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Children in ISIS Nusantara Media Outreach

By Remy Mahzam

Synopsis

The inclusion of children has raised ISIS Nusantara's media outreach to new heights. From military training videos to educational mobile applications designed to teach kids jihadist ideology, the indoctrination of young minds with radical tendencies marks a troubling shift in how children have been co-opted into ISIS propaganda strategy.

Commentary

SINCE THE start of ISIS' aggressive online campaign in justifying its own brand of caliphate, children have been targeted as a subject of propaganda and featured alongside adult fighters in visual reports as well as videos. The imagery of children in ISIS media outreach for the Nusantara region which encompasses Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines is more than just a marketing gimmick.

The way these children are being portrayed as ideologues at a tender age reflects a deeper agenda to immunise the idea of indiscriminate killing, making it outwardly permissible for even children to use violence to realise the so-called Caliphate dream, by all means necessary.

Nusantara in the Spotlight

In a recent video entitled "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus" (The Impenetrable Edifice) released on 22 June 2016 by a newly established ISIS Philippines media wing, Abu 'Aun Al-Malizi, a Malaysian fighter even called for the mobilisation of children from the Nusantara region to join the Caliphate in Philippines under the leadership of Abu Abdullah al-Filipini, also known as Isnilon Totoni Hapilon.

The Nusantara has been glimmering under ISIS propaganda radar since the start of its media campaign. *Dābiq* magazine, ISIS' key propaganda publication, has been made available in full Bahasa translation since the release of its first issue. There are countless other periodicals from multiple media outlets such as An-Naba' weekly newsletters by Amaq Agency, audio news bulletin broadcasted over Al-Bayan radio network and spiritual anecdotes released by Maktabat al-Himmah, all of which have their own respective Bahasa translated variations.

On 20 June 2016, *Al Fatihin - Surat Kabar Bagi Muhajirin Berbahasa Melayu di Daulah Islamiyyah*, debuted as the first Malay language newspaper bringing updates from Syria and Iraq published by Furat Media. Adapted from ISIS' An-Naba' weekly newsletter in Arabic, the Bahasa version was strategically released in the fasting month of Ramadan which has been equated as the month of conquest and jihad.

Aggressive Multimedia Campaign

Within a span of just one year, the amount of multimedia release targeting the Nusantara has increased significantly reflecting an aggressive all-out media campaign. The exploitation of Southeast Asian children in ISIS-related videos was earlier noted on 17 March 2015, in a video entitled, "*Cahaya Tarbiyah di Bumi Khilāfah*" (The Light of Education in the Caliphate).

The video released by Al-Azzam Media who claimed to be ISIS' Malay-language media division, showed children training with AK-47 assault rifles. The children were also well versed in their own preaching of the faith, having the ability to quote eloquently from the holy Qur'an and Prophetic traditions.

In 2 April 2016, Furat Media released a music video entitled "*Khilāfah Telah Kembali*" (The Caliphate Has Returned) in Bahasa. Again, images of children of the Nusantara were poignantly used in the video montage, matching the lyrics of the song, "*Where have the men gone? Those who will fulfil the call of God? Where are the souls of the brave youths? Committed themselves for an eternal paradise.*" The song which is already a form of a recruitment apparatus has been reinforced by the visualisation of children impersonating real men preparing themselves for a battle.

A music video for a nasheed or religious hymn entitled "*Sang Pour Sang*" (Blood for Blood) was distributed by Al-Hayat Media on 29 April 2016. The hymn which was sung in an adolescent's voice in the French language interestingly came with Bahasa subtitles.

The visual shows a child wondering alone in what looked like a battle-damaged district in Syria intermixed with footages of children's sufferings and images of world leaders such as Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad who are being perceived as those responsible for the affliction. The video startlingly culminated with the formation of an all-children militia equipped with weapons sending a chilling warning of vengeance to these leaders, "*Beware, we have what we need to defend ourselves; Well-armed soldiers are ready to kill you.*"

On 16 May 2016, Wilāyat al-Barakah, ISIS official media wing in Syria's Hasaka

province, released a 16-minute video titled “*Generasi Petempur*” (The Generation of Epic Fighters) featuring Southeast Asian children aged between 8 to 12 years old who have already migrated to the land of the Caliphate. The children described as “Putera Khilāfa” (Princes of the Caliphate) representing Bangsa Nusantara (Nusantara People) were shown engaging in target practice, proclaiming their bai’ah (oath of allegiance) and burning their passports as a sign of resoluteness.

Technology-Savvy Caliphate Generation

To cater for a technology-savvy generation, Maktabat Al-Himmah released age-appropriated Android mobile applications for kids. “Huroof” which has a colourful child-friendly interface teaches Arabic alphabets and vocabulary using content related to the military and jihadist ideology. Words such as ‘tank’, ‘gun’ and ‘rocket’ are surprisingly included in the teaching content.

Another application, “Du’a Al-Yaum wal Layl”, described as “a new interactive app for Cubs” teaches over 40 prayer recitations to be read by children. The prayers include supplications asking for protection from ISIS’ enemies which have been referenced to the United States, United Kingdom, Russia and Israel in the app graphics.

There is a psychological impetus to why children have been targeted in ISIS Nusantara propaganda. For ISIS, children represent the future as much as the Caliphate. To prepare these children to become the next generation of fighters or stakeholders of the Caliphate, ISIS sees the need for an indoctrination programme to be effected at an early stage of child development.

For children, it is crucial for them to distinguish their heroes from their enemies just like the good from the bad. Unfortunately, the relative powerlessness of children works to the advantage of ISIS in its propaganda mechanism.

The inclusion of children in ISIS Nusantara propaganda outreach is indeed worrying as it marks a progressive milestone for ISIS’ ultimate realisation of a relentless and unforgiving world that would rob the children of their own innocence.

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