASI has not reported the total amount it has collected for the Syria cause, in one of its visits to Syria, it announced a disbursement of Rp 250 million (US\$22,727) to a hospital.

Unlike HASI which began fundraising in July 2012, JAT only started to do so in July this year following Abu Bakar Baasyir's call for Muslims to wage jihad in Syria. A one-week fundraising event by JAT's West Nusa Tenggara provincial branch collected a total of Rp 117 million (US\$10,636). The campaign included a documentary screening on Syria in a shopping mall in Bima, the capital city of West Nusa Tenggara.

Despite the large amount of donations collected, JAT has not announced if the group would also send a team to Syria. The possible lack of accountability on the use of funds coupled with an undefined strategy to disburse these funds could result in the monies being used beyond humanitarian purposes.

Networking with Islamist insurgents

Unlike other Indonesian mainstream Muslim charity organisations such as Dompot Dhuafa that disbursed aid to refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan near the Syrian border, the HASI team went further. The team was based in a hospital in an area controlled by Islamist insurgents in Salma village in Latakia province of Syria. The insurgent battalions in Salma were led by the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and comprised fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and three other groups - Suqoor el Ezz, Ahrar al-Sham and Katibat il Muhajiroon. The last consisted of foreign fighters from Chechnya, Libya, Tunisia, Pakistan and some European countries.

Only one km from the battlefield, the Salma hospital gives medical treatment to wounded Islamist insurgents and local residents. Besides supplying medicine, medical logistics, and working for the hospital, HASI has also disbursed aid to residents in Salma and villages in the neighbouring province of Idlib.

Given present realities on the ground, Indonesians are more inclined to establish contacts with the Al Qaeda-linked group Jabhat al-Nusra. The Indonesian jihadi websites sourced their news from al-Manara al-Baida', the media wing of Jabhat al-Nusra on the latest developments in Syria.

Syria as a training ground

While HASI's work seems to focus on humanitarian issues, given the opportunity, some jihadists may go along with HASI's humanitarian work to join the Al Qaeda-linked insurgents. The military training conducted by al-Nusra for the new recruits in Homs, another province of Syria, presents a training opportunity that is rarely experienced by the current generation of Indonesian jihadists. This is unlike their predecessors who had attended a military training academy in Afghanistan during the war against Soviet Union.

Upon their return to Indonesia, some of Afghanistan alumni who joined JI used their military skills to conduct terrorist attacks in Indonesia - more than a decade after they returned from Afghanistan. The potential threat from Indonesian jihadists returning from Syria should not be underestimated.

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