

Indonesia's Newest Jihadists Are Down, but Not for Long

Rebecca Lunnon & Muh Taufiqurrohman | April 29, 2011



Members of the Indonesian police bomb-disposal unit recovering a parcel bomb near a church in Serpong on the outskirts of Jakarta on Thursday. The bomb was placed in an empty plot near an underground gas pipe. AFP Photo

Indonesia's Detachment 88 has once again struck a blow against terrorism by making arrests linked to March's spate of book bombs and by foiling the more recent bomb plot in Serpong.

However, even if the terrorist groups operating in Indonesia have been considerably weakened, they are a long way from being wiped out. The chief of the National Counter-Terrorism Agency recently said the country remains a haven for terrorists. The question remains, what are the dynamics that make it possible for groups to reconsolidate and recover despite a robust counter-terrorism operation? Part of the answer is found in the formation of specialized units and a different approach in the way jihadis handle the recruitment of new members.

Today, radicals are showing a preference for forming small specialized units that launch secret assassination-style attacks. The group linked to the book bombs showed this trend clearly by setting out to kill prominent public figures such as Uilil Abshar Abdalla and Gories Merre.

Specialized small units are not easily detected by the police and are easy to deploy. In addition, having small units operating for them, provides the more well-known organizations such as Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Jamaah As Sunnah and Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia that are generally unwilling to be publicly associated with terrorism, the ability to plausibly deny any involvement in terrorist acts.

The second noteworthy trend concerns recruitment. Although radical groups in Indonesia have often worked together, the Tandzim Al Qaeda Serambi Mekkah (Al Qaeda in Aceh) military camp was a genuine cross-organization project. Jihadis were recruited from a number of organizations, including JI, Kompak, Darul Islam, the Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid and the FPI. When the training was well underway, after they had presumably become a cohesive group, they began calling themselves members of Tandzim Al Qaeda Serambi Mekkah.

Though one might suspect that these developments might have caused ideological rifts within the groups, there was no evidence of such. It would seem that all jihadi groups, whatever name they may go by, acknowledge similarities in ideology and objectives with one another and are thus able to form strong working relations.

Perhaps a reason for the general lack of rifts between members of different radical groups is because of

the pattern of recruitment. As has always been the case, and will continue to be so, everyone recruited into the cause was either a friend or relative of one or more known jihadis. Only those deemed ready were told of the camp and offered the opportunity to participate.

An interesting paradox is evident from the indictments of those involved in or somehow connected to the Aceh military training camp. On one hand there was clear freedom of choice. It is a fact that many declined the invitation to join the training camp, citing work, financial or family reasons. There were also others who declined to participate in the training but offered to take logistical positions.

On the other hand, there was significant peer pressure, not only on those who participated but also on those who did not, to prove their convictions. As in the case of army deserter Yuli Harsono, his motive to kill two police officers last March in Kebumen, Central Java, and another two officers the following month in Purworejo, was not purely revenge for what the police had done to the jihadis in Aceh.

His ulterior motive was to show to some people who doubted his loyalty that he was trustworthy and a real jihadi. This is an ongoing trend, whereby radicals sometimes launch attacks because of their desire to be accepted as real jihadis, not because of purely ideological motives.

It remains to be seen whether the jihadis can consolidate their ranks and organize themselves sufficiently to set up another Aceh-style training camp. It would require financial resources. In the meantime, the jihadis are seen to favor assassination-style attacks.

There is still a lot of resentment toward Detachment 88 and other law enforcement authorities, and that could translate into retaliatory attacks against the Indonesian Police. However, it is probably the case that internal dynamics within the groups themselves are motivating individuals to commit more attacks than they might otherwise do.

The jihadis may have suffered a blow, but many of them will learn from their mistakes and endeavor to continue the struggle.

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