



How Fatwas Might have Fuelled Violent Extremism in Indonesia

Prakoso Permono



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By Prakoso Permono

SYNOPSIS

Recent international conflicts have sparked religious sentiments, prompting varied Muslim responses, including the issuance of fatwas with possible risks of them being misused to fuel radicalisation and terrorism. Coordinated efforts between Muslim organisations and the government are crucial to provide legal and secure avenues for religious expression, thereby mitigating risks and promoting peaceful coexistence.

COMMENTARY

Islamic religious rulings, or fatwas, have long shaped Muslim responses to global events, but it can be a double-edged sword. In the context of recent conflicts, such as the Palestinian issue, such rulings may carry unintended consequences, providing an opportunity for misuse by terrorists.

In response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a wave of fatwas emerged, urging both solidarity and troubling calls to action. One such fatwa, issued in March 2025 by a Qatari-based [International Union of Muslim Scholars \(IUMS\)](#) urged, amongst other things, jihad against and boycott of Israel. Such rulings risk being co-opted by terrorist groups. Mohamed bin Ali and Rafillah Rapit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) have warned that this fatwa [potentially promotes violence and risks fuelling radicalisation](#) in societies in which Muslims live.

Although the fatwa is not legally binding on all Muslims worldwide, its impact is felt in many places, including Indonesia, where the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) [enthusiastically endorsed the fatwa](#), resonating with calls for action from the IUMS. The MUI went further to urge Muslim countries to [sever diplomatic ties with the United States](#) because of its support for Israel.

On the other hand, there are Islamic institutions that decried the fatwa. For example, the Dar al-Ifta of Egypt, the oldest fatwa institution in the Arab World, despite being government-affiliated, [strongly opposed the fatwa](#), calling it out as illegitimate and potentially an incitement for unrest and polarisation between Muslim communities and their respective governments. At the 2nd Conference of Fatwa in Contemporary Societies in February 2024, Mr Heng Swee Keat, then Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, gave a good response to such fatwas when he urged Muslims to adhere to fatwas as part of their religious duty while observing their civic duties as citizens of their respective countries.

In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, the Muslim identity has significant influence on its followers. A 2025 [nationwide survey](#) on MUI's fatwa calling for a boycott of Israel-related entities showed 92.5 per cent compliance. [Another survey](#) reported that 47 per cent of respondents followed this fatwa out of religious duty, while 46 per cent did so for humanitarian reasons.

Terrorist groups are misusing these fatwas and the rhetoric on the conflict. It is well known that conflicts such as the war in Gaza have been fuelling terrorist activities. As noted by the [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), 98 per cent of terrorism-related deaths have direct links with active conflict zones, underscoring conflicts as incubators of terrorist activities and their ideologies.

The [UN Monitoring Team report](#) repeatedly emphasised that the impact of the October 7 attacks on terrorist recruitment and terrorism financing is substantial. For instance, Al-Qaeda uses the issue to incite attacks, including lone wolf attacks on Israel's supporters, and launched a donation campaign for the Palestinians in Gaza.

The use of deception and distorted narratives is a well-known strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It actively exploits the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and uses it for online recruitment. One example of violence driven by the ISIL narrative was a [knife attack](#) by a 26-year-old Syrian man, which took three lives and injured 10 in Solingen, Germany, in August 2024. Palestinian issues, in addition to various other international conflicts promoted online by terrorist groups, have clearly managed to attract young and vulnerable individuals to terrorism.

This does not stop with Islamist groups. Across EU countries, [Europol reported](#) a spike in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic tensions, which were capitalised on for propaganda and recruitment by both Islamist and far-right white supremacist terrorist groups. A [recent work by the author](#) also revealed how conflicts with high ethno-religious tension, like the dispute over Kashmir, could trigger radicalisation and provide justification for terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda and ISIL, underlining the use of distant conflicts as a mobilising tool for action.

Even if a fatwa is aligned with the official position of the Indonesian government and the international community in condemning breaches of international humanitarian law, it can still be misimplemented. A [recent report](#) revealed that a distorted 2003 MUI fatwa on terrorism was circulated among terrorist networks. This shows how terrorist groups have manipulated the fatwa in pursuit of their objectives. They disregard the fatwa's position on the illegitimacy of suicide bombings and violent activities. Another example is the [2023 Bitung riots](#), where a clash took place between groups of

Palestine and Israel supporters in a predominantly Christian city in North Sulawesi resulting in one death, just weeks after another MUI fatwa on Palestine.

Terrorist propaganda often cites hadith proclaiming that the time will come for an end battle between Muslims and Jews. Those affiliated with Israel and the Jewish faith, including countries with diplomatic ties with Israel, could be justifiably perceived as enemies. Therefore, violent rhetoric should not be taken lightly, especially amid the recent escalation of antisemitism in the region, marked by incidents such as the synagogue attack and clash in a Jewish-owned restaurant in [Melbourne](#).

The same argument applies to countries that agree to a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. They can be considered as siding with the sworn enemy and a neglect of the duty to avenge the deaths of Muslims in Palestine. This applies to Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's [statement](#) that he would establish diplomatic ties with Israel, provided that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Palestine are recognised and respected.

The MUI fatwa calling for the mobilisation of resources for Palestine may have unintended consequences in Indonesia, potentially facilitating terrorist financing. The author discovered cases of fundraising to personal bank accounts using humanitarian aid for Palestine as a pretext, which garnered millions of rupiahs. Adding to the concern, Indonesia – reportedly the world's most [generous country](#) – has seen terrorist-affiliated non-profit organisations [funding](#) hundreds of millions to tens of billions of rupiahs for terrorist activities at home and abroad.

To ensure lawful implementation of fatwas, the Indonesian government should collaborate with fatwa-generating religious organisations like Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and, especially, the Ulama Council. For example, this partnership could facilitate a fatwa that promotes responsible and secure resource mobilisation through partnering with official zakat bodies or international organisations, such as the Red Cross, instead of rhetorical calls for action, narrowing the room for misinterpretation. Furthermore, the government should regulate and monitor NGOs and crowdfunding activities to ensure transparency and compliance with the law.

Credible individuals, including religious scholars, educators, and even former terrorists, can help to expose the narrative inconsistency of terrorist groups in the use of MUI fatwas. These groups often invoke MUI fatwas when it suits their agenda, such as in using a fatwa on terrorism to justify launching terrorist attacks in conflict zones, while ignoring other fatwas that contradict their agenda, such as the one on mosque closures and physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This inconsistency highlights the opportunistic nature of the terrorists.

Ensuring the legal and secure implementation of fatwas requires a robust collaborative effort, awareness, commitment, and an effective communication strategy. Indonesia's 2024 counterterrorism strategic communication roadmap provides a relevant framework, emphasising clear, coordinated, and robustly planned government communication to prevent violent extremism and promote social cohesion.

Religious institutions should adopt a similar approach in issuing and implementing their fatwas, especially those related to foreign conflict and sensitive issues, prioritising

clarity and careful consideration of the potential risks of misinterpretation and assuring that the narratives are not misused for illegal activities.

In conclusion, religious organisations, especially the Ulama Council, must prioritise producing fatwas that are not only theologically sound but also practical and responsible, taking into account the potential consequences of misinterpretation. This can be achieved through a collaborative effort between religious organisations and the authorities, working together in a consultative capacity to formulate fatwas that adheres to the Islamic jurisprudence principle *maslahah al-mursalah* (for the greater public good).

Prakoso Permono is a terrorism researcher and PhD candidate in Political Science at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). He is also a member of the GIFCT Youth Radicalisation and Mobilisation Working Group.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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