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ISIS' Southeast Asia Unit: Raising the Security Threat

By V. Arianti and Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) Southeast Asia fighting unit, Katibah Nusantara, has continued expanding geographically. How does it link with Indonesian pro-ISIS groups and what security threat does it pose to the country and the region?

Commentary

THE SOUTHEAST Asia fighting unit of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Katibah Nusantara (KN) continues to expand geographically within a year of its establishment. There are about 450 Indonesians and Malaysians, including children and women under fealty to ISIS in Iraq and Syria today. KN or *Majmuah Al Arkhabiliy* in Arabic, started out with some 100 Indonesian and Malaysian fighters when it was formed in Shaddadi, Hasakah in Syria in September 2014. It has since the middle of this year, divided into three geographical groupings: KN Central led by Bahrum Syah; Katibah Masyariq led by Salim Mubarak At-Tamimi alias Abu Jandal, based in Homs and Katibah Aleppo led by Abu Abdillah. Bahrum Syah remains *amir* of KN, dealing strictly with Indonesian ISIS fighters that defy or defect from KN's instructions, to maintain unity within ISIS.

In Southeast Asia almost two dozen Indonesian extremist groups have pledged allegiance to the self-styled Caliph of Islamic State (IS) Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi. ISIS has accepted their *ba'iat* (oath of loyalty), as expressed in its publication *Dabiq* in November 2014, but has yet to acknowledge Indonesia as a *wilayat* (province). That will require the appointment of the leadership in a particular wilayat by the Caliph, where multiple groups have merged or where direct line of communication exists between ISIS and the purported leadership of a wilayat.

Indonesian pro-ISIS groups

The Indonesian pro-ISIS groups, prompted by the need to be united under one umbrella, have established the Jamaah Ansharut Daulat (JAD), in March 2015. JAD comprises students of Aman Abdurrahman who previously joined various groups. Indeed the key leaders of KN such as Bahrum Syah and Abu Jandal are former students of Aman. JAD considers its main mission to be the facilitation of a more coordinated communication between Indonesian fighters in Syria and ISIS supporters in Indonesia.

Despite losing the lives of more than 50 fighters – mostly Indonesians – in the Syrian civil war, KN's public profile has been undiminished as seen in the open video of its Eid Adha celebrations in the conflict zones of ISIS-held territory. The video features Indonesians fighters prominently but Malaysian fighters have appeared in other ISIS videos. KN has also translated ISIS materials from Arabic into Bahasa Indonesia, and sub-titled jihadist videos, setting a record of 20 videos in a month under the banner of ISIS' Al-Hayat Media Centre.

The Threat to Southeast Asia

Although none of the ISIS' official videos featuring KN has specifically mentioned any intention to attack Indonesian targets, they have, however, focused on calling on Indonesians to *hijrah* (migrate) to Syria to fight against those that ISIS consider infidels. However one KN figure, Abu Jandal was featured in several unofficial videos that threatened to free pro-ISIS ideologues Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman, from Indonesian prisons, and to attack Indonesian military, police and youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Indonesian Muslim organisation. Abu Jandal also praised operations conducted by Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), a pro-ISIS terrorist group led by Santoso. The Abu Jandal video had been aired without the consent of KN amir Bahrum Syah, which led to his brief imprisonment by the latter for insubordination.

Several KN personnel have reportedly aided terrorist groups in Indonesia. Bagus Maskuron, the appointed MIT's liaison officer with ISIS, allegedly arranged for the deployment of nine Uighurs to train with MIT in Poso, Central Sulawesi, in September 2014. While four of them were later arrested five Uighurs are believed to be fighting with MIT in Poso. Indonesian police believe that MIT received logistical assistance from ISIS. Bahrum Naim (of KN) allegedly funded several foiled bomb plots in Solo, Central Java, targeting a Buddhist temple, a church, and police stations during the Indonesian Independence Day anniversary on 17 August 2015. However, it is not known whether the assistance for Indonesian terrorist groups was officially from KN or was without official sanction from the group.

More terrorist cells in Indonesia might gain financial and logistical assistance from their comrades in Syria. The growing links between Indonesian extremists and ISIS might give rise to more variation of targets for terrorists but the police remain MIT's primary target.

Additionally, foreign embassies might once again become terrorist targets given that

the ISIS' Dabiq published in August 2015 has specifically encouraged the targeting of embassies of the coalition-member states in Indonesia and Malaysia. The possibility of Shi'ites being attacked by KN returnees should also not be underestimated. A list of Indonesian Shi'ite organisations were circulated online recently among Indonesian pro-ISIS supporters.

Shi'ite institutions being targeted in Indonesia is not new. In 2011, they constituted the targets of Abu Umar's group, a faction of Darul Islam (DI), which was involved in weapon procurements from Mindanao. The group also planned to attack the Singapore embassy in Jakarta in 2011. Indeed, members of KN would not find difficulty to connect with the many terrorist cells that are mostly pro-ISIS, to plot attacks in the country.

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