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Charity for “Jihad” in Syria: The Indonesian-Uyghur Connection

By Nodirbek Soliev

SYNOPSIS

A jihadist-aligned Indonesian fundraising group, the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), has been developing close connections with Uyghur and Central Asian fighters in Syria. This link could become a vector for fighters to exit from Syria, and a source of potential risks to Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

A NUMBER of Indonesian non-governmental charity organisations have undertaken philanthropic campaigns in support of suffering Syrian civilians. While most charities pursue a legitimate purpose, one such fundraising group, the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), has prioritised supporting the jihadist cause in Syria.

As part of these efforts, AAF has developed close ties with various Al Qaeda-linked militant groups on the Syrian battlefield, including the ones from China's Xinjiang province and Central Asia. This connectivity is significant for Southeast Asia in particular given the previous involvement of Uyghur militants in attack networks in Thailand and Indonesia. As we continue to see an exodus of foreign fighters off the Syrian battlefield, close attention should be paid to this vector as a possible source of future risks.

What is Abu Ahmed Foundation?

AAF is an Indonesia-based jihadist-aligned fundraising group founded and led by Tasniem, or Umyy Jibi, a widow of Indonesian fighter Abu Ahmed al-Indunisy, who was killed in 2015 fighting alongside the Al Qaeda-linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). An HTS-affiliated online user claimed that Tasniem is currently based in Syria, from where she might be coordinating the group's activities.

AAF's existence became more prominent towards the end of 2018 when the group started to publicise its activities through various social media platforms, including Facebook, Telegram, Instagram and Twitter.

AAF's online propaganda suggests that various local pro-Al Qaeda factions in Indonesia have promoted it, especially in the city of Cirebon in West Java, where most group members operate from. One of the key leaders of the pro-Al Qaeda Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS) group, Agung Nur Alam, alias Abu Usamah Nur Irhab, has often been invited to participate in AAF's grassroots preaching sessions.

In such gatherings, Agung was usually seen carrying the AAF flag, showing his support to the group. JAS is a splinter faction of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), the successor entity to Jamaah Islamiyah (JI).

Supporting the 'Caliphate'

AAF engages in activities that pursue a mixture of humanitarian relief and jihadist-supporting goals, calling on people to support "destitute and oppressed Muslims" in Syria, Palestine, Xinjiang and Burma, amongst others.

AAF claims that HTS has established a "rightful Islamic state in Syria" and it is now imperative for all Muslims to do their bit. In spite of its growing commitment to the Syrian jihad, AAF has so far presented itself as a non-violent group by abstaining from getting directly involved in any militant operations both in Indonesia and Syria.

Like many other Indonesian charities, group members collect donations on the streets, at mosques and preaching seminars. In the online domain, AAF usually circulates its fundraising appeals in the form of posters that contain bank account details, contact number and name of recipients of the funds.

AAF's propaganda videos and photos show that in Syria the group retains a team of volunteers assigned to deliver aid supplies primarily in the northern provinces of Idlib and Latakia. While a portion of the funds is used for social work such as the delivery of food and clothing for civilians, a significant amount is consistently diverted to jihadist groups fighting to keep HTS' "caliphate" alive.

The Uyghur/Central Asian Link

Uyghur and Central Asian foreign fighters are among the top recipients of the logistical and financial resources that AAF has delivered to the groups under HTS' umbrella. The group has been developing close links with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), Malhama Tactical and Kazakh fighters in particular.

AAF's narratives regularly cite the Uyghur "oppression" in Xinjiang and are emphatically critical of China. Such narratives are particularly valuable to the group as the Uyghur cause is very popular amongst the jihadist and broader community. AAF views TIP as the *mujahideen* force standing up for the "protection of defenceless Muslims" both in Xinjiang and Syria. The group has also launched targeted fundraising drives for Uyghur fighters and their families in Syria.

AAF has also been closely working with Malhama Tactical (MT), a private jihadist mercenary group, which serves as a special tactical training wing of HTS. MT was established in 2016 by Abu Rofik, an ex-Russian special air forces soldier born in Kyrgyzstan.

Since October 2018, AAF announced several rounds of online fundraising campaigns for MT, when the latter was “in need of help” to purchase airsoft rifles and to build a new training camp where “the *muhajireen* undergo their special training”.

In a video statement released September 2019 on Twitter, “Ali Shishani”, MT’s new leader from Russia, claimed to have received donations from AAF and also expressed gratitude to the foundation. Later, in November 2019, AAF members were seen visiting and having dinner with the Kazakh fighters “performing *ribat* (frontline guard) duties” in Syria.

Implications for Southeast Asia

While bound by aid in Syria at the moment, these groups may shift their attention in a more operational direction in the future. There is a possibility of AAF becoming a new connecting point between the battlefield in Syria (and Al-Qaeda linked factions in particular) and conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Some Uyghur fighters and even Central Asians who wish to leave the battlefield may use AAF’s local connections to relocate to Southeast Asia.

In such a scenario, battle-hardened Uyghur returnees (or Central Asians) may form alliances with Southeast Asian groups. The involvement of Uyghur militants in the Erawan Shrine bombing in Thailand in August 2015, their networking with the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) in Sulawesi and separately with the Batam-based cell known as Katibah GR in 2014-2016 to plot attacks had tangible security implications for the region.

Finally, the link between AAF and the battlefield in Syria (and in particular the Central Asian fighters) might help transform elements of the organisation into an additional security risk to Southeast Asia. While it is a charitable organisation principally now, time alongside militant groups and an increasingly hopeless situation on the ground in Syria might further radicalise elements of the group to violence.

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