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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Jihadists in Syria: Indonesian Extremists Giving Support?**

By Navhat Nuraniyah

### **Synopsis**

*The emergence of overt supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in Indonesia has raised concerns regarding links between local and global jihadi groups. This overt support does not necessarily mean ISIS may take root in Indonesia.*

### **Commentary**

ON 16 MARCH 2014 hundreds of Islamist extremists carrying the flags of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) rallied in the heart of Jakarta. Campaigns in support of ISIS, a designated terrorist group operating in Syria, also took place in other parts of Indonesia.

The emergence of overt supporters of ISIS in Indonesia has raised concerns regarding the revival of links between local and global jihadi groups. There is also a concern that ISIS supporters might want to establish its affiliate group in Indonesia. While it might not pose any immediate threat, the development might indicate an increasingly blurred distinction between extremism and terrorism in Indonesia.

### **“Fan Club”, not affiliate**

The event, however, does not necessarily signify the emergence of an ISIS affiliate in Indonesia for two reasons. Firstly, the Jakarta rallies were organised by above-ground pro-sharia advocacy groups including Forum for Islamic Sharia Activists (FAKSI), Sharia4Indonesia, Islamic Reform Movement (GARIS), and Congress of Bekasi Muslims (KUIB). The pro-sharia groups act more like a “fan club” of ISIS than committed soldiers.

In general, like their jihadist counterparts, pro-sharia advocacy groups reject democracy and secularism. Both also believe in the supremacy of the Islamic political system as the ideal. But pro-sharia advocacy groups generally differ from more radical jihadist groups in that they focus on the gradual implementation of Islamic law and enhancement of public morality rather than armed struggle as a way to build an Islamic state. They do not, however, entirely dismiss armed struggle especially in the context of political instability and chaos.

The pro-sharia advocacy groups support ISIS largely because they expect it to be an embryonic transnational caliphate. The Jakarta rally was said to promote the so-called emerging caliphate in the Indonesian society. Given their mission to win the hearts and minds of society, they prefer a public relations approach than

violence, as reflected in the peaceful rallies.

Secondly, in the jihadist worldview, support is not similar to *bai'ah* (giving allegiance). While the groups participating in the campaign expressed support for ISIS, they have not explicitly committed to become ISIS' soldiers in Syria. The "fan club" merely expressed passive support. For instance, it was mentioned that they would join ISIS in a distant scenario in which ISIS would become an international caliphate, which is not in ISIS' agenda yet as it is facing mounting opposition in Syria. Short of pledging allegiance, ISIS supporters are arguably no more than a "fan club" and thus not an immediate threat.

### **Tension between "Fan Clubs"**

Pro-ISIS campaigns in Indonesia are arguably also a response to the recent split between ISIS and Al-Qaeda (AQ). ISIS was first established in 2006 as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) by various jihadist groups, most significantly Al-Qaeda in Iraq, before it decided to expand to Syria in 2013. Earlier this year, ISIS broke away from AQ central command and the two have been competing for supremacy in global jihad.

Since Indonesian extremists and their media have been following closely the events in Syria, they also started taking sides. Pro-ISIS media include Al-Mustaqbal, whose editor is an important figure in Sharia4Indonesia, and Millahibrahim that is linked to influential jihadist cleric, Aman Abdurrahman. Despite the seemingly growing media fanfare for ISIS, most Indonesian fighters on the ground in Syria reportedly got there through Ahrar Al-Syam, one of ISIS' rivals.

Representing the anti-ISIS camp is Arrahmah.com. A "publication war" has been taking place between both camps. Arrahmah has been bashing ISIS for killing members of AQ affiliates in Syria while pro-ISIS media came to its defence and accused Arrahmah of biased reporting.

The campaigns are possibly just an extension of the growing tension between both "fan clubs". The declaration of support recited during the campaign mentioned that it not only aimed to show support but also to defend ISIS against criticism from other groups. Therefore, although Syria offered new opportunities for local jihadist groups to participate in global jihad, it has also led to growing friction among them.

### **Blurring line between extremists and terrorists**

Perhaps the only source of concern here is the blurring distinction between extremism and terrorism. While the ideology of pro-sharia advocacy groups involved in pro-ISIS campaigns could be categorised as extremist in the sense that they advocate religious supremacy and oppose the existing system of democracy, they nonetheless refrain from the use of terror. It is true that some pro-sharia advocacy groups have shown solidarity for imprisoned jihadists as a form of support to 'fellow Islamic activists'. However, formally supporting an internationally recognised terrorist organisation is a step further.

The prospect of blurring boundaries between extremism and terrorism is especially alarming due to the apparent links between Indonesian pro-sharia groups with Anjem Choudary, a United Kingdom-based extremist preacher. Choudary's aboveground pro-sharia and pro-jihad advocacy group, Islam4UK – formerly called Al-Muhajiroun – was banned by the UK government as it was revealed that a number of individuals convicted of terrorism were linked to the group. Choudary and his organisation provide an example of how non-violent extremism could in some cases generate violent extremism, thus his growing proximity with Indonesian extremist groups merits concern.

In recent years, Choudary has become a highly regarded figure among Indonesian pro-sharia advocacy groups. He, for instance, has been a regular speaker at Sharia4Indonesia's conferences in Jakarta and other regions in Indonesia. In a video message especially addressed to Muslims in Indonesia, Choudary encouraged them to rise against the current regime in order to accelerate Islamic revolution. Choudary's statements in support of ISIS and jihad in Syria were also published in Indonesian jihadi media particularly Al-Mustaqbal.

It is possible that Indonesian pro-sharia advocacy groups' support for ISIS might have been partly inspired by Choudary. Furthermore, as Al-Muhajiroun and its networks have allegedly recruited and facilitated European fighters to go to Syria, they could potentially provide Indonesian extremists with yet another link to Syria. Hence, the situation deserves to be monitored.

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