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The Middle East Crisis and the Issue of Jihad

Rohaiza Ahmad Asi*

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THE Middle East crisis seems to be running out of control. A full-blown war might just break out between Israel and Hizbollah, with other Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iran and Syria, eventually dragged in.

While it is still too early to predict how it will end, it certainly never too early for the radical Islamists or the militants to ride on the situation to advance their jihadi goals. The current crisis has all the ingredients for their cause: Muslims and Arabs are being persecuted; the radicals' biggest enemy, Israel, backed by the US, is killing helpless civilians and children; the lack of strong and effective condemnation of Israel from the US and the European countries, is construed as turning a blind eye because many of the victims are Muslims.

The Opportunists?

It should not be a surprised therefore if radical and militant Islamists exploit the current Middle East crisis. If there is one thing that binds them together, it is a common enemy, or rather, enemies. Most, if not all, jihadi websites that are online, be it in Arabic, English or even Indonesian carry content that condemn the US and Israel. They relish every possible opportunity to condemn these two countries. No doubt, at times the actions of the US and Israel are repugnant, but what the Islamists are doing is to weave everything into their global jihad campaign. Not surprisingly, Al Qaeda has stepped in to warn that it will not stay still in the face of the "Zionist-Crusader war".

Closer to home, calls to view the Middle East crisis as a broader jihad that all Muslims should engage in have been rather shrill. In a recent gathering of various national and Muslim-based organizations in Jakarta with the theme "Indonesian Muslims are united to Oppose Zionist Israel and its Allies", the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) representative, Fauzan Al Anshari, urged the Indonesian government to act on its commitment to helping Palestine, criticizing it for lacking initiative or what it called 'no action, talk only'. The MMI asked the Indonesian government to facilitate the despatch of Indonesian mujahideen to help Palestine against Israel. The head of Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in Aceh also mentioned to reporters that his group is ready to send mujahideen volunteers to Lebanon and Palestine to fight the Israeli army.

Mere rhetoric? Most likely. The two groups had previously claimed that they were going to send mujahideen to Iraq and that several volunteers had registered. But there was no follow-up. Without government support, it is unlikely that they would have the necessary resources

and logistics to send hundreds of volunteers and mujahideen to the Middle East. But their actions did stir up the feelings of their fellow Muslims, which was probably their intention.

Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) has also been actively protesting against the Israeli offensive, and has held demonstrations at the consulates of several Middle Eastern countries in Jakarta, calling for a more vocal opposition to Israel. In addition, the group has requested the Indonesian government to send peacekeeping forces to the Middle East. On the group's websites, several commentaries and press releases on the Middle East crisis have been posted, such as those entitled "US-Israel: The True Terrorists"; "Criticizing the Brutality of the Zionist Israel" and "Freeing Palestine: The Need to Unite Islamic Countries under the Banner of a Caliphate". Significantly, the latter commentary sees the Palestine crisis and the absence of effective response from Muslim countries as demonstrating the relevance and urgency for a caliphate.

The expressions of sympathy for those innocent civilians who perished or lost their loved ones in the Israeli attacks are perfectly understandable. But we also know that resurrecting the Islamic caliphate is the objective of the HTI. Thus, it is possible to see that aside from showing sympathy, the group is finding the current events to be a boon for reinforcing its objectives.

The majority of Islamists in this region are Sunnis while Hizbollah is a Shi'a movement. In addition, Hamas and Hizbollah are both well-established groups within their controlled territories, with a distinct nationalist tone to their struggle. In contrast, numerous Arabic websites have condemned Hizbollah who are seen as a Shi'a movement and an extension of the Iranian ideology.

It thus begs the question why the Indonesian Islamist groups are showing support for Hizbollah or Hamas. While some say that these groups are doing nothing more than to advance their agendas, it should not be discounted that the new Middle East crisis is unifying the regional Islamists with Hizbollah and Hamas in unprecedented ways.

The Broader Implications

The Middle East crisis is still in its early stage and what we have seen thus far is only a handful of Islamist radicals and militants being drawn into the issue. But if the situation deteriorates, many more will come forward with their version of propaganda. The ultimate will be a statement issued by Al Qaeda calling on Muslims and mujahideen to assist in the conflict. Lebanon is probably not going to be another Iraq or Afghanistan. However, a possible scenario is one in which future terrorist attacks will be launched against Israeli or US interests overseas, or any Western interests for that matter, with the justification that they are responsible for the deteriorating situation in Palestine and Lebanon. In September 2004, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) conducted an attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. One of the reasons provided by JI for the attack and choice of target was that Australia sent its troops to Iraq. A similar outcome cannot be ruled out as a consequence of the latest round in the Middle East crisis.

* Rohaiza Ahmad Asi is a research analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.