

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Syria Alumni Threat: Legal Loopholes and Inadequate De-radicalisation

By Chaula Rininta Anindya

Synopsis

Syawaludin Pakpahan, the perpetrator of a terror attack in Medan, North Sumatra may not be the last of the Syria alumni to launch an attack in Indonesia. The government's one month de-radicalisation programme for the returnees appears insufficient to prevent them from returning to radical groups.

Commentary

A POLICE OFFICER was stabbed to death when he was on duty at a security checkpoint in front of the provincial police headquarters in Medan, North Sumatra on 25 July 2017. There were two attackers, identified as Syawaluddin Pakpahan and Ardial Ramadhana. Both are allegedly connected to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the umbrella organisation for Islamic State (IS) sympathisers in Indonesia.

Pakpahan is known to be the first of the Syria alumni who launched an attack in Indonesia. He went to Syria in 2013 and stayed for five months before returning to Indonesia. The National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) chief Suhardi Alius said that Pakpahan fought alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA) while he was in Syria.

Central Role of Syria Alumni

The group which conducted the terror attack consisted of four people: Syawaludin Pakpahan, Firmansyah Putra Yudi aka Yudi, Ardial Ramadan, and Hendri Pratama aka Boboy. Pakpahan played a central role within the group where he radicalised the other three and assigned them with different roles for the attack.

The National Police spokesperson Brig. Gen Rikwanto stated that Pakpahan ordered

Yudi to conduct a survey prior to the terror attack on several targets including the Command Headquarters of the Police Mobile Brigade of North Sumatra and the Headquarters of the Military Regional Command at Bukit Barisan. He was also called to conduct a survey of the Megamas Asian Complex Medan targeting citizens of Chinese descent.

Pakpahan also ordered Boboy to monitor the conditions in an army battalion, a police station in Tanjung Pinang Morawa, and a provincial police office. That indicated that the group did not only target police officers as had been done recently by other terrorists groups in Indonesia as a form of revenge.

Their purpose of targeting the military officers was not revenge but seizing firearms to launch another terror attack. Pakpahan and Boboy had surveyed the police office for a week and found loopholes in the gate. The last perpetrator, Ramadan, was in charge of launching the attack with Pakpahan. Ramadan was shot dead by the police.

Syria Alumni Serious Threat to Indonesia

Pakpahan's role was not limited to conducting this attack; the police also discovered that he propagated radicalism to children. He printed a notebook for children with radical messages on the cover, for instance "whoever dies without having fought (in Jihad) or having resolved to fight has died following one of the branches of hypocrisy". Police found 155 copies of the notebook.

Pakpahan's roles show that the Syria alumni pose a serious threat to Indonesia. IS and other terrorist groups in Syria are being pushed back; hence there is a higher possibility that there will be an influx of Syria returnees. Moreover, the IS leadership also called for their sympathisers to launch attacks in their respective countries if it is not possible for them to fly to Syria. Under the current law on terrorism, the Indonesian government could not arrest the returnees unless they have committed terror attacks in Indonesia.

The legal loopholes limit the security apparatus to prevent the Syria alumni from conducting terror attacks on Indonesian soil. According to National Police spokesperson Insp. Gen Setyo Wasisto, the former combatants mostly used official documents to return to Indonesia, otherwise they would have encountered difficulties to return home. The security apparatus could only retrieve their personal data and monitor their activities.

Inadequate Deradicalisation Programme

The Indonesian government has a deradicalisation programme for the returnees and people deported from other countries, mostly from Turkey who attempted to join the terrorist groups in Syria. They undergo the de-radicalisation programme for a month in a shelter in East Jakarta, run by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The programme requires them to attend daily sessions with BNPT officers, Indonesian Military (TNI) personnel, clerics, and former jihadists. After completing the one month programme, they will be sent back to their respective hometowns.

A total of 152 returnees were sent home between January and June 2017. Their activities were monitored by the security apparatus and the local government (Pemda). Still, BNPT Chief Suhardi asserted that it is difficult to monitor their activities because they tend to move from one place to another or return to radical groups after being rejected by the society.

The one month de-radicalisation programme appears insufficient for the returnees who had been radicalised for months or years. They went to Syria by collecting money and selling all their assets in Indonesia. That shows that they have a strong willingness to do anything to join the Jihad in Syria.

Even a longer de-radicalisation programme may still be insufficient, as in the case of Jihadist recidivists. The Sarinah Thamrin attack in early 2016 and the Bandung attack in February 2017 showed the involvement of recidivists in the attacks. Although they had already undergone the de-radicalisation programme while they were imprisoned, they still launched another terror attack.

Success Stories

There are also success stories of the prison deradicalisation programme, such as Ali Imron and Nasir Abbas who helped extend the programme to other jihadists. Yet, the underlying factors for radicalisation vary from individuals and similar methods of de-radicalisation might not be effective with other Jihadists.

The government should also engage the society, post de-radicalisation. Society should embrace the returnees and not reject them. The problem that leads the returnees to radicalism might not necessarily be religion, but marginalisation.

Without a society that is willing to accept the returnees, they will rejoin radical groups, such as IS, who always exploit the narrative of marginalisation to recruit more people.

Chaula Rininta Anindya is a Research Assistant with the Indonesia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
