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Declaration of a State of Islam ‘Caliphate’: Will discord among Indonesian jihadists breed violence?

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Synopsis

The declaration of a State of Islam Caliphate by the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi on 29 June 2014 has drawn mixed reactions from the Indonesian jihadi community. Will this discord lead to possible violence?

Commentary

The jihadist community in Indonesia has been divided over the extent to which it should back Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and the ‘Caliphate’ of the State of Islam which he declared on 29 June 2014. Overt *ba’iat* (pledges of allegiance) for the ‘Caliphate’ from among radical individuals and smaller radical groups has increased. Conversely, despite supporting the cause of the ‘Caliphate’, established jihadi groups such as Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) have been cautious in formally pledging the oath of allegiance to the group.

Support for ‘Caliphate’

The radical *Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam* (Forum of Activists for Islamic Sharia) or FAKSI, a new group established by M. Fachry, was among the groups who first supported ISIS even before the formation of the ‘Caliphate’. FAKSI also played an instrumental role in garnering support for the ‘Caliphate’ from radical groups such as *Gerakan Reformis Islam* (Islam Reform Movement) or GARIS and *Gerakan Tauhid Lamongan* (Oneness of God Movement, Lamongan City). FAKSI’s campaign also managed to attract prominent jihadi ideologues such as Aman Abdurrahman – who recently pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and declared that it is obligatory for Muslims to do so – and Halawi Makmun. Events in support of ISIS have taken place in Greater Jakarta Area, and Bima (a city in West Nusa Tenggara). Over a hundred people, including dozens of children, attended each of the events that were held in February and March 2014. These events and especially the involvement of children were captured in video recordings that have been circulating on the jihadi social media.

The ‘Caliphate’ has also obtained support from an Indonesian terrorist group *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia) or MIT that is led by fugitive, Santoso. MIT, which was responsible for a series of attacks against police in the restive area of Poso, Central Sulawesi, had immediately produced a video that featured Santoso’s pledge of allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. He had declared that MIT was part of the ‘Caliphate’ and that it stood ready to act on its instructions. At around the same time, al-Baghdadi posted a Ramadhan message in an apparent address to downtrodden Muslims around the world including Indonesia. He assured

them that the 'Caliphate' will rescue them even if this took time.

In contrast, JI and JAT's response to the formation of the 'Caliphate' has been somewhat measured. The extremist ideologue Abu Bakar Ba'asyir who formerly headed JI and currently chairs JAT has not issued any statement on the formation of the 'Caliphate'. Still it is noted that he had in the last several months expressed positive interest in the jihadi cause in Syria by calling on the ISIS and the other dissenting *mujahidin* groups there to set aside their differences and pursue their cause in concert. JAT's spokesman Ahmad Fatih has officially stated that JAT will take the time to study whether it will pledge the oath of allegiance to the 'Caliphate' and would not do so hastily.

As regards jihadi websites, other than *Al-Mustaqbal.net* (manned by M. Fachry) and *Shoutussalam.com* that have become ISIS' mouthpieces in Bahasa Indonesia, the majority of the Bahasa Indonesia extremist websites translated opinions from extremist ideologues affiliated to Al-Qaeda such as Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi who have been critical of ISIS's declaration. He is concerned about how the new 'Caliphate' would treat other jihadi groups.

Contrary to the measured response of JAT and JI there have been over a thousand messages of support for ISIS from the young radicals in online social media such as Facebook and YouTube. Many of them have written pledges of allegiance to al Baghdadi. Some have expressed disappointment with JAT and JI for their hesitancy. It is unlikely that those who attended declarations of ISIS in Greater Jakarta Area as well as in Bima are members of JAT or JI.

Implication

The muted reaction from JAT and JI has not hampered the expression of support for ISIS by radical youths. On the contrary, it is expected that the support for the 'Caliphate' will increase especially with Al-Baghdadi's latest Ramadhan message. ISIS's savviness in optimising online extremist websites, forum, and social media to broadcast its victories including the capture of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, has ignited the spirits of the Indonesian jihadists.

ISIS's seeming successes in the battlefield will motivate more Indonesian jihadi youth to join it. There will likely be more dissatisfaction among the radical youths towards JAT and JI for the muted reaction towards ISIS's declaration and this may force their hand to pledge support for the 'Caliphate'. Meanwhile, the dissensions within the Indonesian jihadi community may catalyse the formation of more deadly splinter groups.

There is precedence for these dynamics. The militant faction within JI under Hambali, Mukhlas, and Imam Samudra planned and executed the Bali bombing in 2002 despite opposition by some others within the JI leadership. Many militant JI members then joined JAT – established by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir in 2008 – with the hope that JAT will serve their violent agenda. Disgruntled JAT members, including Santoso who established MIT, pursued terrorism on their own.

MIT now stands ready to pursue violence on the ISIS's instructions. There is a strong possibility that continued perception of ISIS's victory will set off these dynamics for more violence by radical individuals and smaller radical groups.

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