



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

TERRORISM IN INDONESIA AND THE PERCEIVED OPPRESSION OF MUSLIMS WORLDWIDE

Prakoso Permono and A'an Suryana

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Terrorism in Indonesia and the Perceived Oppression of Muslims Worldwide

By Prakoso Permono and A'an Suryana

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Various motivations underlying terrorism uncovered by recent scholarship include the radicals' desire for Muslim unity, political interest, yearning to correct social and economic deprivation in the Muslim world, and simply anti-Westernism.
- This article focuses on the radicals' call for Muslim solidarity and how this tends towards becoming their primary motivation for perpetrating terrorism. It discusses how radical groups and individuals exaggerate the perceived oppression of Muslims worldwide and how this encourages their sympathizers in planning, fundraising and/or executing terrorist attacks.
- The so-called ummah *solidarity* discourse is coupled with the prevalence of the dogma that Muslims are targets of Western or foreign oppression. This has legitimized jihadist terrorists' use of violence and facilitated the recruitment of new terrorists.
- Besides regular crackdowns on terrorists and putting limitations on access to radical websites and other Internet sources, this article contends that the Indonesian security apparatuses and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must work with the embassies from India, China and Myanmar based in Jakarta to nullify any likelihood of terror attacks on their embassy compounds or their citizens.

Terrorism in Indonesia and the Perceived Oppression of Muslims Worldwide

By Prakoso Permono and A'an Suryana¹

INTRODUCTION

Existing scholarship on terrorism has pointed out various motives underlying violent acts. Notably, Kruglanski, Bélanger, and Gunaratna (2019) argue that such intent could stem from perpetrators' unfulfilled basic needs, their exposure to violent and extremist narratives since they were young, and the outreach by terrorist networks to them. Additionally, an insightful study by Putra and Sukabdi (2013, p. 84) provides a more region-specific example. Through conducting in-depth interviews with forty religious terror activists in Indonesia, they identified three prevalent motivations for violence: (1) the perception of Indonesia being in a state of war, thus legitimizing defensive actions; (2) the belief in the nobility of suicide bombing; and (3) the view of the West (as a whole) as an invader of Muslim countries and a representative of evil, with the Indonesian government being seen as its corrupt ally.

Mufid et al. contest the notion that poverty and social inequality are the sole drivers of terrorism, positing instead that the confluence of

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structural factors at the global, national, and subnational levels is what leads to such acts. Based on their study involving 110 terror perpetrators, Mufid et al. suggest that perceived structural factors, such as the West's domination of the global economy and politics, along with its military intervention in Arab countries, provoked the terrorists to act (Mufid et al. in Sukabdi 2021, p. 4). Mufid et al. further classify the terrorists' motivations into five distinct categories: (1) religious-ideological; (2) solidarity-driven [individuals participate in the acts of terrorism to express sympathy for fellow believers whom they perceive as victims of conflict]; (3) separatist [the terrorist's desire to establish an Islamic state]; (4) "mob mentality" [spontaneous acts of terrorism]; and (5) situational [referring to, for example, individuals convicted of terrorism charges due to associations with others].

This article focuses on the role of *ummah solidarity* [or Muslim community solidarity], as a motivation for terrorism. According to Mufid et al., 20 per cent of their 110 respondents admitted to engaging in acts of terrorism driven by this sense of community solidarity (Mufid et al. in Sukabdi 2021, p. 4). This motivation is only surpassed by ideological and religious motives, which were cited by 45.5 per cent of respondents. Other motives were: mob mentality (12.7 per cent), revenge-seeking (10.9 per cent), situational (9.1 per cent), and separatism (1.8 per cent).

This article discusses the perceived oppression of Muslims overseas, a sentiment often underlying acts of jihadist violence in the name of Islam. It examines how this perception alone can catalyse new recruitments for planning, managing, and executing terrorist attacks. Despite many terrorists citing the oppression of Muslims overseas as a grievance, it remains an under-explored area of scholarship. While scholars have paid significant attention to ideological, psychological, and economic factors behind terrorism, this article reveals that the narrative of perceived oppression towards Muslims overseas is particularly prevalent among Indonesian terrorists' Telegram groups. These groups exploit this perception to justify their acts of terror. Telegram, a secure, encrypted messaging application, is popular among terrorists due to its privacy feature.

While the *ummah solidarity* motivation should not be viewed as the sole catalyst behind jihadi violence, our research indicates that this

narrative is pervasive in social media networks. Indonesian jihadists and their supporters frequently disseminate information, photographs, and videos depicting the persecution, repression, and even the killing of Muslims in various non-Muslim countries. Based on the authors' digital ethnographic work, which involves immersing themselves in five jihadist groups' Telegram channels between 2020 and 2022,² some interesting trends have become evident. India was mentioned at least twenty-three times, while China was referenced thirty-seven times. By contrast, Israel, often the primary target of global Muslim animosity, was only mentioned twenty-three times, less than anticipated. Other nations frequently discussed in jihadist social media groups include the United States and Russia, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Australia and Israel. These countries are often portrayed as "enemies of Islam", and the jihadists occasionally issue calls for holy war to avenge what they perceive as the oppression of Muslims in those countries.

Some jihadists even endorse the use of physical violence under the banner of jihad. This article illustrates how exposure to overseas events has led some Indonesian jihadists to engage in, or even perpetrate, acts of terror. They perceive those events as manifestations of Muslim oppression.

MUSLIM SOLIDARITY MOTIVATION AND METHODOLOGY

There is a perception among Indonesian jihadists or terrorists that governments and their fellow citizens oppress Muslims living in foreign

² Telegram is a secure encrypted messaging mobile app launched in 2013. Some jihadist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda are well known for the use of it. Telegram provides an open private setting for channels with communication and chat groups/person with member interactive features. ISIS in 2015 circulated information that Telegram was one of the secure platforms in the Internet. See more in Counter Terrorism Project (2017), Terrorist on Telegram. Or Bloom et al. (2017), Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram.

countries due to their faith. While this perception holds in certain situations, it is not universally accurate. Despite the occasional lack of factual support, Indonesian terrorists often legitimize these perceptions through propaganda. In this article, the terms terrorist and jihadist are used interchangeably, referring to individuals who justify their actions via religion. These individuals believe their acts can earn rewards from God [Allah] in helping attain “Islam’s objectives”; these acts include violent jihad. However, this understanding of jihad is misguided because Islam does not condone violence. Numerous Muslim preachers have sought to correct this misguided belief, emphasizing that jihad is the pursuit of goodness, encompassing endeavours such as the pursuit of knowledge to contribute to humanity and assisting those in need. In particular, the term Indonesian jihadists/terrorist in this article refers to those advocating violent causes,³ with some having served jail sentences under the 2003 and revised 2018 Indonesian terrorism law. This does not discount the existence of terrorists among other religions or secular groups, including Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, white supremacists and Marxists.

The data presented in this article is compiled from various sources, including digital ethnographic analysis of five Indonesian pro-jihadist groups, interviews with two former jihadists, court verdicts, and scholarly journals and books. Digital ethnography data provide unfiltered, real-time responses featuring official statements and narratives circulated

³ In the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland, terrorist organizations that exist in Indonesia during the period of 2018 to 2020 were the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama’ah Islamiyah (JI), and those affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) including Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) and Jama’ah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). Based on the Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism Outlook of the Indonesian NCTA (2023), during the past five years, the active groups engaged in attacks were all linked with the IS. Therefore, one can note how IS-linked groups shifted from Western targets to new targets such as China. See more in Uran Botobekov, “Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Take Aim at China”, *The Diplomat*, 8 March 2020, and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, “Why China Is Becoming a Target to Jihadist Hatred, Like the US”, *South China Morning Post*, 16 September 2020.

among Indonesian jihadists concerning the persecutions of Muslims abroad. Interviews were conducted with former jihadists, who have participated in deradicalization programmes and who are now assisting the Indonesian government's efforts to counter violent extremism in Indonesia. These interviews were primarily aimed at gathering insights into motivations for Muslim solidarity and at understanding how perceptions of Muslim repression overseas triggered angst, particularly among current and former jihadists. The central question we address is: what fuels the growth of the solidarity motive? This article argues that the formation of a Muslim identity within the discourse of *ummah*, combined with the internalization of the belief that Muslims have long been targets of Western or out-group oppression, contributes to terrorists using perceived overseas Muslim oppression as a justification for their acts of terror.

The following section discusses the foundational ideas that allow such perception to take root. This will be followed by a discussion of how those ideas drove jihadists to perpetrate acts of terrorism. The third section will detail cases of perceived Muslim oppression overseas that terrorists use to justify their violent actions. Lastly, the fourth section will examine the government's strategy to address this issue, its challenges, and how it tries to overcome these obstacles.

THE WORLDVIEW OF JIHADISTS: UMMAH AND MUSLIM SOLIDARITY

The perceived persecution of Muslims in countries where they represent a minority is linked to the concept of *ummah* found in Islamic teaching. *Ummah* refers to the universal union of the Muslim faithful. The term appears more than sixty times in the Quran and is used in various contexts (al-Ahsan 1986). Originating from divine scripture, this concept gradually acquired socio-legal and religious connotations among ancient Arab tribes and communities. As Islam spread to non-Arab countries, the understanding of *ummah* evolved into its contemporary interpretation as a worldwide community of believers. Embedded in this concept of *ummah* is the often-negative stereotyping of outsiders, encapsulated in the “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Some Muslims often perceive Western

governments or people as an out-group, believing they aim to delegitimize and weaken the Muslim *ummah* and resist Islamic revivalism. However, the authentic meaning of *ummah* encompasses humanity more than it encourages segregation (al-Ahsan 1986; Hassan 2018).

The jihadist movement can also trace its origins to Muslim persecution and the breakdown of the Muslim *ummah*. When viewed as a social movement, global jihadist factions such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and their regional affiliates are diverse yet united by a similar collective mobilization factor. Across various groups, these jihadist movements label themselves as *mujahideen* or those who wage jihad (holy war) in defence of the Muslim *ummah* and Islam itself. The concept of *mujahideen* is deeply intertwined with the emergence of the jihadist movement during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The “invasion of infidels” into the Muslim land of Afghanistan and the call for Muslims to protect their fellow believers set the stage for the early jihadist movement, which eventually became the Al-Qaeda Central (AQC). A similar call to defend those under invasion was echoed in the aftermath of the US-led War on Terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the surrounding region (Berube and Dupont 2018).

As a global and transnational phenomenon, the jihadist movement utilizes perceived Muslim persecution as one of its core narratives. For instance, Al-Qaeda has consistently underscored the global struggle against apostasy and the infidels. It has also sought to internationalize local conflicts by stoking religious sentiments. The global narrative revolves around a perceived clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and Jews or Crusaders, the belief that Islam is under siege by Christians, Jews, and their allies, including Muslims who refrain from answering the call to defend Islam. In this context, jihad for the defence of Islam and Muslims worldwide is framed as an individual obligation (Rabasa et al. 2006). Therefore, the notion of solidarity emerges as a significant theme within the jihadist worldview.

This feeling of solidarity, derived from the concept of *ummah*, has triggered the mobilization of terrorist fighters worldwide to the conflict zones in Bosnia or the Philippines. Even among Muslims who migrated to Western countries in search of a better life, between 10,000 and 30,000 individuals, many shared that the *ummah* sentiment remains strong. They

feel obligated to support the *ummah* and oppressed Muslims by funding extremist and terrorist groups (Hegghammer 2010; Rabasa et al. 2004).

In his first speech in July 2014, the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, who also self-proclaimed his position, delineated the roots of his struggle. He appealed for jihad in the holy month of Ramadan:

The *ummah* of Islam is watching your jihad with eyes of hope, and indeed you have brothers in many parts of the world being inflicted with the worst kinds of torture ... Muslims' rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Sham (the Levant), Egypt, Iraq, and Indonesia, ... So, raise your ambitions, O soldiers of the Islamic State for your brothers, all over the world, are awaiting your rescue and anticipating your brigades.

This statement underscores ISIS' global strategy to incite attacks by capitalizing on Muslim grievances resulting from foreign persecution. The world is presented and framed as a battlefield for the liberation of persecuted Muslims. This type of narrative is not exclusive to ISIS and has also been adopted by various jihadist groups since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In addition to promoting Muslim solidarity, several other ideological perspectives can influence global jihadist thought. Abu Abdillah Al-Muhajir (2012) proposed a worldview in which the globe is divided into *Darul Islam* and *Darul Kufr*. *Darul Islam* is where Islamic law reigns supreme; while *Darul Kufr* comprises nations governed by man-made laws. Similarly, Muslims who opt not to undertake *hijrah* (migration to Muslim polities) are labelled as *kufr*, and the seizure of their wealth is justified. Abu Musa al-Zarqawi maintained that *Darul Islam* and *Darul Kufr* are in a constant state of war and that Muslims must wage war against *Darul Kufr* and its people.

In his influential book, jihadist Abdullah Azzam argued that the obligation for modern jihad was ignited with the fall of Granada to Christian forces in 1492. He posited that this duty to engage in armed conflict continues till today. Azzam further asserts that if the enemy takes a single Muslim prisoner, jihad becomes an obligatory duty, or *fardhu ain*,

for all Muslims, including children and women. Similarly, a book of *fiqh* or jurisprudence of jihad by Maktab al-Buhuts wad Dirosat (2015) stated that the concept of defensive jihad is not applicable. Instead, it outlines three stages of jihad. The initial stage is when jihad is permissible for those under attack, referring to Quran 22:39: "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged". The second stage involves the order of jihad against those who initiate attacks but prohibit attacks against those who maintain peace with Islam, as per Quran 2:190: "fight in the cause of Allah [only] against those who wage war against you, but do not exceed the limits". Yet, according to the book, the complete stage of jihad is when it becomes mandatory to confront all enemies, citing Quran 9:5: "And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush".

Indonesian terrorists often adopt a similar worldview. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspective of Indonesian terrorists, it is essential to assess the writings of key figures in the Indonesian jihadist movement. Imam Samudra (2004), in one of the first generation of books written by Indonesian terrorists (Gunawan and Marcoes-Natsir 2017), maintains that waging jihad is a *fardhu ain* or mandatory duty for all Muslims, tracing this obligation back to the time Prophet Muhammad first waged jihad. His writings also refer to all Muslims as *ahluts tsughur*, or those involved in warfare. Meanwhile, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, in his book *Tadzkiroh* (2014) and his prison notes (2005), referred to three Western concepts, *thaghut* [nationalism, secularism, and democracy], which he argued opposed the Muslims' aspiration to establish a *Khilafah Islamiyah* or Islamic Caliphate. He defined the obligation of *jihad fi sabilillah* as "The struggle to fight for Islam by fighting against the infidels who wage war against the Muslim community and by fighting against the infidels absolutely, so they will not hinder Islamic da'wa anymore."

This notion of a mandatory jihad against the enemies of Islam is closely aligned with the perception of Muslims being oppressed. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir (2005) pointedly stated that countries like the United States, Australia and other Western countries are the real perpetrators of terrorism, waging wars against the global Muslim community. Further writings by Aman Abdurrahman (2005) affirm this viewpoint, declaring

jihād as mandatory against three categories of individuals/entities: (1) those directly involved in oppressing Muslims, such as Afghans and Saudis who support the presence of the United States forces in their region, (2) those who are loyal to the enemy of Islam, imprisoning Muslims who are fighting for Islam, and (3) those who cooperate with any Muslim oppressors, including by abiding by laws or resolutions against terrorism as sanctioned by the United Nations.

MUSLIM SOLIDARITY, PERCEIVED OPPRESSION OF MUSLIMS AND VIOLENT JIHAD

Many Indonesian Muslims are exposed to the concept of *ummah* through channels such as Islamic boarding schools, social media and religious events. The subsequent internalization of the concept augments their sense of Muslim solidarity. This heightened sense of Muslim solidarity, in turn, triggers feelings of outrage and emotional distress when they encounter reports or visuals on the oppression of Muslims overseas. While most Muslims internalize these tormented feelings, those who align with jihadists' ideology are spurred into committing acts of terror as a response.

Evidence shows that the internalization of the aforementioned concepts has played a significant role in instigating terrorist activities. A book written by infamous Indonesian terrorist Bahrūn Naim (2016) highlights a speech delivered by ISIS spokesman Abu Mohamad al-Adnani, asserting that violent jihād is obligatory due to "the suffering of Muslims all over the world". Naim's book, in turn, has inspired other Indonesian jihadists to perpetrate their acts of terror.⁴ This progression underlines the entrenched nature of the concept of Muslim solidarity within the Muslim jihadist network. It constitutes a core belief in the

⁴ Also see Rohan Gunaratna, "Hidup dan Matinya Bahrūn Naim: Teroris Asia Tenggara yang Paling Diburu", 3 October 2018, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/opini/bahrūn-naim-opini-10032018165554.html>

jihadist movement and fuels hostility towards others, especially those who subscribe to different faiths. Furthermore, it fosters the conviction among jihadists that defending fellow Muslims worldwide is integral to their core belief.

One of the former jihadists interviewed for this study in early 2020 admitted that his decision to participate in the Syria jihad stemmed from attending a lecture delivered by militant Muslim cleric Abu Jandal, who died in Syria in 2016, and viewing numerous videos showing “atrocities against Muslims” in Syria. This individual was educated at an Indonesian Muslim boarding school (*pesantren*), held a law degree, and enjoyed notable business success. He travelled to Syria in 2013 intending to help “his brothers and sisters who suffered under the regime of Bashar al-Assad”.⁵

Indonesia has experienced several major attacks triggered by, specifically targeting retaliation for, perceived Muslim persecutions domestically and abroad. For example, in the case of the 2002 Bali Bombing, Imam Samudra and his associates justified their attacks as retribution for the death of Muslims globally (Hassan 2007). Then Head of the National Counter Terrorism Agency, Saud Usman, similarly affirmed that revenge against Western countries’ perceived mistreatment of Muslims was also the motivation behind the Australian Embassy bombing (2004), the Philippines Embassy bombing (2000), and the most recent Jakarta Bombing in Thamrin business district area in 2016, which took place just a few hundreds of meters away from the State Palace.⁶

By framing their actions in terms of Muslim solidarity and defence of the *ummah*, these terrorists were successful in recruiting new members. The following section will further elucidate the significant role of perceived overseas Muslim oppression in motivating jihadists to engage

⁵ Interview with a former jihadist, SM, on 13 November 2020. See East Jakarta Court’s verdict against Syahrul Munif, Nomor 1124/PID.SUS /2017/PN JKT. TIM.

⁶ Antara, “Terrorist Targeted Foreigners to Seek Revenge: Counter-Terrorism Agency”, 16 January 2016, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/102560/terrorists-targeted-foreigners-to-seek-revenge-counter-terrorism-agency>

in acts of terrorism. Specifically, the perceived mistreatment of Muslims in countries such as India, China and Myanmar ranks high on their list of concerns.

PERCEIVED MUSLIM OPPRESSION IN INDIA, CHINA AND MYANMAR

Those unfamiliar with Indonesian terrorism studies may wonder why emphasis should be placed on Indonesian terrorists' perceptions of overseas Muslim oppression rather than perceived domestic oppression. As Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, instances of physical or psychological oppression against Muslims are uncommon. An example of perceived domestic Muslim oppression occurred in 1999 when many Indonesian Muslims believed that the Christians in Maluku had initiated a war against their Muslim brethren. This perceived oppression led to thousands of Javanese Muslims, mobilized by the Islamist militant group *Lasykar Jihad*, to travel to Maluku, especially its capital Ambon City, to aid their "brothers and sisters" in the conflict against Christians, who were perceived as oppressors of Muslims living in the area. This influx of Javanese Muslims escalated the violent riot in the province, resulting in approximately 5,000 deaths and the displacement of about 700,000 individuals. In 1999, the population of Ambon population was almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims (Christians constituted 161,977 people, or 51.92 per cent of the total population, while Muslims accounted for 132,215 people or 42.38 per cent) (Suparlan 2001, p. 7). Since the Ambon incident, significant perceived oppression of Muslims in Indonesia has largely been absent. Consequently, some Indonesian jihadists have turned their gaze overseas to find cases that could legitimize their acts of terror.

Various incidents perceived as oppressive to Muslims have caught the attention of Indonesian terrorists. In 2019, Muslims experienced harassment and persecution in 147 countries through various means, some of which were non-violent. This persecution encompasses utilizing government legislation to marginalize Muslims, closures of Muslim-owned businesses, discriminatory practices in educational institutions, and restrictions on the functions and existence of mosques. These

instances exclude those involving violence. Islam ranks as the second most persecuted religion in the world after Christianity (Majumdar and Villa 2021). According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (2022), the most concerning persecution against Muslims has taken place in China and Myanmar. The Chinese government is accused of implementing policies aimed at forcibly assimilating Uyghurs and Turkish Muslims into the Chinese social and political systems. Condemnations extend to eradicating their ethno-religious identities and incarcerating millions in concentration camps, prisons, and forced labour. In Myanmar, an estimated 745,000 Rohingyas have fled to seek refuge, mainly in Bangladesh, following the mass killings and rapes perpetrated by the Myanmar military and Buddhist civil society groups. A similar report from the UK House of Commons (2021) highlights the growing intolerance and systematic persecution of Muslim minorities in India, a country with a Hindu majority. China, Myanmar, and India have moved into the spotlight as primary sites of Muslim persecution in Asia (Human Rights Watch 2018, 2019; Abdelkader 2013, 2020; Varshney 2001).

News about the persecution of Muslims abroad is widely circulated on social media, eliciting reactions from various Indonesian Muslim groups. These responses vary, with some manifesting as spiritual expressions, while others have more tangible implications, although not necessarily violent ones. For instance, during Friday prayers, they commonly pray for divine retribution upon Allah's enemies and the protection of Muslims in other countries. In anticipation of the 2022 Nakba Day, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) calls for *qunut nazilah*⁷ (special prayers). Nakba Day, literally translating to the day of catastrophe, is a commemoration of both the territorial loss and the displacement suffered by the Palestinians following the establishment of the State of Israel on 15 May 1948. The

⁷ *Qunut Nazilah* is a prayer in times of need, for instance, when there are Muslims persecuted. Some preachers in local mosques, even traditional ones affiliated with moderate groups like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), still pray for Muslims in Kosovo where religious conflicts have in fact ended.

State of Israel was founded upon the conclusion of the British Mandate in Palestine.

In 2017, Muslim protesters, including activists from the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Persaudaraan Alumni 212⁸ social movement, gathered at the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta to protest the mistreatment of Rohingya Muslims. In 2022, they protested outside the Indian Embassy, while in both 2018 and 2022, demonstrations were held outside China's Embassy. Additionally, these protests have been echoed on social media platforms. It is impossible to quantify the exact number of such protests on social media due to the diversity of platforms and the expansive nature of these virtual landscapes. However, the protests would have been quite sizable given Indonesia's substantial number of active Internet users. In 2020, approximately 145 million people, or 54 per cent⁹ of Indonesia's 270.2 million, were active Internet users.¹⁰ The issue of Muslim persecution has the potential to galvanize even moderate Muslims, making it a potent rallying point for Indonesian terrorists in performing their propaganda activities—serving to raise funds, gain legitimacy, and stimulate their recruitment process.

Jihadists also monitor the oppression of Muslims overseas, especially in India, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwest China,

⁸ Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Alumni of 212 (PA 212). FPI is a small group that is influential in Indonesian politics and has managed to contribute in utilizing Islam and horizontal sentiments in the 2019 general election and the 2017 Jakarta election. While FPI is currently banned, its leaders such as Rizieq Shihab, even after his self-imposed "exile" in Saudi Arabia to escape criminal charges in Indonesia, are still considered influential in shaping issues at community level. The populist activities and rhetoric of FPI in past years have influenced and increased Indonesian self-identification with Islam and the demonization of other identities, particularly non-Muslim ethnic Chinese (Barton et al. 2021).

⁹ World Bank, "Individuals using the Internet (per cent of population) – Indonesia", 23 July 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ID>

¹⁰ Badan Pusat Statistik (Central Statistics Agency), "Jumlah dan Distribusi Penduduk", 23 July 2023, <https://sensus.bps.go.id/main/index/sp2020>

and Myanmar. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism promoted by the government and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has subjected the country's Muslim population to social and political pressures. Many mainstream Indonesian media outlets, including *Republika Online*, a prominent print daily newspaper that caters to Muslim needs, frequently report about Muslim persecution in India. On 10 February 2022, *Republika Online* published an article titled "Dampak Mahasiswi Berjilbab Dilecehkan di India, Pakistan Ambil Sikap [Hijabi Women Molested in India, Pakistan Took Stand]".¹¹ On 6 May 2022, it published another news piece titled "Ketua Partai di India Serukan Larangan Suara Azan [Head of Party in India Calls for Banning Adzan]".¹² Both these stories were shared on *Republika Online's* Instagram account, inciting strong condemnation from Muslim netizens against Muslim persecution in India. The responses varied widely in the comments section of the *Republika* Instagram account. Some users advocated for violent jihad, while others exercised self-restraint, arguing that: "there is no radical Islam. What happened in India shows that Muslims are persecuted by those intolerant and radical Hindus."

Many posts circulated on social media were hoaxes, but they could still fuel anti-Indian or anti-Hindu sentiments, particularly among the jihadists. The falsehoods could even influence them to commit acts of violence. One such instance occurred within a pro-ISIS Telegram group in Indonesia. A video was shared in the group showing people speaking in Hindi during an Indian Parliament session. This was followed by a narration in Bahasa Indonesia stating: "This bill just passed, a bill that allows ethnic cleansing against Muslims in India." An Indian Embassy official in Jakarta confirmed that the short video accusations were

¹¹ *Republika Online*, "Dampak Mahasiswi Berjilbab Dilecehkan di India, Pakistan Ambil Sikap", 10 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZyIVdAFjNX/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>

¹² *Republika Online*, "Ketua Partai di India Serukan Larangan Suara Azan", 6 May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdNYCKYvqX7/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>

unfounded.¹³ In another instance, a video showed an Indian Muslim man being beaten to death by rioters in the street, accompanied by a narrative that non-believers in India (*kufir harb*) were continuously murdering Muslims in their country. While the actual context of this video differed significantly, such narratives often flooded social media and the network of Indonesian jihadists.

Besides Muslim persecution in India, the perceived persecution of Uyghur Muslims by the government of China has also attracted the attention of Indonesian terrorists. “These Chinese persecutions of Uyghurs really pissed me”, said a reformed jihadist who has largely been cooperative with the Indonesian government during the deradicalization process. He shared this sentiment with one of the authors during an interview in late 2019 and cautioned on the deep-seated resentment harboured by jihadists towards the perceived persecution of the Uyghur people by the China government,¹⁴ and the increasing determination among some jihadists in Indonesia to retaliate against the China government. In separate interviews with one of the authors, other jihadists confirmed having similar feelings.¹⁵

Additionally, each time an issue involving both the Chinese government and Chinese Indonesians arises in the public domain, jihadists respond unfavourably towards both groups. Jihadists harbour the misconception that both the Chinese government and its people were responsible for spreading the COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, they believe that the China government plans to establish a military base in Indonesia as a prelude to an eventual takeover of the country.¹⁶

Jihadists tend to make sweeping generalizations that incorrectly conflate the interests of the Chinese government and Chinese Indonesians. The faulty generalization stokes general anti-Chinese sentiments. A

¹³ Informal interview with Indian Embassy official, 22 December 2022.

¹⁴ Interview with a former jihadist, ST, on 6 September 2020.

¹⁵ Interview with a former jihadist, SM, on 13 November 2020.

¹⁶ Interview with a former jihadist, ST, 6 September 2020.

case in point is the controversy surrounding Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, who was the then-governor of Jakarta. During his 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign, Islamists accused Ahok of blaspheming Islam and its holy book (Al Quran) during a speech he delivered in North Jakarta in late 2017. These accusations sparked the Islamists to hold a series of large protests in Jakarta, and the events encouraged the terrorists, including the Indonesian ISIS supporters, to plot attacks. These included plans “to bomb a Chinese establishment in Solo, conduct shootings in a Chinese neighbourhood in Medan, and attack a local Chinese restaurant in Central Java” (Permono and Syaullillah 2021, p. 27).¹⁷ Indonesian terrorists believed that Ahok’s gubernatorial policy favoured Chinese investors and wealthy Chinese Indonesians (ibid., p. 27).

The erroneous conflation of the two groups—Chinese Indonesians and the Chinese government—resulted in various attacks against their interests. Court verdict records from 2013 to 2020 reveal sixteen planned attacks targeting properties belonging to the Chinese government and Chinese Indonesians, such as company buildings and places of worship (usually Vihara or Confucianism temples).¹⁸ These planned attacks included bombings, shootings, arson and robbery, purportedly in the name of jihad (*fa’i*). These plots implicated more than forty-four Indonesian jihadists, primarily ISIS supporters, and spanned various regions of Indonesia, including Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi (ibid. 2021).

Jihadists often leverage conspiracy theories against China circulated on social media. One such theory is the idea that China plans to seize control of Indonesia and subsequently persecute its people. Anti-China sentiments, dating back to the Dutch colonial era, continue to influence many Indonesians today (ibid. 2021) and primarily stemmed from the

¹⁷ Also see South Jakarta Court’s verdict against Oman Rochman, Nomor 140/Pid.Sus/2018/PN.Jkt.Sel.

¹⁸ See North Jakarta Court’s verdict against Iwan Wahyudianto, Muh Ruly Satory, Emiel Fitria Nur, Muhammad Sopian, Nomor 304/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN Jkt. Utr.

favourable social and economic treatment that the Dutch colonial regime conferred to Chinese immigrants to Indonesia, often at the expense of indigenous Indonesians. The perceived economic disparity between indigenous and Chinese Indonesians further fuels anti-China sentiment. This context partially explains why the issue of Uyghur persecution resonates strongly among Indonesian jihadists.

The last case involves the perceived oppression of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. Indonesian jihadists often fail to distinguish between Indonesian and Myanmar Buddhists, leading them to target Buddhist places of worship (Vihara) as sites for terrorist attacks. Furthermore, some jihadists inaccurately identify Viharas, a Buddhist place of worship, with Confucian temples, leading to misdirected attacks. These jihadists tend to disregard the differences as their strategy mainly relies on indiscriminate violence. Some jihadists have even plotted attacks against Confucian temples as retaliation against Muslim Rohingya persecution by Myanmar Buddhists.¹⁹ Although there is no evidence of formal connections between Indonesian terrorist groups and those in Myanmar, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (IPAC 2018), Muslim persecutions in Myanmar serve as a pretext for terrorist plots in Indonesia. In May 2013, three members of the NII²⁰ planned to bomb the Myanmar Embassy during a protest organized by the non-terrorist group Forum Umat Islam (FUI).

¹⁹ See East Jakarta Court's verdict against Chatimul Chaosan, Nomor: 384/PID/SUS./2014/PN.JKT.TIM.

²⁰ NII or Negara Islam Indonesia (Islamic State of Indonesia) is one of the oldest terrorist groups in Indonesia. It was founded by insurgent Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo in 1949, and aimed to establish an Islamic State of Indonesia. Compared to other terrorist groups like Jama'ah Islamiyah that has international ties (such as with Al-Qaeda) and Jama'ah Ansharut Daulah that has ideological links with the Islamic State, NII is more of a homegrown organization with minor transnational movement and ideological ties. However, its network with tens of thousands of members has expanded to more violent splinters. See more in IPAC, "The Search for an Islamic State in Indonesia: The Many Guises of DI/NII" (2023). Or Abdalla et al. "Inspirasi Jihad Kaum Jihadis, Rumah Kitab" (2017).

THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

Since the 2002 Bali bombings, the Indonesian government has been intensively combating terrorism. Its efforts involve cracking down on offline and online extremist content. On average, the Indonesian police successfully prevented dozens of terrorist plots each year. For instance, they averted ten such attacks in 2022 alone, with only two successful terrorist strikes occurring that year. These successes in preventing the attacks can be attributed to relentless law enforcement efforts, with an average of 300 terror suspects arrested yearly (totalling 1,564 arrests between 2018 and 2022). These arrests likely serve as deterrence to those contemplating perpetrating acts of terror. Regarding preventive measures, the government, through related agencies and local governments under the coordination of the National Counter Terrorism Agency, has closely cooperated with civil society organizations to penetrate and improve school curricula that promote religious moderation and tolerance. These efforts aim to prevent misuse of concepts like *ummah* and jihad.

The Indonesian government has also implemented online prevention measures, aiming to limit Indonesian Muslims' access to Internet sites that abuse the concept of Muslim solidarity and *ummah*. These websites often disseminate hoaxes and propaganda campaigns, misleading Indonesian Muslims into believing that foreign governments or societies are systematically oppressing fellow Muslims overseas and inciting them to take retaliatory terrorist attacks. While the government's efforts to prevent Muslims from being exposed to such Internet sites have not been flawless, they made significant progress. The Ministry of Communication, Information and Technology (Kemenkominfo) blocked and took down 27,443 websites, social media accounts and channels affiliated with terrorist groups between 2017 and 2022. However, despite the hard work, some lapses have occurred. For example, a website affiliated with a terrorist group that offers bomb-making training materials and disseminates ISIS propaganda remains accessible in 2022, despite its mention in a 2019 court verdict.

The government must persist in its crackdowns against terrorists while expanding efforts to prevent Muslim exposure to radical online ideologies. In particular, to address problems stemming from terrorist

attacks resulting from the perceived oppression of Muslims overseas, the government needs to pay attention to protecting Indonesian minority groups and their properties. For instance, provisions for minority groups related to such perceptions, such as Chinese Indonesians and their places of worship—the Viharas or Confucianism temples—must be ensured.

The Indonesian security apparatuses and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should actively engage with foreign representative offices in Indonesia, including the Embassies of India, China and Myanmar in Jakarta. This collaboration allows them to formulate plans or contingency measures to prevent terror attacks against their embassy compounds or citizens. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs to appeal to these embassies for swift and appropriate responses in addressing misinformation circulating on social media or mainstream media related to the cases of perceived oppression of Muslims overseas.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data and analysis outlined in this paper, the authors conclude that there is a relationship between perceived Muslim persecution abroad and the actions of Indonesian jihadists. This monograph shows that the internalization of the concept of *ummah* has contributed to the perpetration of terrorist acts by Indonesian actors. In some instances, individuals exposed to this concept experienced a heightened sense of Muslim identity, and some consequently resorted to terrorism as a means of retaliation against foreign governments or populations perceived to oppress their Muslim brethren. This research has also shown evidence that several terrorists perpetrated terrorism due to the perceived oppression of Muslims overseas.

This research suggests the need for continued government intervention in cracking down against online and offline radicalism narratives that abuse the concept of *ummah*. This includes addressing the spread of misinformation or hoaxes and arresting people involved in acts of terrorism. Such firm policy implementation is critical to deter potential terrorists or radical Islamists, preventing them from committing acts of terrorism or spreading hoaxes when they perceive fellow Muslims overseas as being oppressed. The government need to promote a positive

interpretation of the *ummah* concept. For example, embodying *ummah* could involve aiding oppressed Muslims overseas through diplomatic channels or offering material assistance like food rather than venting anger, or resorting to violence or acts of terrorism.

Furthermore, the Indonesian government must collaborate with the embassies of Myanmar, China or India to mitigate potential retaliatory backlashes against their respective nationals residing in Indonesia, particularly when cases related to Muslim oppression overseas resurface. Given the tendency of Indonesian terrorists to generalize the actions of these foreign government and their citizens as oppressive towards Muslims, citizens from the three countries are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks perpetrated by Indonesian terrorists. The Indonesian government and the three countries' embassies need to develop contingency plans to prevent such future attacks.

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