Indonesia and Malaysia need to focus on a 'soft' approach to tackle IS support on social media

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In response to the rise in Indonesian and Malaysian fighters joining the extremist Islamic State (IS) group, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have taken action to criminalise membership. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the nation's top Muslim clerical body, also released a statement that it was *haram,* or forbidden, for Muslims to participate in IS activities. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has also issued a [strongly worded statement](#) [1] condemning IS for its actions, which 'run counter to Islamic faith, culture and to common humanity'.

These are positive moves. But they have been inadequate, given the popularisation of IS ideological beliefs via social media.

Indonesia, in response to the 2002 Bali bombing, the twin bombing of the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton in 2009, and other attacks on Indonesian soil, adjusted its counter-terrorism strategy. Indonesia has stressed a hard approach to countering the threat of terrorism, primarily through the lens of law enforcement. Over 600 terrorists have been [prosecuted](#) [2] in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings. Currently, the Indonesian police are responsible for counterterror operations, particularly the elite counter-terrorism unit, Detachment 88.

But Indonesia's hard approach has resulted in the growing incidence of terrorist attacks targeted at the police. Allegedly, it has also created convergence between jihadist fighters and religious vigilante groups — such as Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) — providing opportunities for the jihadist groups to recruit and enhance their influence in society.

Malaysia has also stepped up its counterterrorism efforts and arrested several individuals amid

reports that four new Malaysian militant groups, identified by their acronyms BKAW, BAJ, Dimzia and ADI, are bent on creating a 'super' Islamic caliphate in parts of Southeast Asia, including secular Singapore.

So far, the emphasis on hard approaches to countering terrorism has brought some success in defeating terrorism and disrupting terrorist plots. But the rising influence of social media [3] and the popularisation of IS ideologies through the internet highlights the need for states to be innovative in using modern communications to counter the growing threat of radicalisation.

The exposure of Malaysians and Indonesians to external currents of contemporary Muslim socio-political thought — ranging from the moderate-liberal, radical and sectarian — is intensified by social media. Indonesia has the second-largest population of Facebook users and the fourth-largest population of Twitter users in the world. Malaysia has also seen an increase in internet users since 2000, from 21 per cent to 65 per cent in 2012.

Research has shown that young people are at greatest risk of being radicalised by extremist messages. This is particularly important because of the use of social media by young people. The ease and pace of communicating via such social media platforms are what keeps them 'hooked'. Governments need to drive the online debate to ensure that their message is heard above the extremists'. The use of social media by radical groups to recruit, raise funds and spread propaganda messages should not be taken lightly.

A video by the IS released in July featuring Indonesian fighter Abu Muhammad al-Indonesi showed him delivering an impassioned appeal to fellow Indonesians to 'join the ranks'. A number of Indonesian IS fighters are reportedly also using social networking platforms such as Facebook to recruit fighters. According to Indonesia's National Agency for Combating Terrorism (BNPT), there are currently 34 Indonesians who have joined the IS group. These numbers do not include Indonesians who have joined other groups in Syria and Iraq in the jihadist cause.

Malaysian authorities say that the IS sympathisers are attracting a small number of Malaysians from a wide variety of backgrounds through social media, particularly Facebook. They have also managed to raise funds through such channels.

In early August, photos of a dead 52-year-old jihadist Malaysian fighter who was formerly a member of the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) were uploaded and circulated via social media and blogs. The former KMM member allegedly died while defending the town of Arzeh with several other jihadist fighters. The photo was 'liked' by thousands of online users.

The primacy of IS theological arguments feature strongly in the Indonesian militants motivations to fight in Syria. The IS believes that the 'Final Battle' against the false prophets will ensue in the ongoing battle in Syria. The activities of Malaysian IS supporters on Facebook on the other hand point to a more complex mix of motivations for Malaysians joining the IS, most of which are political, financial or ideological.

The distinct divergences in the causes for motivating these Indonesian and Malaysian fighters

to join the IS, as well as the differences in contexts, highlight the need for tailored responses by the state and community in each country.

To date, IS has carried out executions, including beheadings. In many cases, IS has videotaped the executions and posted them online. There is a need to be discreet in publicising the IS to the larger community without exaggerating or sensationalising the group, so as to deny them the publicity that they seek.

Governments, with the help of civil society activists, should partner to channel key messages of religious moderation and interfaith tolerance through soft media campaigns.

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[1] strongly worded statement:
http://news.asiaone.com/news/malaysia/malaysia-pm-condemns-isis

[2] prosecuted:
http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/03/08/rehabilitating-terrorists-in-indonesia-through-engagement-not-ostracism/

[3] rising influence of social media:
http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/03/15/pakistan-social-networking-and-the-facebook-jihad-phenomenon/