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New Al-Fatihin: IS Continued Ideological Threat to Southeast Asia

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Synopsis

The new version of Al-Fatihin will continue to threaten the Bahasa- and Malay-speaking societies. The propaganda may not be the tool for recruitment but at least to shape some ideas around religion and politics.

Commentary

ON 20 June 2016, the so-called Islamic State (IS) released its first newspaper in the Malay language called Al-Fatihin. It then stopped being published and almost two years later the magazine re-emerged. It is now being published weekly and already in its sixth edition.

The new publication uses the same name “Al-Fatihin” but the tagline and its contents have been readjusted to audience specifically for Indonesia. The new tagline is “*Surat Kabar Mingguan Berbahasa Indonesia, Diterbitkan Dari Daulah Islam*” which means, weekly newspaper in Bahasa Indonesia from Daulah Islam or IS.

Old Al-Fatihin Versus New Al-Fatihin

Starting with the tagline, the new version of Al-Fatihin continues to serve the existing IS fighters, supporters, and sympathisers from the Southeast Asian region. Although it may be meant to target Indonesian-specific audience more so than others, Bahasa Indonesia is comprehensible to many in the region who speak Malay language despite its various dialects and forms.

The two-month old Al-Fatihin by IS is a light publication of 10 to 15 pages. Similar to the old Al-Fatihin, it carries a wide range of articles in the form of news, reports, infographics, correspondences with its readers, and opinion pieces. Its topics are

mainly political and religious in nature. IS, despite losing its large swathes of territories in Iraq and Syria, portrays itself in the new Al-Fatihin as still having control and support wherever it is present across the globe.

The group also gloated its strength in killing its enemies inside and outside of Iraq and Syria. In addition, the publication incites hatred towards the West, religious 'other' i.e: Shiite, Christian, etc., even Muslims who are against the group, warranting from its supporters to *wage jihad* against them. The publication also promotes IS' pseudo-religious values through a literal understanding of religious sources, consequently justifying violence and abhorrent acts towards humanity.

Different Tone?

In IS' attempt to stay relevant to the Southeast Asian region, it strives with its propaganda. However, the new Al-Fatihin suggests desperation in its tone. Having lost the territories, fighters, followers and sympathisers, the new Al-Fatihin repeatedly call for *jihad* in every edition, justifying its religious obligation and highlighting its importance.

Above all, it threatens those who denounce *jihad* with severe punishments and repercussions. The calling is also not limited to male per se, but female and young individuals who are capable of fighting. It dedicated several posters and articles to its female audience with appreciations and guidelines to partake in *jihad*.

Notwithstanding all the losses, Al-Fatihin propounds the concept of determination to their readers. It talked about how persevering IS members are that they will not betray their *bai'ah* or allegiance regardless of the challenges they face to the extent that being a captive is not an option for them.

Implications

The new Al-Fatihin suggests the very nexus that is connecting IS central with the Southeast Asian region. After failing to establish a caliphate in the Philippines, IS strives to influence the largest Muslim state in the world, Indonesia. Al-Fatihin can be seen as an attempt to win the 'hearts and minds' of Muslims and in the post-Marawi to regain what they lost in terms of territories, fighters and supporters.

Riding on religious sources to justify its agenda, albeit a vicious one, it is a quick way to "buy" and mobilise supporters. After all, IS fosters its members' religious identity through religious guilt and victimhood thus requiring them to serve the religion and seek salvation through *jihad*.

However, any rational mind – if they were to read the Al-Fatihin – will not buy into IS' ideas. The publication is full of hatred, enmity, bigotry, call for inhumane actions, in which, none of those are in any way part of Islam. The whole religious arguments put forth by IS are skewed and have been rejected by many of the authoritative, contemporary and prominent religious scholars.

Putting all these aside, the purpose of Al-Fatihin is not because of IS wanting to recruit any members. If any of the readers interested in joining them, it would definitely be a

plus point. But more importantly, the Al-Fatihin propaganda is to shape its readers' ideas on religion and politics. This is important for the IS group to gain traction from the community again and for the group to stay alive and relevant. In the end, religious and political opinions by the group, however skewed they are, are continuously being read and digested by their audience.

Moving Forward

The severity of such influence on Southeast Asian society is tremendous. As societies in this region face changes in leadership and governance, the influence from IS can be detrimental. Although the group's physical existence may no longer be in dominant, its ideas will continue to permeate in the minds of our society. The new Al-Fatihin is also a reminder that IS central continues to have Southeast Asia and its jihad-based mission in its radar.

The IS threat to the Southeast Asian region will linger so long as it continues to have supporters and sympathisers. Al-Fatihin is only one of the many of IS propaganda tools that is being used to shape the Muslim minds. Religious scholars would need to continuously guide the society against skewed religious views. Seekers of religious knowledge should also pursue this from proper scholars, platforms and channels.

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