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Avenging Christchurch Terror: Indonesian Militant Responses

By Kenneth Yeo

SYNOPSIS

The March 2019 massacre at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand by a white supremacist has sparked retaliatory messages from Islamist militants in Indonesia. Outrage from the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and its Indonesian supporters has triggered the sharing of violent hate messages across many militant-linked Southeast Asian Telegram and WhatsApp groups.

COMMENTARY

ON 15 MARCH 2019, two mosques in Christchurch were attacked – a massacre that claimed the lives of 50 innocent Muslim civilians. The bloodbath at Al Noor Mosque was live-streamed by the 28-year-old Australian-born terrorist who held white supremacist beliefs. The shootings reinvigorated efforts by IS-inspired Indonesian groups to mobilise and rally their supporters using the oft-trotted “us vs them” line of Islamist hardliners. At least 16 Southeast Asian Telegram and WhatsApp groups, each with more than 100 members, have disseminated messages inciting acts of vengeance.

The first message put out by these IS-inspired groups preyed on the widely-held belief among Muslims that there were double standards in applying the terrorist label: Muslims are easily branded as terrorists while acts of violent extremism by Christian fundamentalists and white supremacists are seldom described as such by the media and analysts. The militant messages subsequently rallied Muslims to “wake up from their deep sleep”. Days after the Christchurch massacre, IS released an audio speech featuring its spokesperson, who called for retaliatory attacks over the mosque shootings.

Reframing of Narratives

Almost immediately after the massacre, the militant community in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, began inciting vengeance against non-Muslims whom they called *kuffar* or infidels. Anger and outrage from Indonesian-speaking IS-inspired Telegram groups called for attacks against Christians.

Islamist militants have framed the attack as a religious conflict, claiming that it was “not (a matter of) white extremism, racism or immigration” but a problem of the “*kuffar* who will never accept Islam or Muslims”. To strengthen this narrative, pictures of the firearm used by the shooter of the Christchurch massacre were circulated on IS-inspired platforms online; IS supporters had highlighted that the weapon was covered with Christian images and references.

Shortly after the attack, Muntasir Media – a pro-IS media outlet – published a video titled “*Millatuhum Wahidah*” (“Their Religion is One”), which outlined the supposed unfairness faced by Muslims globally and called for lone wolf attacks on churches, pubs and populated areas, with any means possible. Segments of the video were taken from past IS videos and mainstream news.

Tactical manuals such as bomb-making instructions were disseminated soon after, providing potential lone wolves with the knowledge to conduct attacks. Militants have also dissected the Christchurch terrorist’s 74-page manifesto in which they claimed that the latter “talked about how Christians are endangered because of Muslims”, further selling the IS message that the attack was a “war between the *mu’minin* (faithful) and the *kuffar* (infidel)”.

Perpetuating the Cycle of Violence

The misuse of religion by terrorists and extremist groups of all stripes has been very effective at mobilising disparate individuals to commit extreme violence. At times, a heightened sense of grief regarding a tragedy affecting a specific community is exploited to inspire vengeance or vigilantism. Hence, it is not surprising that the Christchurch terror attack has been shaped as a religious conflict by IS supporters and sympathisers as a means to perpetuate the cycle of violence against the “other”.

IS frames the massacre as a religious war while the racially-motivated lens is used by white supremacists and other far-right terrorists and extremists. IS propaganda in the wake of the Christchurch massacre has echoed the often-misinterpreted perception of a tension between *Dar al Islam* (territory of Islam) and *Dar al Harb* (territory of war).

Such a binary worldview of conflict between the “*mu’minin*” (faithfuls) and “*kuffar*” (infidels), consistent with IS propaganda, allows radical Islamists to set the agenda for sympathisers. It steers the online discourse away from “should we seek vengeance?” to “how should we seek vengeance?”.

Framing the attacks as a battle between religious affiliations also diversifies the target spectrum of IS. Attributing the terror to the white supremacy cause limits the targets of potential Islamist lone wolves to mainly Caucasians. In the case of Indonesia, the narrative of a battle between Islam and Christianity allows the targeting of local ethnic Chinese many of whom are Christians.

It is noteworthy that churches in Indonesia have been targeted by violent extremists in the past – there was a series of bombings on Christmas Eve in 2000 across Indonesia and more recently in 2018 in Surabaya.

Renewed Support for the Caliphate

The Christchurch massacre has also prompted radicals to assert their advocacy for a caliphate in Indonesia. While this is not a new trend, the outrage over the massacre coupled with the impending Indonesian elections has provided an opportunity for radicals to champion this agenda more aggressively.

The Christchurch mosque massacre ties in ideally with the territorial retreat of IS in Syria, providing the opportunity to migrate from the physical battlefields to the virtual domain. These ideas can easily manifest in lone wolf attacks in Indonesia.

In the run-up to the Indonesian elections, radicals will experiment with all options to achieve Islamist governance in parts of Indonesia. The government can expect both democratic and coercive tools to be used by the radicals to attain their goals. Adequate security measures should be put in place to deal with possible threats such as hardening election booths as they become potential targets of lone wolf attackers.

In the aftermath of the Christchurch massacre, there is concern that it could set off violence among different religious communities in Indonesia, particularly if IS' call for vengeance is acted on by its following. Hence, it remains critical that the terrorist attack must not be framed as a battle between religions but as our collective war against all forms of terrorism, including white supremacism and far-right extremist violence that the Christchurch massacre exemplified.

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