



RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARES THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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Responses to the Challenge of ISIS in Indonesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is posing a significant challenge to Indonesia. Ideologically, ISIS is introducing new arguments that can be appealing to militants, notably beliefs concerning the end of the world and a concrete model of an ideal society based on a radical interpretation of Islamic law.
- Indonesian authorities and various currents within Islam have started to put in place programs to delegitimize ISIS' ideology in the eyes of the Muslim community. Compared to the Jemaah Islamiyah years, Indonesian Islam is better equipped to confront this threat. It is relatively united in rejecting the ISIS ideology and it is using potent arguments such as nationalism and Indonesia's cultural distinctiveness.
- Radical groups are divided on the issue. Some have declared their support to ISIS, others have condemned its generalized use of excommunication and killings.
- IS might attempt to aim at soft-targets in Indonesia, such as foreigners, but it is doubtful that it will make significant gains in the country. The main obstacle to this is the extremist stance of IS that is ready to use violence against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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INTRODUCTION

During the last six months, IS¹ militants took over a number of local mosques and preached for Indonesians to join the growing ranks of the jihadists in the Middle East. Dozens of Indonesian nationals have travelled to Syria and Iraq to participate in building a global Islamic caliphate. Upon their return, these militants could pose a real threat to national security as they will have acquired potent combat experience, skills in explosives and an international network of contacts.²

Indonesian authorities have been slow to react to the growth of IS at first, but a series of events in July and August changed the situation: on July 18th, the Jemaah Islamiyah's³ spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir himself made a declaration of allegiance, surrounded by a group of militants in the maximum security Nusa Kambangan island. At the end of the month, a YouTube video appeared of an Indonesian militant in Iraq calling for his fellow countrymen to join the ranks. In August, another video pictured an event held at the hotel of the State Islamic University (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah) in Jakarta, showing dozens of individuals swearing allegiance (*bai'at*) to the IS caliphate's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, where 3500 USD was also collected for the cause during the meeting.

From then on, the Indonesian authorities reacted swiftly by making a number of arrests and by banning the organization in the country. The government is currently working with Muslim clerics to convince local communities not to join or support ISIS. Initiatives to counter the ideology of IS have also come from various elements within Indonesian Islam itself, such as the two largest Muslim organizations of the country, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah; but also, more surprisingly, from radical organizations, such as the Council of Indonesian Mujahedeens (MMI, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia).

THE APPEAL OF ISIS IDEOLOGY

In his video calling for support, Indonesian IS jihadist Bachrumsyah points to the enemies of the Islamic State⁴. While many of the actors and movements apply more for the Syria and Iraq context, he also mentions the concept of *thoghut*/transgressors - those who worship someone or something other than God. Here, he seems to refer to Indonesia, where the term has often been used to designate "the police and other agents of the state

¹ Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ISIS, now renamed "Islamic State" – IS.

² "With Iraq gains, ISIS finds traction with Indonesian hard-liners", *TheJakartaPost.com*, 14 June 2019 (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/06/14/with-iraq-gains-isis-finds-traction-with-indonesian-hard-liners.html>)

³ An organization that was responsible for the main terrorist attacks of the 2000s in Indonesia.

⁴ These are mentioned in passages of the declaration that were not included in this perspective for lack of space.

that are considered legitimate targets of jihad".⁵ In Indonesian *jihadi* thought, Indonesian authorities are considered illegitimate rulers because they oppose the application of Islamic law in the country, while worshipping the ungodly Pancasila (the state ideology). Thus, for IS, it is not only non-Muslims and Shias that can be targeted, but also Sunni Muslims who do not share their views. This *takfir*⁶ strand was already present in the Darul Islam movement in the 1970s-1980s, from which the Jemaah Islamiyah later partly emerged.⁷ However, its use was limited and debated within the local *jihadi* community. This blind violence committed against Muslims fueled by religious ignorance is a source of criticism against IS in Indonesian Islam.

However, the IS discourse is also constructive. As Bachrumsyah makes clear, IS wants to show that it can propose an alternative to existing corrupt and infidel political systems (both Western and Arab), an ideal society that will truly put in practice the precepts of the Qur'an.⁸ Indeed, IS has started to establish an embryo of a bureaucracy (or rather theocracy), social, educational and health services, compulsory religious taxation (*zakat*) on Muslims and non-Muslims (*jizyah*) alike. Thus, IS has somewhat succeeded where Jemaah Islamiyah has failed in the case of Southeast Asia: implement the Sharia in Middle Eastern areas under its control. This is considered to be a major appeal for Indonesian jihadists who can now testify to the efficacy of their struggle.⁹

IS is also anchored in the future, one that gives hope for those ready to take up arms. Indeed, for IS ideologues, the end of times will soon take place in the region of "Sham", encompassing Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. It is said that those brave enough to participate in this event will be able to witness the advent of the Mahdi, "the Islamic redeemer, in the final battle between good and evil".¹⁰ Fascination towards these theme can be traced back to 2003 when a few books on the subject were published, but it is only with the beginning of the Syrian conflict that militants started to see the realization of the prophecy.¹¹ This specific narrative is another major pull for Indonesian jihadists.¹²

⁵ "How extremists regroup", *ICG, Asia Report* no. 228, 16 July 2102 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/228-how-indonesian-extremists-regroup.pdf>).

⁶ The term "takfir" derives from the word *kufr* (impiety).

⁷ Solahudin U Hartman. 2014. *The roots of terrorism in Indonesia. From Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 78.

⁸ "Can ISIS manage a caliphate system of government?", *VoalIslam.com*, 17 July 2014 (<http://www.voa-islam.com/read/opini/2014/07/17/31669/dapatkah-isis-mengelola-sistem-pemerintahan-khilafah/#sthash.0HLeyt7m.21DYyZYY.dpbs>)

⁹ Solahuddin U Hartman (IPAC co-director), "The Rise of ISIS in Indonesia: A source of serious concern?", ISEAS seminar, 17 September 2014, Singapore.

¹⁰ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), *Indonesian and the Syrian conflict*, IPAC report no. 6, 30 January 2014, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/conflict/read/22/Indonesians-and-the-Syrian-Conflict>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Solahuddin U Hartman (IPAC co-director), "The Rise of ISIS in Indonesia: A source of serious concern?", ISEAS seminar, 17 September 2014, Singapore.

While, for many militants in Indonesia, the struggle in Syria and Iraq has become the “greater Jihad”, there are fears that, at one point, the struggle will be aimed at local “infidels”, Muslims or non-Muslims alike. This, the Indonesian authorities and local Muslim organizations are well aware of, and have started to propose a counter-narrative.

RECLAIMING ISLAM, FROM THE CENTRE TO THE FRINGES

Oppose IS	Grey area	Support IS (9 jihadist groups in total, among which) ¹³
Nahdlatul Ulama (moderate Traditionalist organization)	Prosperous Justice Party (PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera), Islamist party	Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and part of the Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT)
Muhammadiyah (moderate Modernist organization)	Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam), anti-vice militia	Tauhid wal Jihad led by Aman Abdurrahman (in prison)
Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI, transnational organization, dedicated to promoting the caliphate, through non-violent means)	Islamic People’s Forum (Forum Umat Islam), an umbrella organization for various radical groups	FAKSI (Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam) led by M. Fachry, editor-in-chief of the extremist website Al Mustaqbal.
Council of Indonesian Ulamas (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia)	Ja’far Umar Thalib (ex-commander of the Laskar Jihad), Salafi-brand	MIT (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur) led by Santoso

Recent statements from officials show that the state appears to have finally realized the real danger posed by IS in comparison to previous radical groups. Ansyaad Mbai, head of the Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT, Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme), noted that IS was much more dangerous than Al Qaeda, as the latter was “mostly intent on destroying the West”, while “IS wants to combat Muslim countries that do not apply the Sharia in their own interpretation”.¹⁴ President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) had similar strong words, declaring that ISIS’ “heretical views are dangerous for (the Indonesian people’s) identity”.¹⁵ He reaffirmed that Indonesia was a

¹³ IPAC, “The evolution of ISIS in Indonesia”, *IPAC Report* no. 13, 24 September 2014 (http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2014/09/IPAC_13_Evolution_of_ISIS.pdf)

¹⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99wVm_TQf2U

¹⁵ “SBY: Indonesia rejects ISIS”, *Tempo.com*, 15 August 2014 (<http://en.tempco.co/read/news/2014/08/15/055599903/SBY-Indonesia-Rejects-ISIS>).

“religious country”, but that it could not have a “religious-based state”.¹⁶ Similarly, General Moeldoko, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, insists that “ISIS is not a religious movement, but an ideological one” and, as an ideology, ISIS runs counter to Pancasila (the state ideology) and the principle of “Unity in Diversity” (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). This was also asserted by Lukman Hakim, the current Minister of Religious Affairs, who criticized the jihadist view that Pancasila is a form of “idolatry”.¹⁷

Mass Muslim organizations – NU with around 40 million sympathizers and Muhammadiyah with around 30 million – have officially condemned ISIS. One of NU’s leaders, Saifullah Yusuf, calls IS’ ideology “not Indonesian” and urged Indonesians to hold fast to the four pillars that are the Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, the Unitary Republic of Indonesia, and the Unity in Diversity motto. A related argument invokes the sense of nationalism and cultural distinctiveness of Indonesia. In the words of Hasyim Muzadi, former chairman of NU: “IS is a political movement that can threaten (Indonesia’s) independence and its Constitution”.¹⁸ But possibly one of the most potent arguments against IS is its use of extreme violence directed against not only non-Muslims, but also Muslims.¹⁹

The Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia) has cut short of emitting a religious advice (*fatwa*) that would make IS illicit (*haram*), because, according to its Deputy-Chief, KH. Ma’aruf Amin: “ISIS is not related with the character of Islam. These sorts of actions are forbidden (*diharamkan*) by Islam. So, if you support ISIS that in itself is *haram* (...)”.²⁰ MUI’s external affairs representative, Muhyiddin Junaidi, declared that IS has “monsterized Islam”²¹ and adds that, because none of the twenty two Arab countries have lent their support to IS, the organization cannot be considered as Islamic.

Another noteworthy reaction to the ISIS challenge has come from the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), a branch of the Hizbut Tahrir (Party of Liberation), created in 1953 in Jordan as a Sunni organization. Its objective is to rebuild a global Islamic caliphate, as an

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Minister Suyanto: Many Islamic organizations are against ISIS”, *Tempo.co*, 5 August 2014 (<http://en.tempo.co/read/news/2014/08/05/055597295/Minister-Suyanto-Many-Islamic-Organizations-are-Against-ISIS>).

¹⁸ “Why ISIS has the potential to threaten Indonesia”, *Tempo.co*, 1st August 2014 (<http://www.tempo.co/read/news/2014/08/01/078596639/Kenapa-ISIS-Berpotensi-Membahayakan-Indonesia>)

¹⁹ “Preaching at NU and Muhammadiyah mosques: ISIS is deviant”, *Tempo.co*, 15 August 2014 (<http://www.tempo.co/read/news/2014/08/15/078599881/Khotbah-di-Masjid-NU-dan-Muhammadiyah-ISIS-Sesat>).

²⁰ “MUI: We do not need a fatwa, ISIS is already haram”, *Liputan6.com*, 7 August 2014 (<http://news.liputan6.com/read/2087796/mui-tidak-perlu-fatwa-isis-sudah-haram>).

²¹ “MUI: ISIS has monsterized Islam”, *Liputan6.com*, 10 September 2014 (<http://news.liputan6.com/read/2103344/mui-isis-telah-monsterisasi-islam>)

answer to the problems created by “Western” democracy and neo-liberalism.²² This objective, however, is to be attained through peaceful means, the public rejection of violence having been a hallmark of the organization. Thus, IS’ extreme violence is now jeopardizing the image of HTI in Indonesia and the organization has been quick to react to defend its own vision of the caliphate.

For HTI, the ISIS issue has only served to “criminalize” and “monsterize” the concept of the caliphate and the Islamic law. According to Ismail Yusanto, the spokesperson of HTI, ISIS methods are contrary to what was taught by the Prophet Muhammad, who was “against violence, especially the destruction of places of religious practice, the killing (of people) without rights, and so on”.²³ ISIS is thus considered by HTI as a “military militia” and cannot be defined as representing the caliphate. Additionally, ISIS’ caliphate declaration has no legitimacy because it does not comply with any of the following conditions, according to HTI²⁴: instated in an autonomous area, not under an existing state; it should only be declared once security has been achieved in the said-area; the caliphate concept should be socialized; and the Sharia be implemented wholly and justly.

The IS issue has even produced acute tensions within the Jihadist milieu, as the declaration of allegiance by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir has created a schism within the Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT, an off-shoot of the Jemaah Islamiyah), whereby each camp has accused the other of being deviant (*sesat*). While the pro-IS branch of the JAT considers Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a legitimate caliph, the Council of Indonesian Mujahedeens (MMI, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia), previously linked to the Jemaah Islamiyah, has declared that ISIS is deviant and leads astray (*sesat dan menyesatkan*). Because IS makes use of excommunication (*takfir*) and this method “comes from the Khārijite²⁵” – which MMI freely interprets as a “Shiite sect” –, Sunni Muslims should reject IS, its message and practices.²⁶

In between these two opposing poles lies a grey area. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI, Front Pembela Islam), a militia that specializes in combatting “vice”, declares that it is in favour of the caliphate and Jihad against the enemies of Islam, but that it opposes sectarian conflicts within Islam. Quoting Al Qaida’s leader Ayman Al Zawahiri, FPI calls

²² For more details, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Reviving the Caliphate in the Nusantara: Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia’s mobilization strategy and its impact in Indonesian”, *RSIS working paper* no. 171, NTU, 9 February 2009.

²³ “Muhammad Ismail Yusanto: The Walisongo come from the caliphate not ISIS”, *Hizbut Tahrir official website*, no date (<http://hizbut-tahrir.or.id/2014/08/29/muhammad-ismail-yusanto-jubir-hti-walisongo-itu-utusan-khilafah>)

²⁴ “The Walisongo come from the caliphate not ISIS”, *Arrahmah.com*, 29 August 2014 (<http://www.arahmah.com/news/2014/08/29/hti-walisongo-itu-utusan-khilafah-bukan-isis.html>)

²⁵ The “Khawarij” or Khārijite: the earliest Islamic sect that rejected the claim to the fourth caliphate by both Ali (Muhammad’s son in law) and Muawiyah, the governor of Syria, and used extreme violence to further its views.

²⁶ “Majelis Mujahidin: ISIS is deviant and leads astray”, *Tribunnews.com*, 9 August 2014 (<http://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2014/08/09/majelis-mujahidin-isis-sesat-dan-menyebabkan>).

upon all Jihadi forces to unite, including ISIS.²⁷ The Islamic People's Forum (FUI, Forum Umat Islam), a group responsible for attacks on religious minorities, has hinted that it would only condemn IS if there was proof that it had links with Western powers. Similarly, the Salafi-oriented Ja'far Umar Thalib (leader of the now defunct Laskar Jihad paramilitary group), has declared that Indonesian Muslims should be wary of news regarding IS from Western sources and recommended seeking alternative information regarding the conflict in the Middle East.

Reflecting its traditionally ambiguous position on radical Islam and its dislike of the West, the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) has declared that IS is not a Muslim organization and that it could be a conspiracy by the West and Israel to divide Islam.²⁸ Moreover, the party's chairman, Anis Matta, suggested that if Iraq and Syria were united by IS, the newly formed state could play an important role in the Middle East, as it could count on its "human resources" (its population) and vast natural resources (in the form of oil reserves). Anis Matta also criticized the US-led anti-IS coalition as an "overreaction" (*lebay*).²⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The US' airstrikes expansion in Iraq and possibly Syria could embolden IS members and sympathizers, and swing the pendulum of sympathy towards IS, especially among the radical organizations in the "grey area", as described above. However, the violence and chaos that has been developing in a number of Arab countries since 2011 has worked as a strong deterrent for Indonesian political and religious leaders, as well as for the general public. While there is a certain multi-vocality of Indonesian Islam, Muslim organizations are, in their great majority, opposed to IS, its violence and its transnational utopia. At the same time, IS has shown that it is not merely an ultra-violent organization, but that it also carries a project of an idealized society with a refined narrative that may be appealing to many and not only to radical jihadists. Thus, this ideological challenge has forced different elements of Indonesian Islam to redefine, and sometimes reposition, themselves.

A long-standing argument in attempting to explain the growth of violent extremism is that

²⁷ "This is FPI's position on the ISIS issue", *Voa-Islam.com*, 9 August, 2014 (<http://www.voa-islam.com/read/citizens-jurnalism/2014/08/09/32123/inilah-isi-maklumat-fpi-terkait-isu-isis/#sthash.FoTq4ByR.dpbs>).

²⁸ "PKS politician: ISIS is a Western and Israeli scenario to divide Islam", *Detik.com*, 7 August 2014 (<http://news.detik.com/read/2014/08/07/143659/2655912/10/politisi-pks-isis-skenario-barat-dan-israel-untuk-pecah-belah-islam>).

²⁹ "PKS: if Iraq and Syria are under ISIS domination, they can become one state", *Merdeka.com*, 21 September 2014 (<http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/pks-jika-dikuasai-isis-irak-dan-suriah-bisa-jadi-satu-negara.html>).

the phenomenon is a product of socio-economic injustices.³⁰ Certainly, poverty and ignorance can favor such radical views to grow and provide fertile ground for militant recruitment, but studies have shown that this argument is not sustainable by itself.³¹ As the IS case makes clear, ideology can constitute a strong appeal for extremist engagement.

³⁰ See for example, recently: Rizvi Shihab, "The root of the problem of IS in Indonesia", *TheDiplomat.com*, 23 August 2014 (<http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/the-root-problem-of-is-in-indonesia/>).

³¹ Krueger, Alan B. 2007. *What makes a terrorist: economics and the roots of terrorism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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