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“Jihad Now” Vs. “Jihad Later”: Different Means, Same End

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Synopsis

Indonesian jihadists are divided between those who insist on conducting “jihad now” and those advocating for “jihad later”. The division seems to stem from their disagreement about legitimate means of jihad but not from their religio-political goals.

Commentary

INDONESIA'S MOST wanted terrorist, Santoso, the self-proclaimed leader of East Indonesia Mujahidin network, recently appeared on a YouTube video, calling on all mujahidin in Poso to wage jihad against the police special unit for counterterrorism, Detachment 88. Poso, in Central Sulawesi, has long been an extremist stronghold with the legacy of armed jihad operations involving Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) networks during Muslim-Christian sectarian conflict from 1998 to 2007.

Santoso's call for immediate armed jihad is in stark contrast to older extremist groups such as JI and the above-ground Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), which promoted temporary retreat from armed jihad. While both factions are known to have previous links –Santoso used to be part of JAT's Poso branch – fragmentation occurred due to disagreement over when and how to conduct jihad. Internal divide, however, does not necessarily suggest weakness but rather evolving strategies to achieve the same end.

Internal debate

Debate over jihad strategy is flourishing in Indonesian extremists' online discussion and offline publications. The older generation prefer “jihad later” for strategic and doctrinal reasons. To maximise the chance of defeating the ‘apostate government’, they believe that extremists should first strengthen their military capacity and societal support through military preparation and proselytising (da'wah).

Additionally, they also maintain that armed jihad is less relevant in the current Indonesian context. Given the absence of large scale conflict, they argued, Indonesia does not count as the “territory of war” where jihad is permitted.

In contrast, younger militants such as Santoso insist that jihad cannot be postponed due to the on-going police victimisation. According to his victimisation narrative, the ‘brutality and tyranny’ of Detachment 88 against their mujahidin ‘brothers’ is more than enough reason to wage “jihad now”. By police ‘brutality’, Santoso referred

specifically to the extra-judicial killings of 12 terrorist suspects during the 2007 raid in Poso. By portraying fellow Poso jihadists as victims of 'infidel' forces, Santoso then located his narrative within the global jihadist narrative of an apocalyptic war between 'Muslims and infidels'.

While sharing Santoso's sentiment regarding Detachment 88, members of the older generation criticise Santoso's narrative in two ways. First, they criticise Santoso and the like for confusing sacred jihad with obsessive vengeance. Second, they also doubt whether police killings of some extremists – as opposed to large-scale victimisation of Muslim populace – is sufficient to justify turning the Indonesian context from the current 'territory of peace' to 'territory of war'.

Not sign of weakness

One might argue that extremists' internal debate is good because it weakens the cohesion of radical networks. Unfortunately, Indonesian extremists' internal debate is not necessarily a sign of weakness for the following reasons. Firstly, there remains a potential for convergence. Despite disagreement over method, both factions seem to share religio-political goals derived from their shared ideology: to find a secure base from which to wage armed jihad and establish an Islamic state.

It is evident that militants from both the "jihad later" and jihad now" groups were once unified in a joint military camp in Aceh in 2010. The JAT-funded military camp was aimed at establishing a secure base in Aceh but failed as it was halted by the security authorities. Such collaboration seems likely to recur given the shared sentiment among both factions regarding the prospect of a safe haven in Poso.

Secondly, their differing areas of expertise ironically led to a complementary division of labour. "Jihad later" groups have used Santoso's military training camps for their preparation purposes. Meanwhile, Santoso and his networks reportedly recruited younger militants from JAT who were too eager to crush Detachment 88. Hence, the victimisation narrative that prompted fragmentation could also serve as a converging point for individuals disillusioned with the "jihad later" approach.

Despite their internal divide, the threat posed by Indonesian extremists is far from diminished. "Jihad now" groups continue their terror acts, while "jihad later" groups might reactivate at the first symptom of sectarian conflict. More comprehensive strategies are needed to deal with these challenges.

Many have suggested that the police employ non-lethal methods in order to avoid extra-judicial killings of terrorist suspects, which have encouraged further militancy. However, progress towards non-lethal counterterrorism method has been slow. While more training on the use of non-lethal methods is needed, Indonesian counterterrorism agencies might benefit more from broadening their policy to other areas that receive less attention.

Although there is no single cause of terrorism, the above-mentioned case suggests that a strong sense of victimisation seems to be a significant factor contributing to one's shift from mere radical da'wah activities to violent acts. Ironically, Indonesia's counterterrorism approach still lacks comprehensive counter-narrative programmes.

Need for credible counter-narrative

In response to mounting criticism against alleged police brutality, for instance, the head of Detachment 88 only issued sporadic statements in defence of their approach. Instead of reactionary statements, the agencies need to actively promote a comprehensive counter-narrative. As both radical organisations and human rights groups criticise Detachment 88's human rights record, the public lacks an alternative view. A carefully crafted counter-narrative should therefore be promoted to explain and justify police counterterrorism methods.

To convince the public, the agencies not only need widespread public relations campaign, but also *credible* counter-narrative backed by real policy changes. Thus, improving the accountability and transparency of counterterrorism agencies could be the first step to promote credible counter-narrative.

While countering "jihad now" narrative could help improve security now, "jihad later" narrative should also be countered to prevent future challenges. As noted, "jihad later" groups use apostate labelling to justify long-term armed jihad against the government. So far, counter-terrorism agencies have employed the testimonies of former militants as the main tactic to prove that the behaviour of government officials reflects that of devoted Muslims, not apostates. Such tactical counter-narrative is insufficient because it does not address the core of *takfiri* ideology, which becomes the basis of apostate labelling.

What is needed is a strategic counter-narrative aimed at holistically debunking the ideology. One way to do this

is by continuing to foster dialogues between radical groups and well-respected, independent Muslim intellectuals. Strategic counter-narrative campaigns can be lengthy and challenging, but over the long run, are utterly necessary in the struggle against violent extremism in Indonesia.

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