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Putting All Cards on the Table: Trust and Soft Power in the War on Terror

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SINCE THE dreadful attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11 2001, the global campaign against terror has involved both the hard and soft power approaches. The bombings of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as other security, socio-economic, and political measures employed by the United States-led “coalition of the willing” have indeed undermined the capacity of terrorist organisations and networks. Various programmes, mostly educational and cultural, to promote moderation have to a certain extent helped public understanding that it is terrorism that the US-led campaign is after, not the religion or belief system of its perpetrators. There has also been a conscious effort to prevent sweeping generalisations that the terrorist violence is being bred by religious belief.

Despite the incessant war against terrorism, we are reminded that the threat is still very much out there. We are still haunted by the spectre of some of its leaders, most notably Osama bin Laden. Worse, there seems to be no assurance when the threat will cease. Because of this, the world is still being kept busy with precautions. From time to time, terrorism-related travel warnings are issued. Security measures are tightly imposed in public places: airports, train stations, shopping malls, hotels, and even certain houses of worship. These only indicate that the worldwide campaign to counter terrorism has encountered obstacles.

There is no doubt that combating terrorism is a huge and complicated a job. But observing from Jakarta how this endeavour has evolved, I see three pressing issues calling out for closer attention.

First, the cultural factor:

That the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks were Muslims, and the victim, the United States, being predominantly non-Muslim, are facts that played no small part in reviving the cultural

prejudices against Islam in the West. “Most Americans’ cultural perception of Arabs/Muslims,” as Fawaz Gerges has noted, “is that they are dangerous, untrustworthy, undemocratic, barbaric, and primitive.” This cultural preconceptions of Islam have also been echoed by several American religious leaders who cast negative aspersions not just on the religion but even its Prophet.

The war against terror has somehow been influenced by this cultural factor. In spite of the denials by some Western leaders that Islam is not the target of their counter-campaign, there are evidences of many Muslims in Europe, North America, and Australia becoming victims of such cultural prejudices. And because of this, many Westerners seem to see terrorism in a rather simplistic way: that Islam is indeed the root-cause of terrorism.

Many Muslims are also guilty of a comparable cultural prejudices against the West. This can be observed, for instance, from the way they reacted to America’s war on terror. Instead of seeing the US strike on Afghanistan (or on Iraq) as an effort to combat terrorism, they regarded it as a rampage on the Muslim world. The rapid spread of this cultural factor on both sides of the divide has resulted in the emergence of mutual distrust and hatred between Muslims and the West, specifically the Americans, making the war on terrorism that much more difficult to conduct.

Second, the political factor:

Worsening the distrust and aggravating the apprehension of many Muslims is American unilateralism. While they shared the grievances of the victims and condemned the attackers of the World Trade Centre, many Muslims could not accept the US-led raids on Afghanistan, or on Iraq, which have caused an even greater number of casualties. For this, some Muslim leaders even argued that the attack on Afghanistan was an act of terror in itself.

Third, the trust factor and Soft Power:

Like the US, some Muslim countries were actually victims of terror. Indonesia is a case in point. The Bali bomb blasts in October 2002; the bombing of the J.W. Marriott Hotel in early August 2003; the Kuningan bombing in September 2004; the Bali bombing II in 2005; and other terrorists attacks thereafter, were undeniable proofs.

As such, it is only logical that Indonesia should be trusted as a partner in the campaign against terror. Unfortunately, this is not the case – at least not during the early years of the war on terror. On the

contrary, Indonesia was listed as one of the 26 countries where terrorism found its natural ground. Today, the list may have changed. But Indonesia is still denied the right to question a major terrorist figure like Hambali, an Indonesian Muslim captured in Thailand, and handed over to the US.

Access to Umar Farouq Al-Kuwaiti, another important figure in the terrorist network, who was captured in Bogor, West Java, but was imprisoned in Bagram, Afghanistan, was limited. The fact that these two individuals were linked to a number of terrorist attacks carried out on Indonesian soil, and the inaccessibility of both Hambali and Umar Farouq to Indonesian investigators, only contributed to the rise of suspicions. Umar Farouq's mysterious flight from the US-run maximum security prison in Bagram only provided additional fuel to the erosion of trust between the Indonesians and the Americans in the campaign against terror.

Given the above circumstances, many Muslims still have some reservations with regard to the whole issue of terrorism. There are still doubts whether the Bali bomb-blasts were actually carried out by individuals such as Amrozi, Ali Ghufron, or Imam Samudra who were suspected to have connections with Jamaah Islamiyah (JI). Even Amien Rais, the former chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly, perceives terrorism as something "that is orchestrated by the West to clobber Islam as it is impossible to attack [the Muslim world] directly as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Islamic world is cornered to be made a common enemy and then dominated particularly by a country which claims itself a super power and world police".

Overcoming Distrust

So how do we overcome these obstacles? The most logical way is to fight the slide by preserving and promoting even more vigorously whatever mutual trust there is left among the parties involved in combating terrorism. Putting all cards on the table would be a good start. Let there be transparency in intent. Providing Indonesia with access to Hambali, for instance, will remove the doubts of the country's Islamic leaders. It will also facilitate cooperation between Muslims and the West in combating terrorism.

The West, Americans in particular, need to restrain themselves from taking a unilateralist stance in their foreign policy stances, even in their pursuit of suspected terrorists. Unilateralism, as we have observed, generates more harm than good in this trust-building process. There is no guarantee that the US can execute the campaign against terror on hard power alone. As Joseph S. Nye has suggested, there is so much of US soft power that needs to be re-explored and re-developed. Furious as it may be,

the US should not lose sight of the significance of its soft power in bilateral as well as people-to-people relations in its fight against terrorism. A key factor in the success of soft power is trust. More can, and needs to be done to resort to trust-building if the current campaign against terror is to be succeed in the long run.

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