



Indonesia Spot Report: Online Jihadism and COVID-19

Summary

- The global Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis is providing Indonesian jihadists with opportunities to consolidate their internal support and may prompt some to consider attacks.
- Jihadist narratives on the virus — particularly anti-Chinese sentiment — could find traction among some Islamists but are still unlikely to convert many to terrorism.
- Still, jihadists will add to mounting public criticism of government, finding common voice with Islamists and contributing to the risk of political upheaval in the coming weeks and months.
- The virus' spread is also posing the same physical threat to jihadists as to other communities, with online discussions suggesting extremists in prison in Indonesia and refugee camps in Syria could be at increased risk of infection as the virus spreads.

Opportunities in crisis

Recent propaganda on social media could prompt some jihadists to consider using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for violence. Some official releases have highlighted how jihadists could take advantage of authorities' distraction with COVID-19 to plot attacks. A 19 March editorial in ISIL's weekly Al Naba newsletter — widely distributed in Arabic, Indonesian and English on Indonesian pro-ISIL chat groups on messaging app Telegram — declared:

The last thing they [infidel nations] want today is that this critical time of theirs should coincide with preparations of the soldiers of the Caliphate for new strikes on them, similar to the strikes of Paris, London, Brussels and other places.

The editorial concluded:

So the obligation on the Muslims today with their efforts to protect themselves and their people from the spreading disease is to strive also to free the Muslim prisoners in the prisons of the idolaters and the camps of humiliation in which they are threatened by disease in addition to subjugation, coercion, hunger and enmity against themselves and their religion that they face from the idolaters... and the most beloved form of acts of obedience to God Almighty is jihad in His path, and inflicting damage on His enemies, and God will indeed support the one who supports Him.

An Indonesian-language Telegram post on 26 March appeared to echo this call:

Only those who are intelligent and have been enlightened will think, if COVID-19 could talk, maybe it would say: "WE HAVE SURROUNDED THE VATICAN, WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, ATTACK THEM". So why are you just sitting there? COVID-19 has opened the path for us, let's join together in attacking them... Rise up and incite the believers to war, now is the moment we have long been waiting for.

Jihadists on social media are also using the COVID-19 crisis to shore up support within their ranks by highlighting the suffering of their enemies. Many propaganda releases and posts frame the virus' global spread as a 'soldier of God' striking 'infidel' nations and a vindication of jihadist opposition to those countries. Daily updates on mounting casualties in the US, Europe and other governments traditionally seen as enemies by jihadists — such as Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia — have usually been accompanied by gleeful commentary.

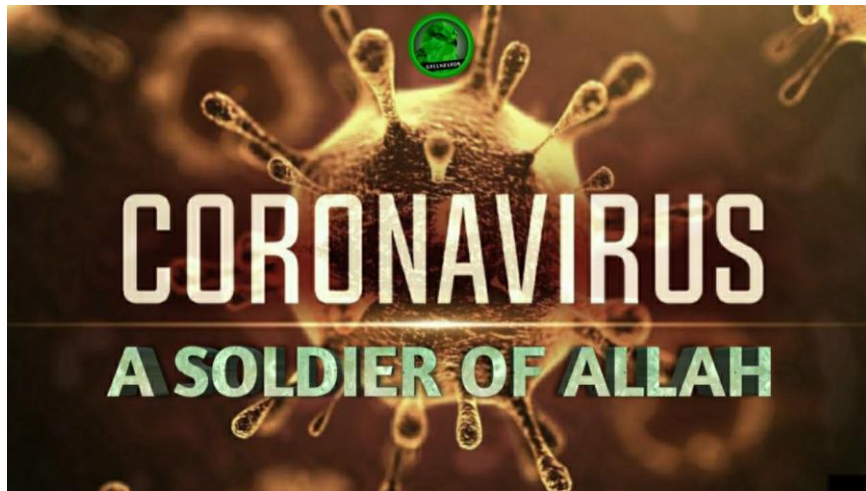


Image: Propaganda posted on pro-ISIL chat group (Grob Jejak Qudwah: 19 Mar 20)

The 19 March Al Naba editorial described the virus as 'The Worst Nightmare of the Crusaders':

God Almighty has imposed something of His painful torment on the nations of His creation, most of them- and praise be to God- being of the idolaters, for fear of the epidemic among them has done more than what the epidemic itself has done, for their abodes have been shut, their markets and activities suspended, and many of them confined to their homes.

It also framed the virus as an act of divine retribution for Western nations' support for Kurdish forces that helped dismantle its 'caliphate', particularly during ISIL's 'last stand' battle for the town of Baghuz in Syria during March last year:

They pretend to forget that when they confined the Muslims in Baghuz, Mosul, Sirte and other places such that disease and hunger took a fatal toll on them, they exploited their weakness and lack of a way out by annihilating them in destructive bombing and they buried them alive in homes... so they had no mercy on the incapacitated, the child, the women or the wounded. We ask God to take revenge on them and place us in authority over the necks of all of them.

An Indonesian-language Telegram post echoed this view:

The fact is that this virus has transferred the fear which was experienced by Muslims [in ISIL-controlled territories under Western bombardment] so that it is also felt by the infidel nations oppressing them.

Some jihadists are even seeing the crisis as an affirmation of their belief that the world is ending and an opportunity to prepare for the prophesised more difficult times to come. ISIL supporters in some instances are using government efforts to contain the virus' spread — such as social distancing and city lockdowns — as a 'practice' or 'simulation' for the 'darkening' phase of the apocalypse, when all machinery and electronic equipment will become inoperable. One post encourages supporters to:

Train your children to undertake activities in the dark. Don't cry because crying is not a solution, teach them to chant and pray no matter what is happening... teach them to not be dependent on gadgets... teach them survival skills such as lighting a fire using flint, making a wooden shelter and finding fresh water from the trunks of banana trees.



LOCKDOWN ADALAH SIMULASI DUKHON

LOCKDOWN sekarang aja sudah tak nyaman. Bosan, Suntuk, Terisolasi dan Tidak Bebas. Tapi ingatlah ini hanya Simulasi dari **DUKHON 40 hari 40 malam** 🤨

Image: "Lockdowns are a simulation for the Darkening: Lockdowns for now are uncomfortable, boring, isolating and restrict your freedom. But remember this is only a simulation of The Darkening, which will last for 40 days and 40 nights" (Hijrah Ke Syam Yu: 19 Mar 20)

Other jihadist sympathisers see much more worldly opportunities in potential social upheaval emerging from the COVID-19 crisis. Some jihadists believe that the crisis could trigger major political instability and provide them with an opportunity to overthrow secular rulers. One Indonesian website linked to Al-Qaida (AQ) sympathisers published an editorial, entitled "The Opportunity Behind the COVID-19 Outbreak: Learning from the Fall of Constantinople" outlining:

The impacts from COVID-19 could be a turning point for the Muslim community's struggle. Secular leaders, who have ruled from a strong position with the support of the infidel superpowers, are being tested. Can they control this situation amidst the outbreak without the strong support they usually receive from their foreign bosses? Here, it is important that the Muslim community does not get caught up in panic around the outbreak, but instead carefully looks for opportunities for victory on the back of the weakened forces and cooperation between our enemies.

[Shared conspiracies and rising discontent](#)

Other jihadist narratives on COVID-19 could resonate with segments of the broader Indonesian Muslim community. Jihadists appear to be tapping into anti-Chinese sentiment, which has been rife among local non-violent Islamist groups — such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) — in recent years. Related to the divine punishment theme mentioned above, some posts published on jihadist chat groups during the virus' initial outbreak in Wuhan earlier this year echoed the views of groups like FPI, claiming it was revenge for China's mistreatment of its Uighur minority:

Revenge for the disgusting Chinese communist infidels who oppose Islam. You brought horror to Uighur Muslims, now feel the wrath of animals: viruses from bats, birds and large mosquitos who move on God's command.

Some jihadists are also bringing themselves closer to non-violent groups by promoting popular conspiracy theories, particularly claims that the Chinese government is behind the spread of the virus. Though ISIL and AQ-aligned media arms and senior thought leaders have frowned upon conspiracy theories related to the virus — preferring the virus as a 'soldier of God' — such conspiracies are widely shared in jihadist chat groups. These views echo those of groups like FPI, some of whom have even adopted Western far-right nomenclature referring to COVID-19 as 'the Chinese Virus'.



Thank You China



Images: Posters blaming the Chinese government for spreading COVID-19 (Just Paste: 26 Mar 20).

Still, probably only a few new potential recruits would be attracted by such messaging. Significant differences and competition remain between violent extremists such as ISIL and AQ and non-violent Islamists like FPI. Indonesian Islamists historically have been wary of jihadists, seeing them as spoilers for their own movement's attempts to gain more public credibility. Even intra-jihadist rivalries have not abated during the COVID-19 crisis. ISIL berated the AQ-aligned Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) in Syria for referring to World Health Organization (WHO) information in its COVID-19 pamphlet.

But jihadists and Islamists could create an increasingly loud de facto chorus of destabilising voices in Indonesian society — online and offline — as the crisis drags on. Both camps want to overthrow the Joko Widodo administration and the government's missteps in handling COVID-19 are providing ammunition for them in their respective public relations campaigns. Jihadists and Islamists are increasingly referring to the same mainstream media materials, including Western media coverage of Indonesia, to highlight the government's failings. And even if they are not cooperating with one another, both groups are continuing to promote a similar solution to the crisis: systematic political change through the establishment of a more Islamic government.



Image: Islamist propaganda: "COVID-19 is not just a pandemic, but a directive to immediately implement Islamic law by establishing an Islamic State." (Telegram: 18 March 2020).

Real-world concerns and impacts

Despite the opportunities for recruitment and violence presented by COVID-19, the virus nonetheless also poses the same physical and health threats for Indonesian jihadists as for other members of the community — in some environments they may be even more at risk of infection. Jihadists in prison will be particularly vulnerable as conditions in these facilities are generally poor, even in non-crisis situations. Since 2018, at least ten jihadists have died of various health ailments while in prison. Social media posts indicate that large Indonesian prisons housing convicted terrorists — including Nusakambangan in Central Java and Gunung Sindur in West Java — have cancelled visitation rights for families, citing concerns about potential future spread of the virus.

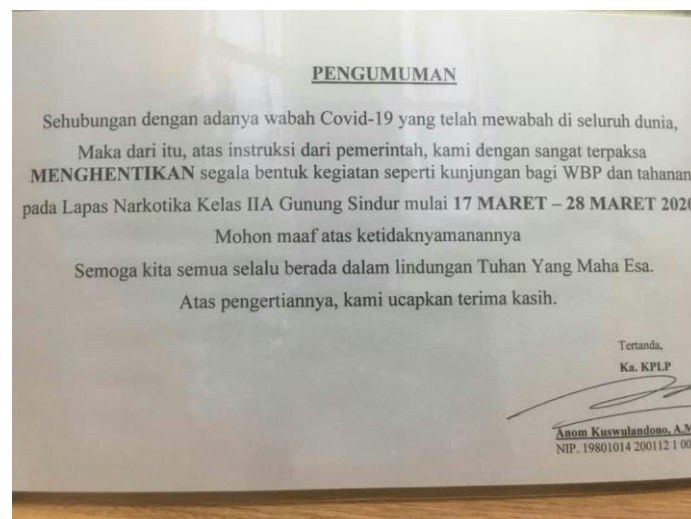


Image: An announcement cancelling visitations at Gunung Sindur Prison from 17-28 March (Rumsing Gunung Sindur: 17 Mar 20)

Likewise, Indonesian jihadists still in refugee camps overseas will also be particularly vulnerable if infections take root. Hundreds of ISIL sympathisers remain in Syrian camps under the control of Syrian, Iraqi, Russian and Kurdish forces, living in squalid conditions. Some messages in pro-ISIL chat groups have already flagged concerns that the virus may already be spreading to these camps:

After the PKK terror group-held areas have been reportedly infected with the coronavirus, there are reports that it has even spread to the Al-Hol camp and the militias have imposed a curfew on those held in Al-Hol camp, eastern rural Hasakah. The camps contain 1000s of Muslim families who had merely resided in ISIS areas or suspect to be ISIS family members. The virus spreading in the camps could be very difficult to deal with!

Oh brothers! Don't forget to pray for your brothers and sisters, especially the sisters in Roj camp because the Coronavirus has infected a French sister and an Iraqi sister there — they very likely got it from the PKK dogs or Iranian Shia infidels.

Further social media reports of real-life impacts of the virus on the jihadist community could spur some supporters to action. There will be little government appetite for providing medical assistance to convicted or suspected terrorists — either in Indonesia or overseas — when so many others are in need of help. Extremist charities with an online presence will likely fill this gap in the best-case scenario, providing basic necessities. Otherwise, others may seek to take matters into their own hands and follow ISIL's advice, outlined in its 19 March Al Naba editorial, to "free the Muslim prisoners in the prisons of the idolaters and the camps of humiliation in which they are threatened by disease."