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Syrian Conflict Fallout: Time to Contain Hate Speech in Indonesia

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Synopsis

Jihadi groups propagate an anti-Shia narrative to mobilise Indonesian militants to fight in Syria. This has spread the seeds of sectarian conflict in Indonesia which could have wider repercussions.

Commentary

A HATE speech regulation is seriously needed in Indonesia to contain the damaging effects of jihadi propaganda as this narrative is increasingly used to mobilise Indonesian Muslims against the Assad regime in Syria. The anti-Shia jihadi propaganda has provoked attacks on Shias in Indonesia and could worsen sectarian tensions if not contained.

Fifty Indonesian fighters are said to have joined jihadi opposition forces in Syria following the anti-Shia propaganda by local jihadi groups which has played an important role in mobilising support against Bashar al Assad.

Anti-Shia propaganda as mobilising tool

Framing the war in Syria as a sectarian conflict – Muslims vs non-Muslims – that justifies “jihad” has not come naturally in the Indonesian context. For one, many mainstream Indonesian Muslims still consider Shias as part of Islam. To many of them, fighting the Shiite regime of Bashar Al-Assad is like fighting fellow Muslims.

Some elements within local jihadi groups argue that the nature of the Syrian conflict is merely political - a civil war rather than a sectarian strife - and thus does not legitimise jihad. They maintain that defending Muslims in Myanmar and Palestine is more important because the sectarian nature of the conflicts is more clear-cut.

To convince the majority Sunni Muslims of the legitimacy of jihad in Syria, jihadi groups propagate the anti-Shia narrative that frames the conflict as a sectarian one. Anti-Shia hate speech and propaganda have been vital for successful mobilisation of Indonesian fighters to go to Syria.

Indeed, in the last couple of years, various jihadi media have been flooded with anti-Shia propaganda and hate speech. Articles on the infidelity and cruelty of Shias appear daily on various jihadi websites. In those articles and other publications, the anti-Shia and anti-Assad narratives are usually posted side by side. Images of Sunni Muslim victims of the Syrian conflict are used to reinforce the murderous image of Shias, which all in all,

represent a powerful propaganda to mobilise fighters to go to Syria.

The anti-Shia narrative has two core elements. Firstly, it gives theological justification for the war by portraying Shiism as a deviant belief, which not only taints the purity of Islam but also is hostile to it. Secondly, it frames the Syrian conflict within a broader sectarian war between Shias and Sunnis. The narrative goes that throughout the history of Islam, the Shias have always tried to subvert the Sunni caliphate.

It also posits that the Syrian conflict is not just a civil war, but rather part of the struggle of international Shia forces – the Assad regime, Iran, and Hezbollah – to annihilate the Sunni population and establish a Shiite state in Greater Syria and the Gulf. One of the most vocal radical clerics who have incited hatred against the Shias, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, dubs the Shiite regime in Syria as 'worse than infidels and Jews'. All this narrative that demonises Shias is used as a justification for armed jihad in Syria which, according to Ba'asyir, is currently more urgent than pilgrimage to Mecca.

Another active propagator of the narrative is Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI), the humanitarian wing of Jemaah Islamiyah. HASI actively holds public discussions and book launches about Shias and Syria to raise funds for the Syrian cause. Given its humanitarian posture HASI has been able to target mainstream Muslim groups including the youth organisation of Muhammadiyah. By selling anti-Shia and anti-Assad narratives, HASI has managed to collect a considerable amount of donations that have been used to help Syrian civilians buy support for the jihadi opposition in Syria.

Incitement to violence against Shia in Indonesia

While there has been subdued Sunni-Shia tension in Indonesia, the Syrian conflict has made it worse. Violent attacks and harassment against Shias in Indonesia have increased in the past few years. The Abu Umar terrorist cell planned to target Shia figures and institutions in 2011, which failed to materialise. In 2012, 1000 Sunni villagers attacked a Shia community in Sampang, Madura Island and in 2013, a Sunni mob attacked a Shia boarding school in Jember, East Java. While not many were killed, several were hurt or displaced.

Despite rising Sunni-Shia tension, anti-Shia hate speech is still allowed to continue. What started out as encouragement to fight the Shiite forces in Syria has developed into incitement of violence against the local Shia community. Much of the propaganda warns the Sunni majority of what extremists call the unprecedented growth and aggressiveness of Shias in Indonesia.

Most recently, an incitement to attack a Shia religious celebration in Jakarta was spread by the above-ground Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia through jihadi online and social media. It successfully mobilised 200 people to protest who forcefully halted the event until the police quickly intervened.

Need for hate speech law

Most local observers agree that anti-Shia propaganda and hate speech have been largely responsible for both mobilising Indonesian jihadists to go to Syria and for the alarming growth of Sunni-Shia tension in the country. Unfortunately, Indonesia does not have any regulation that criminalises religious hate speech and incitement to violence. There was a proposal to include hate speech in existing counterterrorism law but it is yet to be accepted. Human rights groups are now counting on the religious harmony bill to address hate speech.

A future hate speech regulation should set a clear and carefully crafted definition of hate speech so as not to harm freedom of speech. With regard to hate speech online, the law should avoid imposing excessive measures. Banning extremist websites and social media accounts is not only ineffective but also counterproductive as repression could only lead to more radicalisation.

Instigators of anti-Shia hate speech should not go unpunished as they are breeding the seeds of sectarian tension. This, combined with the strengthening of jihadi forces following the return of Syrian veterans, might fuel a larger sectarian conflict in years to come.

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