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Southeast Asian fighters in the new “caliphate”: Implications for Indonesia’s militant Islamist movement

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Synopsis

The growing number of Indonesian fighters involved in Syria’s civil war has security implications for their country when they return. Will the fighters there now have an impact on local dynamics and revitalise the militant Islamist movement?

Commentary

The recent suicide bomb attack in Syria by a Malaysian militant has highlighted the presence of Southeast Asian fighters in Syria’s civil war. Another 15 Malaysians have also been reportedly killed in clashes while Indonesian militants have also featured among the dead in Syria and Iraq. Many of them were said to have fought for the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) which has metamorphosed into the Islamic State, declared to be a transnational “caliphate” by its leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi.

The continued traction of Syria

Among the Indonesians killed are alumni of different Jemaah Islamiyah-linked schools in Indonesia. Security analysts believe the number of Indonesian fighters in Syria is greater than the government estimate of 56.

Part of the continued traction of Syria for Indonesia’s militant Islamists is the narrative that the land is to be the epicentre of the Last Caliphate and where the Final Battle, or Armageddon, against Dajjal the Anti-Christ will ensue. Based on jihadist interpretation of selected hadith, it is argued that the current conflict against Assad may not be the Final Battle, but it certainly is a divinely sanctioned mechanism to get rid of infidels from the holy land and attract pious Muslims from everywhere to migrate there.

Subscribing to the narrative, Indonesian jihadists who have travelled, or have intentions to travel to Syria to fight could well regard their trip as a one-way ticket, either staying or dying there to be a part of the Final Victory. The government anticipates that if some do return, they will come home with new skills and capabilities and renewed ideological commitment to conduct armed jihad. Indonesia is legitimately concerned about Syria veterans, noting that some of the most egregious terrorist attacks in the country in the past decade were masterminded by Islamist militants who had once fought in Afghanistan or Mindanao. However, a more immediate concern is arguably the swelling numbers of local supporters of Syrian jihadist groups, especially ISIS.

Implications of the new “caliphate”

Locally, ISIS’s self-proclaimed “caliphate” has had two results: firstly, it has injected new breath into the notion of *qital tamkin*, i.e., armed warfare that is aimed at gaining territorial control as opposed to merely attacking the enemy (*qital nikayah*). Secondly, it has contributed to the growth of Indonesian ISIS supporters, both offline and online, beyond those who populate the militant Islamist circles.

On the first point, ISIS takeover of parts of Syria and Iraq could further reinforce the viability of ISIS-styled *qital tamkin* in Indonesia. Small-scale *qital nikayah* has been the favoured tactic hitherto largely because it is easier to conduct, but proponents of the approach – which included the Bali bombers and Noordin Top – have been much criticised for being too destructive and not yielding much political or territorial gains. Consequently, those championing *qital tamkin*, including influential jihadi ideologue Aman Abdurrahman, have been using ISIS’s victory to demonstrate how Indonesian jihadists need to focus on establishing a secure base wherein sharia laws could be implemented and governing capability developed.

Growth of ISIS supporters in Indonesia

The leader of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) Abu Bakar Ba’asyir has also recently endorsed ISIS precisely because it has established territorial control and a semblance of a governing authority. These serve to reenergise attempts to create jihadi safe havens in the country, a strategy that, while contested, underlay various violent campaigns over the years. In the most recent recollection was the attempt to set up a militant base in Aceh in late 2009, but which was disrupted; another, led by Santoso’s Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), is still being actively fought in Poso today.

With regard to the second point, ISIS supporters in Indonesia have noticeably grown, and they include existing jihadist groups and their supporters as well as non-violent radicals. MIT and JAT are among those that have sworn allegiance or endorsed ISIS. New groups, too, have been formed in direct support of ISIS such as Anshorullah, whose members have publicly declared their intention to fight in Syria, and Anshar Al-Daulah, whose members are more inclined to promote ISIS through community-based events such as charity work. ISIS sympathisers also come from pro-sharia advocacy groups and religious vigilantes known for their anti-vice activism.

The number of ISIS cheerleaders online is also rising. New pro-ISIS websites, Facebook groups and Twitter accounts continue to emerge with thousands of followers. To be sure, although many ISIS online cheerleaders share the romanticism of an Islamic caliphate, not all of them necessarily support the group’s methods of violence. However, given that terrorists like Abu Roban had reportedly recruited new operatives by identifying cheerleaders of armed jihad supporters on Facebook, ISIS online cheerleaders could become targets for recruitment too.

What’s next?

In sum, developments in Syria and Iraq could determine new directions for the militant Islamist movement in Indonesia. The newly declared “caliphate” has attracted local supporters and revived the idea of *qital tamkin*. These developments can have implications for the rest of the region whether in terms of spill-over effects of domestic politics or the clandestine movements of violent elements across porous Southeast Asian borders.

There is need to closely monitor the development of ISIS supporters to discern credible security threats from the brash cheerleaders. Without necessarily being alarmist, particularly considering how the majority of the global Muslim community consider ISIS neither relevant nor legitimate to demand allegiance, countering the legitimacy of the new “caliphate” as well as any attempt to emulate it in the Indonesian context remains important.

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