

2 April 2020

## IPAC Short Briefing No.1: COVID-19 AND ISIS IN INDONESIA

The sheer scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has removed all else from the headlines, but it is worth examining the impact that it has had on ISIS; on the Syrian camps; and on pro-ISIS extremists in Indonesia.

While ISIS central has called for its supporters to seize the opportunity and attack the enemy at a time of weakness, some Indonesian ISIS supporters appear to be less focused on jihad operations than on how the virus may be yet another sign that the end of the world is near. Intensified anti-Chinese rhetoric on some extremist social media sites does not appear to have been matched by any uptick in plots against Chinese targets but remains something to watch. In general, the level of jihadist activity appears to be low, reflected in the relatively low number of terrorist suspects arrested during the first months of 2020.

Prison administrators, fearing an outbreak of COVID-19, have suspended visits and made other adjustments, but the potential for prison unrest is high, as has happened in other countries hit by the virus. Indonesia urgently needs procedures in place to handle violence or attempted escapes occur.<sup>1</sup> ISIS central has exhorted its followers to take the opportunity of the crisis to free Muslim prisoners.

### I. THE REACTION OF ISIS CENTRAL

ISIS interpreted the pandemic as divine retribution, a punishment to the West, a punishment to China for its treatment of Uighurs, revenge for the destruction of Baghouz in March 2019, and the “worst nightmare of the Crusaders”.<sup>2</sup> It also showed its practical side. On 13 March, its online news bulletin, Al-Naba, issued a directive on how to deal with COVID-19, warning its supporters not to travel to afflicted areas (Europe, for example) and those already in such areas not to leave. It used references to the Qur’an and *hadith* (sayings and actions of the Prophet) to urge supporters to wash their hands and to cover the mouth when yawning or sneezing.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, ISIS has made repeated calls in the online media for its supporters to take advantage of the enemy’s preoccupation with the virus and mount strikes. Some of these messages have circulated in Indonesia. For example, a message posted in weak English on Indonesian pro-ISIS Telegram channels said:

So brothers and sisters, take advantage of how they are now misdirected and forced to let loose the strong grip they had against us, and to exhaust their finances and their resources upon this newly risen matter! The Kuffar are being quarantined and kept from going out. They are being kept from carrying out their tasks usually. Their strength have been dropped by half [sic], or even more than that! Even if some of the Kuffar may keep their eyes strained,

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<sup>1</sup> “How the coronavirus is igniting riots, releases and crackdowns in world’s prisons,” [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com), 26 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For useful summaries of ISIS responses to the pandemic, see SITEIntelligence Group, “Global Jihadist Response to COVID-19 Pandemic,” SiteIntelligence Special Report, March 2020 and BBC Monitoring (see tweets of Mina al-Lami @Minalami).

<sup>3</sup> “ISIS coronavirus directives: Do ‘not enter ‘the land of the epidemic’, cover your sneezes,’” [hstoday.us](https://www.hstoday.us) (Homeland Security Today), 13 March 2020.

looking into the screens of their devices to fight us on the media front, their strength is destroyed on the physical front - and Allah knows best.

So take advantage! And carry out Amaliyat as according to your capability! Do something good which will benefit you and others with you - for the sake of Allah!<sup>4</sup>

The attacks that have taken place since the pandemic took off have been mostly in some of ISIS's far-flung provinces: West Africa has been a particular focus. In Afghanistan ISIS claimed the 25 March attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Clashes in the southern Philippines continue between pro-ISIS components and Philippine military and police, but these appear to be a response less to ISIS exhortations than to local political dynamics.

## II. SITUATION IN THE KURDISH-CONTROLLED CAMPS

The pandemic meant a temporary halt to the fitful discussions in Western and Asian capitals about bringing home nationals from the camps in Syria where more than 70,000 ISIS supporters or former ISIS supporters languish. Conditions continued to deteriorate both in the camps and in the higher security prisons, used for male prisoners. A riot took place on 29 March in Hasakeh prison where many high-risk men, including Indonesians, are detained, resulting in an unknown number of escapes. As of this writing, the number and nationalities of those who escaped remained unclear.

As of March, the corona virus had hit the camps. Pro-ISIS sites sent around news on 12 March 2020 that some women in al-Hol from France and Iraq were infected, having caught the disease from "PKK dogs" or "infidel Shi'a from Iran."<sup>6</sup>

The Kurdish administration in northern Syria has pleaded for more testing equipment, noting the rising number of cases documented in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Neither the Kurdistan Red Crescent nor the Autonomous Administration [of North and East Syria as the Kurdish administration is known] "have not enough instruments and tools to deal with a pandemic," although the NGOs who remain in the region are seeking to help. The region will dedicate 13 ambulances to the transportation of those infected with COVID-19, three of which will be committed to those in need of intensive care.

Testing is a nightmare. "So far the only laboratory which can diagnose COVID-19 is in Damascus, under the control of the Syrian Government. To screen a suspicious case, WHO will take a sample and will transport it to a laboratory in Damascus," Mistefa [co-president of the health department of the Autonomous Administration] said. In practice, it will take a week and even then, "results are not 100 percent sure, given the distance and the impossibility to check quality of the procedures."<sup>7</sup>

Separately, a UNICEF spokesperson in Syria warned on 23 March 2020 that the Turkish military's efforts to cut water to Kurdish-controlled Hasakeh province was putting close to half a million people at risk of disease – and these include the women and children in the al-Hol and ar-Roj camps already prone to disease because of unsanitary conditions and insufficient food and water.

The need to bring home children is greater than ever, but in the midst of a pandemic, what government would risk it? Indonesian officials say they are still monitoring the situation for hundreds

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<sup>4</sup> Twitter Rasyid Nikaz, reposted on Ummat Yang Subur Telegram Channel, 19 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> "ISIS launches attacks in Africa while Pentagon shifts focus to 'great powers' Russia and China," [washingtonexaminer.com](http://washingtonexaminer.com), 23 January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Telegram posting, Media Volunteers, 12 March 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Rubin, "They defeated ISIS. Now the Kurds gear up to fight coronavirus," American Enterprise Institute, [www.aei.org](http://www.aei.org), 19 March 2020.

of nationals, but there will clearly be no movement on repatriation, even of unaccompanied children, until the pandemic has been brought under control.

One ISIS supporter tried to put a positive spin on this, saying the Indonesian government's refusal in early 2020 to repatriate 600 Indonesians in the camps meant that when the apocalypse came and a hot cloud enveloped the earth, ISIS supporters in Syria (whom he referred to as "ex-Indonesians") would be saved, while Indonesia would be submerged at the bottom of the sea.<sup>8</sup>

### III. COVID-19 AND EXTREMISTS IN INDONESIA

The pandemic has meant a reduced level of pro-ISIS activity in Indonesia. For all the anti-Chinese rhetoric spawned by the disease, there has been little obvious change in targeting. The more interesting reaction has been from ISIS supporters, many of whom have decided to stay at home and wait for the end of the world, as foretold in Islamic prophecies, rather than conduct jihad operations.

Al-Qaeda, and perhaps its sympathisers within Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), has exhorted its followers to use the pandemic as an opportunity to bring Westerners into Islam.<sup>9</sup> Stepped up efforts at recruitment during the crisis would be consistent with JI's modus operandi but there is no hard evidence yet of such efforts.

#### A. Anti-Chinese Sentiment and the Issue of Chinese Workers

In Indonesia, the virus has sparked anti-Chinese sentiment on social media that extends far beyond the pro-ISIS community. It builds on a long historical base and plays into political concerns in different parts of the public about the Jokowi government's dependence on China for infrastructure development and foreign investment, especially in the extractive sector.

Much of the rhetoric has been purely racist hate speech. One theme has been that rich Indonesian Chinese have been fleeing to Singapore to avoid the epidemic. One post on Telegram read: "The BaCin [acronym for Bangsa China, ethnic Chinese but suggesting that their true nationality is Chinese, not Indonesian] are cowards fleeing to Singapore. Don't come ever back to Indonesia, you disgusting losers and traitors!"<sup>10</sup>

ISIS supporters also have tried to exploit local resentment of Chinese workers in two areas, Southeast Sulawesi and Banten. The most recent case involves the arrival in mid-March 2020 of 49 Chinese workers from Henan province, hired to work at the Virtue Dragon Nickel Smelter in Morosi, Konawe district, Southeast Sulawesi. Sulawesi is home to some of the biggest nickel deposits in Indonesia, and China is the biggest buyer. After a new mining law was passed in 2009 that banned the export of raw nickel ore and required the construction of smelters, the number of Chinese workers rose dramatically, causing local resentment over pay differentials, perceived preferential hiring of foreigners over locals, culture clashes, pollution and corruption.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rizky Abdul Haq, "Hikmah Tidak Dipulangkan Ex WNI IS ke Indonesia", Posting on ISIS Facebook account, 30 March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See @minalami(BBC Monitoring) on Twitter, 1 April 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Salam Pancasila", posted on Channel Biasa [a Telegram channel], 22 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "Nickel mining resisted in Indonesia," *China Dialogue*, 12 December 2019. Morawali, in Central Sulawesi, where some 5,000 Chinese are employed, has been the site of periodic protests over what local workers say is wage discrimination. In Southeast Sulawesi, the protests have been over pollution from mining sites that killed fish on which much of the coastal population depends for their livelihoods, as well as graft and corruption in awarding mining contracts. See "An island mapped for mines gets a reprieve after violent protests," *mongabay.org*, 19 March 2019. In March 2019 a series of protests demanding the revocation of mining permits flared after an image went viral on Twitter showing how much of Southeast Sulawesi had been leased to mining firms, some of them joint ventures with Chinese companies. As a result of the protests, the deputy governor declared a temporary halt to mining on the island of Wawonii but the governor reversed the decision and mining continued.

It was against this background that the issue of the 49 Chinese workers erupted. Technically they were not in violation of any Indonesian decrees. Flights between Indonesia and China had been banned as of 5 February 2020, but the workers had arrived from Thailand, not China.<sup>12</sup> Their work visas had been issued in late January; they arrived in Thailand from Henan on 29 February where they underwent a two-week quarantine and were issued documents by the Thai government certifying that they were virus-free. They arrived at Jakarta's international airport on 15 March 2020, then flew the same day to Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, where a resident filmed them exiting with their luggage and posted it on social media, with the comment, "One plane, all corona."<sup>13</sup> The video went viral and touched off a public protest. The video-maker was briefly arrested for spreading false information, but public pressure got him freed. The governor ordered that the workers be quarantined at their dormitory at the mining site for another fourteen days, but small protests continued.<sup>14</sup>

The issue provided an opening for some highly racist pro-ISIS postings, but there was no suggestion of violent action – and Kendari has never been a terrorism hotspot.<sup>15</sup>

Another area where the issue of Chinese workers has produced local protests is Banten, where several joint ventures with Chinese companies involved in construction have led to claims that foreigners were getting jobs that should have gone to locals. One site that attracted much media attention in early 2019 as the presidential election was approaching was the Merah Putih cement plant in Bayah, Lebak, Banten that employed 181 mainland Chinese workers, many of them only semi-skilled.<sup>16</sup> A possible attack on these workers had been discussed by the man responsible for stabbing the then Coordinating Minister for Security Wiranto in November 2019. The perpetrator, Syahrial Alamsya alias Abu Rara, was arrested at the site and revealed that he and a friend named Syamsudin alias Jack Sparrow had discussed such an attack as a way of avenging the treatment of Uighurs in China.

Syamsudin, a professional welder, had worked at the plant, as well as at other sites where Chinese workers were employed.<sup>17</sup> He had noted that the workers at the Merah Putih plant were transported to and from the site every day in open pick-up trucks. He and Abu Rara discussed stabbing the truck drivers, thereby causing an accident, or throwing a molotov bomb in the back with the workers. They also discussed, but without serious planning, attacks on gold stores owned by Indonesian Chinese in Pandeglang, Banten.<sup>18</sup> All these ideas came to nothing, however, because Abu Rara and Syamsudin fell out. Syamsudin was apparently not prepared to act alone, and Abu Rara could not go ahead without him, since he had all the field knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> The legal basis for the ban was Ministerial Regulation from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights No.3 2020.

<sup>13</sup> "Immigration Allows Entry of 49 Chinese Workers Despite Ban," *Jakartaglobe.id*, 17 March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> One of the protests was led by Pembela Kesatuan Tanah Air Bersatu (PEKAT-IB), an organisation with close ties to senior police and retired police officers. For more on the group and its operations across Indonesia, see IPAC, "Showdown Looming Over Sumatran Land Conflict," Report No.1, 14 August 2013.

<sup>15</sup> The few instances of arrests in Kendari have mostly been linked to MIT and Poso. See for example "Polri: 3 Terduga Teroris Palu Jaringan JAD Medan-Sulsel-Kendari," *detik.com*, 6 September 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The Merah Putih cement plant, owned by the PT Cemindo Gemilang company in partnership with the Chinese-owned PT Sinoma. As of early 2019, 181 Chinese were employed there. See "TKA Jadi Buruh Kasar di PT Cemindo, disebut tak memiliki izin jang jelas," *titiknol.co.id*, 3 March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Syamsudin had worked at large construction projects such as the Suliwana Poso Hydroelectric Power Plant and the athletes' dormitory used for the 2018 Asia Games, which since has been turned into an emergency hospital for corona patients. He had been radicalised online since 2014. Initially he read many Indonesian pro-ISIS websites such as *almustaqbal.net*, *manjanik.net*, and *KDImedia*. Later he also joined various telegram channels and private pro-ISIS chat groups on Telegram such as Just Terror Tactics, Ummah Media, Anshor Daulah, Nashid Jihad and others. It was through social media that he came to know Abu Rara. After they became friends online, Abu Rara invited him to join the WA group Pengusung Tauhid. Later he was also appointed as an administrator for a WhatsApp group focused on tauhid, jihad and ISIS. In March 2019, Abu Rara contacted him from Medan, seeking his help finding a house to rent in Pandeglang, which he provided.

<sup>18</sup> IPAC interview, Jakarta, 29 March 2020.

As of March 2020, there was little evidence of increased jihadist activity in Banten, but it remained an area to watch.

## B. COVID-19 and ISIS priorities

The question now is whether ISIS supporters in Indonesia will now use the coronavirus as an excuse to expand targeting beyond the police to domestic or international Chinese targets. To see how these supporters see their priorities, it is important to understand the concept of *yakfur bit thogut*, literally “denying the idolater/oppressor”. *Yakfur bit thogut* is seen by ISIS supporters as the perfection of faith. They say an individual’s dedication to Islam is not complete without *yakfur bit thogut*, even if he prays and fasts.

*Yakfur bit thogut* is understood as an attitude of hostility and a willingness to wage war against the oppressor – rulers, including Muslim rulers, who refuse to govern by Islamic law. It is the ideological justification for attacking the police, seen as the agents of the *thogut*, and making the police their No. 1 enemy. This can be seen from the fact that from January 2014 through February 2020, extremists from different pro-ISIS groups have killed 19 police and wounded 71 others. Police in turn have arrested more than 1,000 terrorism suspects over the same period. The hostility is so deep that when ISIS central called for attacks on Westerners and citizens of the countries represented in the US-led coalition forces in Iraq and Syria, Indonesian supporters were not interested. Even after Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi was killed in October 2019, police remained the primary target, as evidenced by the suicide bomb attack at the police station in Medan in November 2019.<sup>19</sup>

## C. Seizing the Moment

Will Indonesian ISIS supporters try to exploit the pandemic? There are at least three views represented about these supporters regarding the Corona outbreak. One is that this outbreak is the same as the plague (*ta’un* or *thaun*) mentioned in various *hadith*. When the plague comes, according to these *hadith*, Muslims must stay at home and be patient. If a Muslim does this and then dies, he will still be considered a martyr. ISIS supporters who take this view tend to choose to stay at home and not undertake jihad operations (*amaliyah*) – especially if they get the same heavenly reward by doing so.

This view sees the coronavirus as a sign of the end of time, before the occurrence of the *dukhon*. *Dukhon* is a hot cloud that will cover parts of the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, and its appearance will precede the coming of the Imam Mahdi, the Islamic messiah. ISIS supporters who take this view believe the pandemic is a dress rehearsal for the *dukhon*. One post warned:

Lockdown is just uncomfortable now. You feel bored, isolated and confined. But remember this is only a simulation of *dukhon* that will last 40 days and 40 nights.<sup>20</sup>

This second group will also take no action. They prefer to stay at home and train family members in preparation for the end of time which they believe is imminent.

The third view, following some views expressed by ISIS central, sees the corona outbreak in Indonesia as an opportunity to conduct an attack. They see the Indonesian government as being in a state of weakness as it tries to confront the virus, so that now is precisely the best opportunity for attack.

<sup>19</sup> One group of extremists did discuss attacking a tourist in Yogyakarta in December 2019 but the plan was discovered and the plotters arrested before it had gone beyond the discussion stage.

<sup>20</sup> Post on Visi Akhir Zaman, 26 March 2020.

If Covid 19 could speak, maybe it would say, “We’ve got the Vatican surrounded, what more are you waiting for?” So why are we keeping quiet, corona has opened the way for us, shoulder-to shoulder let’s attack them!<sup>21</sup>

One possible method of attack would be to use ISIS supporters who already have the virus to try and deliberately infect those they consider their enemies, such as the police.

In addition, ISIS supporters could seek to join the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT) in Poso, especially as it has become increasingly active in recruiting. Despite arrests in Poso and Wajo (South Sulawesi) in February 2020 of ISIS supporters who planned to join MIT, it is clear that the government’s attention has been diverted. This same strategy of recruiting during disaster took place after Aceh in December 2004, the Yogyakarta earthquake in 2010 and the Palu tsunami in 2018.

The actions of extremist inmates in Indonesia’s detention centers and prisons also merits watching. The prison system belatedly recognised how vulnerable the prison population was to the virus and enacted a series of measures in early March 2020 designed to limit visitors, improve monitoring and increase allocations for healthcare, but this is easier said than done.<sup>22</sup> The maximum security prisons where top ideologues are detained suspended prison visits as of 19 March.<sup>23</sup> Once word begins to spread of positive cases, however, panic could ensue – especially when prison healthcare is so poor to begin with – and violence could follow.

Indonesian authorities also need to monitor fund-raising efforts in connection with the virus, including appeals for protective equipment for health workers. These could be exploited by ISIS supporters, especially as they already have several charities trying to raise funds from the public, mostly through on-line appeals but sometimes directly through religious organisations. One example is the Baitul Mal Al Muuqin in Solo that is affiliated with the group known as Jamaat Ansjarul Khilafah (JAK) under the leadership of Abu Husna.<sup>24</sup> It has been active raising funds for humanitarian assistance through its Islamic healing clinics. Organisations like this could exploit the social solidarity that the crisis has engendered to raise funds for pro-ISIS activities.

#### **D. Arrests in 2020**

The number of arrests under Indonesia’s counter-terrorism law fell in the first three months of 2020. A total of 23 suspects were arrested across the country, compared with 68 arrested and indicted in the previous three months (October to December 2019) or a whopping 243 between May and July 2018, in the aftermath of the Brimob detention centre riot and Surabaya bombings.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the early 2020 arrests took place in Central and South Sulawesi linked to MIT. Ten out of the 23 were believed to be MIT couriers. Other arrests took place in Jambi, North Sumatra and central Java, and involved individuals who were pro-ISIS but not linked to the organization known as Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD).

None of the cases appear to be plots linked to the corona virus. The arrests in Batang, Central Java on 25 March turned out to be a preventive strike by Detachment 88, the counter-terrorism police, but in their search of the house where the arrests took place, police reportedly found explosive materials.

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<sup>21</sup> Abu Abdurrahman al Indunusy, pro-ISIS Telegram chat group 26 March 2020 and Jordan Newton, "Online Jihadism and COVID-19 in Indonesia", unpublished paper, Canberra, March 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Leopold Sudaryono and M Doddy Kusadrianto, “Briefing on COVID-19 Response and Implication to Indonesian Prisons and AIPJ2 Program on Criminal Justice System,” Asia Foundation, 30 March 2020.

<sup>23</sup> “Wabah Virus Corona, Lapas Nusakambangan Lockdown,” jateng.suara.com, 17 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Abu Husna has not encouraged his followers to use violence but some individuals recruited by JAK have gone on to conduct attacks.

<sup>25</sup> These figures are based on IPAC’s database and may differ somewhat from official figures because of slightly different definitions used.

Members were reportedly trying to teach themselves how to make bombs but had not yet chosen any targets.<sup>26</sup>

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The pandemic, for the moment, has meant reduced activity on the terrorism front but law enforcement agencies need to remain vigilant, both in terms of isolated cells that may heed the ISIS exhortations to attack and well as those who see in the pandemic an opportunity to boost recruitment.

Indonesian authorities are beginning to pay attention to the issue of the virus in prisons, but preventive measures have been late in coming. In addition to measures already in place to combat COVID-19, the corrections directorate urgently needs to develop guidelines on procedures for handling unrest among inmates or inmates and prison staff as well as anticipating attempted escapes. The uprising at Hasakeh prison in Syria, as well as in prisons around the world, should serve as a reminder that the virus coming on top of existing restrictions on visits and communication can be explosive.

Finally, agencies focused on financial crime prevention like the Financial Transaction Reports Analysis Centre (Pusat Pelaporan Analisis & Transaksi Keuangan, PPATK) will need to watch out for extremist fund-raising efforts in the name of humanitarian assistance. Most of the private fund-raising efforts taking place in connection with the pandemic are going to be legitimate, but the history of Indonesia over the last two decades has been that whenever disasters occur, extremists seek to benefit.

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<sup>26</sup> “Polri Bersiaga Antisipasi Aksi Teroris,” *Kompas*, 31 March 2020.