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New Map of Indonesian Jihadists: Pro-IS and Non-IS?

By Robi Sugara

Synopsis

The debates within the jihadist community in the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq influence contemporary jihadists around the world into making tactical choices. Analysing and studying their reception and influence are useful for predicting their trajectories. These provide options for counter-terrorism efforts.

Commentary

ON 11 AUGUST 2014, a number of board members of the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) left the group and declared the formation of a new outfit named Jamaah Ansharu Shariah (JAS) in Bekasi, West Java. The new group was formed in reaction to Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's decision to pledge allegiance (*bai'ah*) to the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group.

The split was prompted by Ba'asyir's call that JAT members who do not support and offer the *bai'ah* to the IS should leave JAT. Ba'asyir, a founder and leader of JAT and a co-founder of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group has been serving an imprisonment term since 2011.

Early split of Jihadist groups

The dissension among Indonesian jihadists intensified following the declaration by self-styled Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 29 June 2014 that the IS was a full-fledged state. Four names emerged from this split: Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi, Sulaiman bin Nashir Al-Ulwan, Athiyatullah Al-Libbi, Husain bin Mahmud, who is another important Al Qaeda ideologue.

All of them criticised and opposed Al-Baghdadi because they saw IS as being unable to adequately protect Muslims given that supporters of IS are now found in as well as outside IS; these supporters are even getting threats from Muslim and secular countries. In addition, the declaration of Al-Baghdadi as Caliph was not through an electoral process involving *ahlul halli wal aqdi* (a council of Muslim scholars) which therefore renders Al-Baghdadi's IS invalid in the eyes of Islamic law.

The disagreement among Indonesian jihadists, which occurred before the declaration of the IS, was prompted by the fact that the al-Baghdadi group had set itself up against other jihadist entities. A case

in point was IS' beheading of Abu al-Miqdam, a commander of the Al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al Nusra.

Due to its extreme brutality including against fellow Muslims, many Islamic scholars have argued that the IS was no different from the Kharijites, a heterodox group in early Islamic history known for its extremism and atrocities. As such, despite substantial ideological confluences, many jihadists did not instinctually align themselves with the group.

Responses of Indonesian jihadists

Developments in political Islam and jihadism in the rest of the Muslim world hold sway over the Muslims in Indonesia. The influence could extend to the adoption of sides in the internal debates among terrorist organisations. One instance is the difference of opinion between Abdullah Azam, the father of global jihad, and Osama bin Laden, the founder of Al Qaeda, on who constituted the enemy to Muslims today.

Azam had argued for the setting up of an Islamic state in Afghanistan and for Mujahidins to move to Palestine to liberate Muslims from Israeli occupation, while jihadists from the Asian region could start a war to overthrow their secular regimes. At the same time, Osama called on Muslims to attack America and its allies everywhere. At the time, jihadists in Indonesia who were privy to the debates aligned themselves with one or the other: Azam or Osama.

On the one hand, some JI members followed Osama's call in attacking the 'far enemy', the Americans. Indeed Ali Imron, a Bali bomber, had argued that the Bali bombings of 2002, which caused 202 deaths, were in pursuit of this call. On the other hand, other JI members chose to mount attacks against the near enemy of the secular Indonesian state. The significance of the debate on 'near enemy' vs. 'far enemy' was not fully appreciated by the Indonesian authorities at the time.

Currently, the disagreements between the IS and Al Qaeda have quite expectedly aroused interest in Indonesia's jihadist community. *Annajah* magazine, for instance, which promotes the JI ideology, posted on its magazine articles that criticised the IS. *Arrahmah* media, which the convicted terrorist Muhammad Jibril Abdurrahman fronts, is explicit in its rejection of Al-Baghdadi. In fact, the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), a splinter group of the JI initially led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, went as far as to suggest that the IS was a conspiracy by the Shiites and Jews to destroy Islam.

Support for IS has been often voiced by Aman Abdurahman whom many consider as a leader of the terrorist group Tawhid wal Jihad, also known as 'Takfiri Group'. Aman has been serving nine years imprisonment for terrorism since 2010. Support for IS has also been expressed by newer as well as youthful groups such as FAKSI, the Forum of Shariah activists which has been very aggressive in campaigning for IS.

On 6 July 2014 for instance, the group managed to gather about 600 people at a ceremony in the Islamic State University (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah) of Jakarta to pledge allegiance to IS.

Appreciating internal debates in counter-terrorism

Ba'asyir eventually also pledged fealty to the IS, albeit not uneventfully. Many JAT members including Ba'asyir's son, Abdulrochim Ba'asyir alias lim, criticised Ba'asyir for doing so. In fact, lim had characterised JAT's decision as being engaged in a "temporary euphoria". Others claim that JAT people who support IS constituted about five percent among thousands of JAT members spread across Indonesia.

Indonesia has a long history of jihadism. It may be traced back to the Darul Islam movement that became active more than half a century ago when the nation was fighting for its independence. Yet the jihadi movement is not monolithic. Much of its heterogeneity may be attributed to the fact that the Indonesian jihadi movement did not only develop organically but have been influenced by jihadi discourses, strategies and tactics emanating from the Middle East.

Whenever such cross-pollinations happen, we can expect a split in a jihadist group to occur. Such a split then provides an understanding of the unfolding threat of terrorism in Indonesia. Indeed,

developments in local terrorist strategies and tactics have been invariably influenced by the broader global jihadist movement today.

The analysis of a fracture in a jihadi group provides an indication of the trajectory of jihadist movements in Indonesia, which will in turn enable authorities to respond to the threat of terrorism strategically.

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