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Southeast Asian Militants in Syria and Iraq: What Can the Online Realm Reveal?

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Synopsis

Since the rise of ISIS, there has been increasing online chatter from Southeast Asian militants fighting in Syria and Iraq. Useful insights can be derived by critically examining surface observations appearing on social media.

Commentary

ONLINE CHATTER on Southeast Asian militants fighting in Syria and Iraq can readily be found in extremist websites and the social media accounts of the militants, supporters and sympathisers. The Malaysian Police reported a handful of Malay language sites. The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) has detected at least 70 sites in Bahasa Indonesia.

The social media accounts of militants were first detected during the first quarter of 2014. A handful were from Indonesia and at least 35 from Malaysia. Their numbers may be small yet they have served as virtual powerhouses for garnering support online. This has been the case especially for Malaysian militants. A prominent example of a popular social media personality was Malaysian Mohd Lotfi Ariffin, a former Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) leader and Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) member who subsequently travelled to Syria to become a militant for Afnad Ash Sham which adheres to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. He garnered around 27,000 followers on Facebook during the days when such online accounts had a longer lifespan.

The case of Katibah Nusantara

Useful and critical information gathered on these online platforms can be sporadic and often exist as snippets indicative of a much larger picture. More often than not, they point towards critical lacunae in our understanding of the subject. For instance, one of the key questions arising from the online observations of Southeast Asian extremist sites would be on the operating structure, working dynamics, key personalities and security implications to Southeast Asia posed by the militants from *Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah* or the Malay Archipelago Battalion.

Also known as *Majmu'ah al Arkhabiliy*, the group provides an attractive opportunity for Malay-speaking fighters to get mobilised. Its establishment was supported by the Islamic State of Iraq and

Syria (ISIS) on 26 September 2014. Pieces of information on the group have been observed primarily in two online Southeast Asian extremist sources.

The first source came from an article posted in a pro-ISIS website that officially announced the establishment of Katibah Nusantara in September 2014. The content portrayed Katibah Nusantara as a structured group with clear leadership and objectives. The rationale behind the formation of dedicated units speaking a common language was, according to this article, primarily to help militants in ISIS overcome the language barrier. The article also mentioned that the formation of Katibah Nusantara was meant to be a catalyst for the regeneration of the caliphate in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Operational capacity and leadership structure

Furthermore, the article described how the unit was seeking to build its operational capacity and was looking for skilled individuals such as snipers, explosive experts, heavy weapons experts, tactics/strategy experts and experts in military leadership. This explicit call for recruitment can either be indicative of a shortage of fighters in Katibah Nusantara or a shift towards recruiting 'skilled' fighters.

The second source of information came sometime in April 2015 from a pro-ISIS website which reported about the group's success in capturing five Kurdish-held villages in Syria. This notable operational success was used by the group to portray itself as being capable and well-organised.

However, closer scrutiny of some online information raises questions about foreign fighter groups operating in Syria and Iraq independent of local militants. Two videos posted on the Internet around July-August 2015 showing over 70 armed fighters, some speaking with an Indonesian accent and making preparations for battle, created the impression of Katibah Nusantara as an independent, cohesive and active combat group. However, it remains unverified whether such ethnically similar group of foreign fighters, such as Katibah Nusantara, have indeed operated independently and effectively in conflict zones.

Leaders listed in Katibah Nusantara as reported online thus far seem to be Indonesians. These include the overall *amir* (chieftain) of the unit, those responsible for enforcing law and discipline within the unit, individuals with bomb-making expertise and those ear-marked for special training by ISIS. So far, no Malaysian fighter has been mentioned online as a key leader. This is peculiar because there are a few notable ones with military experience and background in religious studies – qualifications that would deem them suitable for leadership. This leads us to question if Indonesian militants are more valued for some reason or is there a more strategic motive behind this?

What lies beneath?

Although ISIS is reportedly well-funded, with its fighters being paid more than those of Bashar al Assad, militants from Southeast Asia who are with ISIS apparently suffer from financial difficulty. In April 2015, some Malaysian militants conducted an online fundraising campaign on social media to ask for donations for the purchase of a truck. This raises queries on how much resources from ISIS command are actually being allocated to the Southeast Asian fighters and more importantly, whether they are valued as equals within ISIS.

The key security implication of such observations revolves around the issue of returnees and their capacity for attacks in Southeast Asia. A well-funded, trained, organised and connected Malay fighting unit within ISIS poses a far greater danger than a fragmented unit that exists more for propaganda purposes. However, even the latter has the potential to become a capable fighting unit when the propaganda serves its purpose by recruiting more skilled fighters.

Despite more questions than answers arising from casual online observations, these questions serve a critical function by guiding us towards essential revelations needed for making credible threat assessments. However, such observations should be grounded on methodological rigour to avoid the tendency to assume trends or jump to conclusions. Characteristics based on observations can only be considered reliable if they appear over a period of time and there is triangulation of information from other sources.

One way to promote such methodological rigour is for the research community analysing such phenomenon to share insights and cross-check each other's findings. This will culminate in collectively deriving an accurate picture of Southeast Asians in ISIS that can value-add to the formulation of counter-terrorism strategies.

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