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Cyber Ribat in Malaysia: Countering IS' New Online Guards

By Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

Synopsis

Online support for ISIL in Malaysia measures in the thousands of pro-Islamic State (IS) Facebook accounts. Authorities will have to look at cyber ribat – the cyber guarding of military frontiers - seriously and decide on counter-narratives to stem the growing tide of this new pedigree of on-line jihadist radicalisation.

Commentary

ONLINE EXTREMISM in Malaysia is a matter of national and regional security. In May 2015, the Malaysian Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi reported that 75% of supporters of ISIS – variously known as ISIL, Islamic State (IS) and Daesh - were recruited online. As of January 2016, the Malaysian police have arrested 153 people for suspected links to the ISIL, successfully thwarting possible attacks. However, Malaysian ISIL fighters and supporters continue to thrive on social media platforms such as Facebook.

While Malaysia has legal recourses to combat real-world terrorism, such as the Security Offences (Special Measures) (Amendment) Bill or SOSMA on top of nascent counter-radicalisation and counter-ideological efforts, Kuala Lumpur cannot ignore the thousands among its citizens who believe that they are contributing to ISIL's cause through their online ribat. There is an urgent need for these online radicals to be engaged in counter-narratives, for theirs is but a small step away from real-world militancy.

Understanding Ribat: “Cyber-IS”

Malaysian online extremists, including mere Facebook “friends” of jihadis as well as

hackers and “tech experts”, believe that they are “Cyber-IS” or that they are conducting *ribat* online. Social media is their frontier, online content are their cavalry and swords, friendship binds them together; their enemies are those who spread falsehood about the *dawlah* (ISIL), as well as online Shi’ites, infidels and supporters of the *tawaghut* (idolaters).

In their very hearts they perceive their online activities as participation in the real world battles on the ground. And in some cases, these activities become realised into actual travel, planning attacks and co-coordinating clandestine cells, which, in Malaysia, has led up to arrests. However, authorities need to look deeper into online *ribat* and curb radical activities further upstream.

Authorities have to be familiar with *ribat* in its various military and non-military usages, particularly in dealing with the strategy of Daesh (as ISIL is known in Arabic) on the ground and online. According to the Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam, *ribat* carries a multitude of meanings. In non-military usage, *ribat* means a building prepared and put aside for the ritualistic, academic and educational activities of the *fuqaha* (scholars of jurisprudence) and the Sufis. *Ribat* in this sense may be linked to jihad but only in the non-violent and symbolic sense, that is, against “the self”.

The associated meanings that come with *ribat* originates from its military usage as a military-religious institution, originally linked to tribal warfare implying the preparations made when mustering cavalry before battle. Much later, along with the changes in the way the Arabs conducted their wars through the ages, a *ribat* became associated with fortifications and buildings such as the observation tower. As a verbal noun of the verb *rabata*, it implies attachment to a place, or a person; just as horses are required to be, having been gathered ready for combat. In the Qur’an (8:60), *ribat* is the assembling of battle horses for warfare as a show force to deter the enemy.

Through the evolution of its use by Muslim armies in warfare in the past centuries, *ribat* has been supplied with the notion of the “frontier” that was injected by the period of conquests in Islamic history, and is a concept of observation, standing guard and of preparation for an impending skirmish, deployment, battle or movement, and may or may not involve the necessary religious or military education or indoctrination.

Victories for Malaysian Online Murabitun

Malaysian Online *Murabitun* – those who undertake cyber *ribat* – have been complicit in shaping and building online and real-world communities of extremists. These *Murabitun* are supporters and sympathisers of radicals who could not afford the trip to Syria, were advised not to go or have yet to find the courage to leave Malaysia and their family behind. Their first victory online was to provide the dominant grasp Daesh has over the online jihadi conversation in the Malay-speaking world.

Since 2013, the online *Murabitun* followed the journey of jihadis such as Lotfi Ariffin, producing and distributing jihadi content, from the daily lives of fighters in Syria to calls for jihad and even materials such as logos, pictures and videos from “IS

Central". They have been consistently defending the presence of their community online by tactically using social media, for instance, by persistently creating new accounts, adding new friends and helping jihadis to verify and resurface accounts that have been shut down.

After the Malaysian fighters left Afnad Ash-Sham and joined IS, these *Murabitun* were unhesitant in staying abreast with the change in ideological or doctrinal leaning and loyalty. Admittedly, this swing in online support was long due, with IS dominating other jihadi groups in terms of public online presence. It is worth noting that since then, there has not been any news of new Malaysian fighters joining any other groups in Syria. In Jan 2016, the 11 Malaysians who were arrested for planning attacks and attempting to travel to Syria were wholly linked to ISIL.

End Ribat, Begin Rehabilitation

Regardless of whether they are responsible for a complete Daesh-isation of real world Malaysian jihad, intentionally or unknowingly, they have allowed their audience to enter into the alternative world of ISIL; they know how to dress, speak, think and use social media like an extremist. They have contributed to the building of an ideological repository of Daesh ethics – what they should and should not do or like.

They are complicit in the creation of the extremist information market, and their sense of community. When there is a threat to the community they will alert the others and provide suggested solutions. When a fighter dies, they grieve or celebrate together and when a member is caught they alert others of enemies among themselves. As a result, fighters do indeed gain from audience participation. They can gauge who among the audience are potential friends or recruits.

Online *Murabitun* with dangerous levels of radicalisation should not be left alone just because they are not an immediate threat. Those who have yet to be dangerously radicalised need to be rescued and guided back into society for their own safety and for the security of Malaysia.

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