

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Indonesian and Malaysian IS Supporters: Need for ‘Soft’ Approach

By Stefanie Kam and Robi Sugara

Synopsis

In response to the rise in Indonesian and Malaysian fighters joining the extremist Islamic State group, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have taken action to criminalize membership of the IS. The emphasis on hard approaches however has not stopped penetration of extremist ideas in Southeast Asia. A ‘soft’ approach is needed to counter their dissemination by groups like the IS via social media.

Commentary

RECENTLY INDONESIA issued a ban on the Islamic State (IS), formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) also released a statement that it was “haram” or forbidden, for Muslims to participate in IS’ activities. In Malaysia Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak also issued a statement condemning the IS.

While these moves are positive they have been inadequate, given the growing penetration of extremist ideas in Southeast Asia via social media.

IS Extremism Penetrating Indonesia and Malaysia

In July, a picture of extremist Muslim cleric, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir in his maximum security prison in Nusakambangan, Central Java, with an ISIL flag as its background, was widely circulated on Indonesia’s social media. Ba’asyir had also called on his followers to support their “fellow brothers” who were part of the IS group. Another jailed jihadi leader, Aman Abdurrahman, had also conveyed support for IS and has been translating and distributing IS publications over the Internet. A video by the IS recently featured an Indonesian fighter named Abu Muhammad al-Indonesi delivering an impassioned appeal to fellow Indonesians to ‘join the ranks’. A growing number of young individuals are drawn to the IS’ cause among them Abu Muhammad, a 19 year old Indonesian who studied in Turkey and later joined the IS in Syria.

Malaysian authorities say that the IS sympathisers are attracting a small number of Malaysians from a wide variety of backgrounds through social media, particularly Facebook, and have also managed to raise funds through such channels.

The primacy of the IS' theological arguments feature strongly in the Indonesian militants' motivations to fight in Syria. The activities of Malaysian IS supporters on Facebook on the other hand points to a more complex mix of reasons motivating Malaysians to join the IS, most of which are political, financial or ideological.

According to the IS's radical narrative, Syria is said to be the epicentre of the Last Caliphate. The IS believes that the Final Battle against the false prophets will ensue in the ongoing battle in Syria.

Indonesian and Malaysian Counter-Terrorism Approaches

Following the 2002 Bali bombings Indonesia has stressed a hard approach to countering the threat of terrorism, primarily through the lens of law enforcement. Under Indonesia's elite counter-terrorism unit Detachment-88 Jakarta has successfully captured hundreds of terrorist suspects across the archipelago and confiscated their weapons.

Amid reports that four new Malaysian militant groups, identified by their acronyms BKAW, BAJ, Dimzia and ADI, are bent on creating a "super" Islamic caliphate in parts of Southeast Asia, including secular Singapore, Malaysia has stepped up its counterterrorism efforts and arrested several individuals. The BKAW was reportedly recruiting through Facebook and rallies. One of its members is said to be Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, a 26 year old factory worker and the first Malaysian IS-linked suicide bomber, who killed 25 soldiers during the attack in Iraq on May 26.

So far, the emphasis on hard approaches has brought some success in apprehending terrorists and disrupting terrorist plots. But the IS has mounted a sophisticated online campaign to spread its propaganda worldwide. The Internet provides the perfect medium for terrorist groups like the IS to recruit, disseminate their ideology and get financing from individuals in Southeast Asia.

According to 2011 statistics from Technasia, Indonesia has the second-largest population of Facebook users in the world and the fourth-largest population of Twitter users in the world, with a growing number who use other social media platforms. According to the International Telecommunications Union, Malaysia has also seen an increase in Internet users since 2000, from 21% to 65% in 2012. Developments in the Arab world today can easily enter the country and pose a legitimate concern for Indonesian and Malaysian governments due to the ubiquitous presence of the Internet.

Focus on Soft Approaches

The Indonesian and Malaysian government need to adapt their counter-terrorism responses to include counter radicalisation strategies focusing on soft approaches. Soft approaches should include engagement through media, cultural, educational and religious sites, with the aim of highlighting the realities of life under the IS.

IS has carried out mass executions, including beheadings, and posted them online. There is a need to be discreet in publicising the IS to the larger community without exaggerating or sensationalising the group, to deny them the positive publicity that they seek.

Malaysian and Indonesian IS supporters are so far not of any immediate security threat to their countries. However, there is a need for some cooperation between civilian and security agencies to closely monitor the development of IS supporters. A number of Indonesians have been found in possession of IS paraphernalia.

Creative citizenship engagements and critical thinking training should feature strongly in terrorist de-radicalisation programs to integrate newly released prisoners and minimise the likelihood of recidivism.

Finally, there can be no single antidote to countering the penetration of extremist ideas that are increasingly becoming romanticised and popularised; there is a need for a holistic counter-terrorism strategy with room for soft approaches to feature in the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts. The

unique social, cultural, economic and religious dynamics of the individual countries should also not be neglected in these counter-terrorism strategies.

Stefanie Kam Li Yee is an Associate Research Fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Robi Sugara is a graduate student pursuing an M.Sc in Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg