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2017

Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin. (2017). After Muhammad Wanndy: What Next? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 089). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/83096>

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After Muhammad Wanndy: What Next?

By Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin

Synopsis

Malaysian IS operative in Syria Muhammad Wanndy bin Muhammad Jedi has been killed in a drone attack on 29 April 2017. Who is Muhammad Wanndy and who will succeed him?

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S CONFIRMATION of the death of Muhammad Wanndy bin Muhammad Jedi is expected to strengthen the disruption of several terrorist plots on Malaysia by the self-styled Islamic State (IS). While the radicalisation and recruitment of IS members are due to many factors, one key driver has been the presence of recruiters online. Until his death, Wanndy had been a prominent recruiter of support for his threats against the country.

Wanndy's death indirectly capped the Malaysian Branch's success in disrupting several terrorist plots by IS. It has arrested more than 250 IS members and supporters in Malaysia over the past five years, notably since the growing prominence of IS in the Syria conflict.

Who is Muhammad Wanndy bin Muhammad Jedi?

The 26-year-old Wanndy travelled to Syria with his pregnant wife in January 2015. He had narrated in his social media account that he had made the travel through Butterworth in Peninsular Malaysia and then to Thailand, Turkey and eventually Syria. Wanndy had been an online supporter even before he migrated to Syria.

However, he was identified in early 2015 after he appeared in a 30-second video

where he was seen smiling whilst holding the head of a beheaded victim of IS. Since then, his supporters had been following him online via his several online monikers which included 'Abu Hamzah al Fateh', 'Abu Sayyaf al Malizi' and 'Wakasilu Huruahara'.

Wanndy and his wife were active in their social media accounts. For their supporters, they shared their life stories in IS territory and propagated IS ideology to justify their motivations and actions. They portrayed life in IS as one filled with blessings, often posting heart-warming pictures of their family and gathering of friends, showing camaraderie among IS members.

With their supporters, they appeared warm and friendly. With his adversaries, Wanndy was aggressive. He released threats and showed off his military skills. He was always updated on counter terrorist developments in Malaysia. As the mastermind behind the Movida attack in Puchong, Selangor in June 2016, Wanndy was first to announce the perpetrators to be two members from the '*junud khilafah wilayah Malizia*'.

Both attackers were arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Further investigations show that Wanndy was involved in several other IS cells in Malaysia including the 'Al-Qubro Generation' and 'Kumpulan Gagak Hitam'. Other reports likened him to IS Indonesian militant in Syria, Bahrun Naim and suggested them working together to network operatives in Malaysia and Indonesia. Such cooperation would assist in the travels of militants. Both were purported to be part of IS external operations unit responsible for attacks outside of IS territories.

Will There Be Another Wanndy?

When news of Wanndy's death first seeped into the jihadi online community, his supporters sought his wife's words for confirmation. The latter announced on 30th April 2017 that the news was credible. She explained that she had identified Wanndy's body herself. While his supporters were quick to accept the news as it was told, the Malaysian authorities were doubtful initially.

No picture of Wanndy's body had been released. There were speculations that he might have staged his own death with the plan to return to Malaysia and to escape being targeted by American drones. This is especially so after he was listed as a 'most wanted' terrorist by the United States early April 2017. There were also reports of him siphoning off money from Malaysian operatives and of him having trouble with the IS leadership because of the absence of a successful attack in Malaysia.

Confirmation of his death on 8 May 2017, though, does not completely banish the expanding IS network in Malaysia. The IS ideology has spread, providing fertile ground for a replacement of recruiters and coordinators. They could be located in IS territories like Wanndy or even on home ground.

From Syria and Iraq, it is hard to predict his successor. Many Malaysians in IS territories have died in battles. Those believed to be alive have been absent online for at least a year. These include Malaysians known online as 'Fudhail Omar', 'Akel Zainal' and 'Zahar'. Known as the 'cook', 'drummer' and 'former Malaysian soldier'

respectively, they have been in Syria since 2014 and 2015. They were once very active, having thousands of followers online. Their tapering presence online started in 2015 when social media companies started shutting down their accounts. This raised concerns on whether they are now operating only on encrypted communication platforms.

Wives of Operatives

The Malaysians in IS territories who are visibly online today are wives of IS militants. They show no aggressive approach to recruit or radicalise and use the online platform more as an online diary where they jot their thoughts and emotions. However, this does not rule out their capabilities for active participation.

The case of Malaysian 'Dr Shams', has shown how women can be effective recruiters. In 2014 and 2015, 'Dr Shams' manned her own blog where she shared tips on how to travel to Syria to inquiring radicalised individuals. On home ground, avid IS supporters and Wanndy's fans too represent a pool of individuals who could be inspired to fill in his shoes in their strife to continue their perceived battle.

The key challenge today is in keeping up with the communication platforms recruiters and supporters are using. The last five years have allowed these like-minded individuals to find each other via open and public communication platforms such as social media. Today, our adversaries have largely moved on to encrypted platforms and possibly even the real-world.

Inter-agency Cooperation is Key

Terrorists know no geographical boundaries or limitations in their operations. This is seen in their inter-linkages such as those in terrorist groups in this region. Their networks are global, their target audience transcends communities from different fields and industries, and their communication exploits all means available today and tomorrow.

The multi-pronged approach very much called for in the fight against terrorism is urgently needed. However, this multi-pronged approach can only be attained through inter-agency cooperation which has real challenges. Political milieu and different interests of states, political parties, security, technology and communication agencies are among our barriers to working together. Until we push for a change, our weaknesses remain our adversary's playing field.

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