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Rohaiza Ahmad Asi

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Jemaah Islamiyah: An evolution in tactics or a weakening?

Rohaiza Ahmad Asi*

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THE discovery of three videotapes by the Indonesian police during raids on hideouts of the now deceased Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohd Top, who is still at large, is a significant development that deserves attention. No groups in the region have, thus far, been known to film suicide bombers before sending them out for an operation. Nor has the leader of the group appeared in a video, issuing threats to the West. Thus, this is a new phenomenon and questions abound as to why the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has switched to this approach.

The first video discovered by the police shows a militant, Tedi, believed to be trained by Azahari Husin, giving step by step instructions on how to make bombs using TNT, RDX, and other explosives, and making detonators from various materials including a mobile phone. The second video shows the three suicide bombers of the October 2005 Bali bombings explaining the motivations for their attacks. This was followed by a warning from a hooded man, reported to be Noordin Mohd Top, warning Western countries such as the US, England and Australia, of more attacks against them. The third video shows footage of men in masks practising shooting and jumping from a moving vehicle at an unnamed training camp.

The videotaping of militants' training session, suicide bombers' making their last will, and the group leaders' warning speech is a common phenomenon among Middle Eastern radical Islamic groups. But this was never so in this region. Clearly, this latest development reinforces the notion that terrorists learn from one another. But most importantly, it also begs the question why JI, seen as the most sophisticated terrorist group in the region, is doing this now.

JI in Crisis

Most terrorist groups are aware that violence alone is no longer enough to sow terror. The use of propaganda and the issuing of such videotapes are more, if not just as, effective in spreading terror and may have a deeper impact psychologically.

JI has been heavily crippled by the series of arrests and raids that have been conducted by the Indonesian authorities. The group faces an increasingly limited space to operate from as a result of intense surveillance by the authorities. Also, the cracks have deepened between the pro-bombing factions, such as those led by Noordin Mohd Top and Azahari Husin, and those in JI who believe in the long-term approach of proselytization. These two factors combined to make it harder for the deadly duo to find new recruits. Recent developments indicated that

they have been recruiting from other Islamist militant groups in Indonesia such as Darul Islam and not just from within the JI circles. It is in this context that the videotapes may be seen as a form of propaganda to attract new recruits, in addition to its purpose of providing motivation to existing members.

The video of the three suicide bombers was not just about their last will; it was also a call for more volunteers to join as suicide bombers. By saying that they were carrying out the attacks for a 'noble cause', they justified their acts and portrayed suicide bombing as worthy of emulation. The videos could be easily replicated and passed on within the Muslim community and other radical Islamist groups. It could also be that the morale of its members is waning in light of the mass arrests and increased raids. The group's leaders therefore needed a more aggressive approach to fuel the jihad spirit among its members.

Shift in Tactics

Having said that, these terrorists certainly wanted a larger audience. Why would Noordin Mohd Top - the Indonesian authorities seem convinced that the masked man in the video is him - make threats to the West if the message will never be seen by the target audience? There are many *jihadist* websites in Indonesia but there have not been any reports of these videos being posted on them. It has been reported recently that one website in Bahasa Indonesia has demonstrated tactics on how and where to kill foreigners in Jakarta, complete with diagrams. Among its contents are messages from Ustadz Mukhlis (likely to be the same person as Mukhlis alias Ali Ghufon who was given the death sentence for his role in the October 2002 Bali bombings) on how Muslims should conduct themselves. The website was removed shortly after its discovery by authorities.

However, unlike the more sophisticated Middle Eastern groups, JI does not have its own television channels and radio stations. This limits the reach of JI's message - which raises another possibility. These videos could have been left behind intentionally, as a means of determining if the security forces had discovered their safe house. If the tapes are discovered and broadcast, the cell knows which safe house has been compromised. This assumes that the occupants of the safe house are able to escape prior to its discovery, a flawed assumption in the case of Azahari Husin. In addition, the messages left by the terrorists will be broadcast to a wider audience. Thus, it could be that those videos were left lying around in their hideouts for a purpose.

Following the September 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta, the Indonesian police found a note in a raid that claimed responsibility for an attack. Interestingly, the hand-written note did not mention the place or date of the attack. The note was never released, however. Similarly, the three videos were recently discovered during the raids conducted by the police. Some speculate that JI is attempting to use the police as their public relations wing.

Since JI members have no proper channel to release their videos or a channel influential enough to gain the world's attention, the Indonesian authorities may be playing into the hands of these terrorists by publicising the group's videos and messages. After all, publicity is what terrorists want.

JI has been in existence since at least 1993, and have risen to notoriety particularly following the October 2002 Bali bombings. But the fact that the group has only now decided to use the sophisticated tactics of recording their messages implies a more important development

within the group: JI's military capability has waned in the recent years with the discovery of training camps in the country, increased raids and intense surveillance by the authorities. Thus, the discovery of these videos signal a significant shift in tactic from a heavy emphasis on the military approach to the active use of propaganda to keep the JI's ideology alive. If JI is not able to sow terror through grand-scale attacks any longer, these videos will play that role and keep the JI's terror campaign going.

It's time for Muslim clerics to unite

It is time for Muslim groups in the region to come together and condemn JI's propaganda. The showing of the videos to religious leaders in Indonesia and the plan to distribute the videos to ASEAN countries to enlist the help of Muslim clerics in those countries are important moves to counter the terrorists' skewed interpretation of Islam. Indonesia has realized that a military approach alone is insufficient. The authorities need to be more active in educating the public so that suspicious activities will not go unreported. Religious leaders too need to take a more prominent role in condemning the terrorists' acts and messages so as to cut off the group's supply of new recruits. This approach, if done pro-actively, will neutralise any unwanted gains from the terrorists' shift in tactics.

* Rohaiza Ahmad Asi is a Research Analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.