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Assessment of IS Ideological Threat

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SYNOPSIS

On 18 February 2019, Berita Harian published an article on the ideological threat posed by the IS terrorist group (“Penilaian ke atas ancaman ideologi IS”). This is an abridged version of the article which dwells on IS’ propagation of ‘Jihād and Khilāfah’, the impact of its ideological propaganda, and the way forward to counter its threat.

COMMENTARY

AT ITS peak in 2014, IS was an entity that fused terrorism, insurgency and governance over vast swathes of Iraq and Syria. Today, IS has lost most of its territories. However, it is still spreading its ideological propaganda centred on its version of *Jihād* and *Khilāfah* (Caliphate) through social media.

In Southeast Asia, individuals influenced by IS ideology have carried out terrorist operations such as the armed conflict in Marawi (the Philippines) in 2017, the suicide bombings in Indonesia in 2018, and the latest church bombing in Jolo (the Philippines) this year – all executed in the name of ‘*Jihād* and *Khilāfah*’.

Propagating ‘*Jihād* and *Khilāfah*’

Both ‘*Jihād* and *Khilāfah*’ continue to be the two pivotal ideas IS used to lure Muslims to its fold. On 29 June 2014, IS declared the revival of the *Khilāfah* after capturing significant parts of Iraq and Syria. Five days later, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a sermon, proclaiming himself as the *Khalīfah* (caliph), and calling on Muslims everywhere to pledge the oath of allegiance to him.

IS claimed that it had succeeded in reviving the *Khilāfah*, a system of government based on *Sharia* laws. IS considered secularism and its various iterations such as

nationalism, communism and Baathism as contradictory to Islam. IS urged the global Muslim community to migrate to its controlled territories, claiming that “*hijrah* (emigration) to the ‘land’ of Islam is obligatory”.

IS also called on the Muslim community to wage *Jihād* through participation in military operations or acts of violence. For IS, the *Khilāfah* could only be established through *Jihād*. IS wanted its *Khilāfah* to replace the ‘Westphalian’ system of sovereign states which IS claimed is an “imperialist plot” to destroy the Muslim *Ummah* (global community); under the *Khilāfah* system, Muslims would be united under a single Islamic theocracy.

IS also portrayed itself as a movement determined to erase the colonial legacy of the ‘Sykes-Picot Agreement’, and its “false” borders. It wanted the caliphate as the only replacement for the existing systems of government in the Middle East.

While the focus is on the Middle East, IS also tries to woo Muslims in other regions by prominently featuring non-Arab fighters in IS’ publications and making claims of having inspired Muslims to perform *Jihād* (often involving violent attacks) in many countries.

IS’ effective use of the Internet and social media for its propaganda and recruitment had attracted some 30,000 people from over 80 countries in 2015. It used its online magazines, *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* and *An-Naba* to provide the theological justifications and rationale for establishing the *Khilāfah* through *Jihād*. These publications also feature ‘convincing and charismatic’ individuals, with a ‘high commitment’ to *Jihād* and *Khilāfah*, to evoke feelings of guilt among vulnerable Muslims for their lack of commitment to Islam and a higher purpose in life. These IS-targeted Muslims include those living in conflict zones and experiencing identity crisis and marginalisation.

IS’ claims notwithstanding, the IS *Khilāfah* is at variance with the Caliphate of the Rightly Guided Caliphs of the seventh century. Prominent Muslim leaders and scholars have rejected IS’ version of the caliphate, questioned its deviant interpretations of Islamic texts and condemned its atrocities. Even the emigrants to IS’ caliphate had expressed their dismay as they found that IS’ promise of a more Islamic life was a hoax. In fact, the Muslim World has overwhelmingly rejected IS’ deviant ideology and IS calls for migration and overthrow of governments.

Initially, the establishment of IS caliphate was touted as a “confirmation from God” of its legitimacy. However, its collapse and the loss of its territories have raised severe doubts about it. The continued military operations have finally paralysed IS affecting its physical existence in Iraq and Syria.

Nonetheless, IS’ ideological threat still persists. IS claimed that establishing the *Khilāfah* is not impossible and uniting Muslims to live under it is a religious obligation. In his speech in August 2018, al-Baghdadi insisted that the legitimacy of a caliph should be judged by the willingness of its members’ and supporters’ to accept what happened to IS as the will of God and a test for the Muslim community. More importantly, the *Khilāfah* will return, and it is the responsibility of the Muslim community to make it a reality.

IS cites the global community’s resistance to IS as evidence of its hostility and attempt

to 'subdue' Islam. Thus, in its view, setting up the *Khilāfah* through *Jihād* is the only alternative. It continues to spread its ideological propaganda of *Jihād* and *Khilāfah* to sway the Muslim community and counter the arguments of its opponents.

The Way Forward

Given the persistence of IS' ideological threat, additional efforts should be considered to augment existing initiatives to counter violent extremism (CVE).

First, the Islamic world must make a paradigm shift to learn to live with modernity and adapt to the changing world through *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and contextualisation.

Second, *Fatwā* with global implications should not go against accepted norms and must be endorsed by a legitimate and recognised religious authority. The global Muslim community should be guided to reject fatwas and religious views from fringe groups like IS or individuals such as al-Baghdadi.

Third, influential Muslims and Muslim clerical authorities and centres of learning should support the movement for religious moderation. In this respect, it is critical that only qualified and accredited religious teachers should serve the Muslim community.

Fourth, Islamic scholars should educate the Muslim masses that all systems of government – not necessarily an 'Islamic state' -- are acceptable if they ensure justice, peace, welfare and security and are supported by the majority. All these features are absent in the IS-style state.

Fifth, the Muslim world needs to develop new narratives that give priority to education, economic growth, and improving the people's standard of living. This is because based on the global index of poverty, human development and others, the Islamic World today is far behind.

Lastly, there is no doubt that promoting pluralism and inclusiveness by cultivating respect for other religions is indispensable. It will ensure social unity among adherents of different faiths and provide a platform for the development of peace and security.

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