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Returning Indonesian Fighters from Syria and Iraq: Learning from the Past

By Navhat Nuraniyah

Synopsis

Indonesian fighters with the self-declared Islamic State (IS) recently posted a video threatening to bring the armed struggle home. Indonesia can learn a lot from past handling of former foreign fighters who returned from the Afghan and Mindanao battlefronts.

Commentary

LAST DECEMBER, an Indonesian fighter with the self-declared Islamic State (IS), Salim Mubarak At-Tamimi, posted a video message stating that he and his IS comrades would soon return and target the Indonesian military, police and the paramilitary wing of Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama that guard churches during Christmas.

As of January, Indonesia's counter-terrorism unit Detachment 88 estimated that 123 Indonesian fighters have joined the war in Syria, though the actual number may be higher. Former Police Chief Sutarman further stated that six of them were killed in battle and at least ten returned. Who are these fighters? What would they do if they manage to return? What could be done to mitigate the threat?

Indonesian fighters: What could happen if they return?

Most Indonesian fighters in Syria were facilitated by existing groups including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the Ring Banten faction of Darul Islam, and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). Those who go through the JI channel join Al-Nusra Front and other jihadi groups that are affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Fighters linked to MIT, Ring Banten, and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) generally fight for IS as their leaders have pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi.

Other fighters made their own ways to Syria and Iraq through personal contacts, social media, and the alumni network of JI-linked schools currently residing in the Middle East. Four Indonesian students in Pakistan who left to fight in Syria were alumni of JI-linked schools. Some of these entrepreneurial fighters, however, were not known to have prior exposure to extremist milieu. One example is two Indonesian students in Turkey who made contact with IS foreign fighters through social media, among other channels. In July 2014, Southeast Asian fighters with IS contacted one another over Facebook and formed a military unit called Katibah Nusantara.

Although it is hard to pinpoint the threat posed by former fighters, it is possible to identify different types of post-conflict behaviour of returning fighters. Foreign fighters are not a new problem for

Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia. Some 200 to 300 Indonesians had trained in Afghan militant camps between 1985 and 1995 and more were reportedly trained and fought in Mindanao from 1996 to 2001.

Reviewing the Afghan and Mindanao veterans in Indonesia, it was evident that not all of them sought to use violence as a political means in the domestic arena. Some hard-core extremists such as Imam Samudra continued to become terrorists; others helped with the cause though not directly involved in terrorist acts; while many totally disengaged from extremism. Some of the latter group have even been involved in counter-radicalisation activities.

Learning from the past, looking ahead

Whether or not returned fighters relapse to terrorism depend on a range of factors, including domestic political contexts and their personal circumstances. It was not until the breakout of Muslim-Christian conflicts in Poso and Ambon in late 1990s that many Afghan and Mindanao veterans decided to go back to the battlefield in what they considered a defensive jihad. Perceived victimisation of Muslims, coupled with turbulent political and economic situations that created instability and massive unemployment, provided fertile ground for JI and other groups to recruit new fighters and establish military squads in the conflict areas.

However even some Afghan veterans who fought in Poso and Ambon were eventually disillusioned by the Bali bombings which killed innocent civilians including Muslims. Disillusionment however did not necessarily turn them away from terrorism. The fact that JI networks were buttressed by interconnected marriages, discipleship, and business relationships among its members made it very difficult for some to totally disengage from their old networks. The availability of alternative social networks and employment were therefore important in rehabilitating former fighters and terrorists.

The current stable political situation, combined with more experienced counterterrorism forces, will make it much more difficult for organised terror plots like the Bali bombings to occur. The capacity of existing terrorist groups have also been significantly weakened. In addition, Muslim-Christian conflicts in Poso and Maluku that served as an extremist battleground have largely been resolved. Now the problem is intra-Muslim conflict. In 2011, hundreds of Shiites in Madura Island, East Java were displaced as a result of a local communal conflict.

Further, the Syrian conflict has worsened existing anti-Shia sentiment because local jihadists and Salafists have framed the Syrian conflict as a Sunni-Shia war and propagated such framing on- and offline. At least three other violent clashes between Sunni and Shia groups broke out in East Java, Jakarta, and West Java recently. Law enforcement authorities and community leaders need to work hand-in-hand to tackle early symptoms of sectarian conflict that could become militant battlegrounds.

Failures and successes

Moreover, the Indonesian government is currently undertaking efforts to criminalise joining foreign terrorist groups. While such criminalisation is necessary, a rehabilitative approach is equally important. Previous deradicalisation programmes undertaken by the government and NGOs have seen both failure and success. One of the infamous failures is the case of employment projects for ex-terrorist inmates in Central Sulawesi in 2010.

After being released from prison, Santoso – who eventually founded MIT – was granted a gutter cleaning project in Palu, Central Sulawesi. He was allowed to employ his followers and other former inmates in the hope that employment would lead to disengagement from terrorism. However, the project not only brought the network together but also gave them financial means to start a new group.

There are also success stories such as a government-funded livestock farm run by former terrorists in Lamongan, East Java and an NGO-initiated cafe that employs former terrorists in Central Java. The more successful programmes share at least three characteristics:

The first is a dual programme of material assistance and religious rehabilitation. The second is the deliberate mixing of former terrorists and their families with other community members in a business

venture to expose them to more plural networks. The third is accountability and a monitoring mechanism to make sure former terrorists do not regroup or use the funding for terrorist activities. All the lessons from previous measures, positive or otherwise, need to be taken into account when designing deradicalisation programmes for returning fighters.

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