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After 17 July: Who is Prince of Jihad?

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After a lull since the execution of the Bali bombers, the extremist online community is finally reenergised by the arrest of the Prince of Jihad. Who is he?

THE FOUR-YEAR hiatus of terrorist attacks in Indonesia ended abruptly on 17 July 2009 when Jakarta was hit by the twin bombings that tragic day. Nine were killed and at least 50 wounded at the Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott. The effectiveness of hotel security was questioned and Indonesian authorities scrambled to mitigate extremist violence in the world's most populous Muslim country. Detachment 88 has managed to prove itself with several major successes with raids and arrests in Bogor, Bekasi, and Jakarta and obtaining information on the players behind the 17 July attacks. None of these incidents however, created the stir that the arrest of Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman a.k.a Prince of Jihad did. Who is he?

Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman

Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman was arrested on 25 August, by the counter-terrorist unit Detachment 88 on his way home to his parents' place in Pamulang, 30 kilometres southwest of Jakarta. The 29-year-old, who holds a passport under the name Muhammad Ricky Ardan bin Mohammad Iqbal, is suspected of being an accomplice of Saudi Arabian national Ali Muhammad Abdullah in channelling foreign funds into Indonesia for the financing of the recent Jakarta attacks. Muhammad Jibriel's contacts with foreign terrorists are long-standing; while a student studying in Karachi, Muhammad Jibriel was a member of the Al-Qaeda affiliated group, Al-Ghuraba, or The Foreigners. Al-Ghuraba was established in 1999 by former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) military leader Hambali. The group disintegrated when Hambali was arrested in 2003. Muhammad Jibriel then returned to Indonesia where he followed the footsteps of his father Abu Jibriel in proselytising militant views.

His father is the deputy leader of the Indonesian Mujahideen Council. Abu Jibriel had in the past lived in self-exile in Malaysia with Abu Bakar Bashir. The senior was also reported to be behind the establishment of the JI cell in Singapore with his recruitment of former Singapore JI leader Ibrahim

Maidin. Eventually arrested by the Malaysian authorities in 2001 under the Internal Security Act, the senior was deported to Indonesia on 14 May 2004, where he was sentenced to five and a half month's jail on 19 October 2004 for passport fraud. He was released on 30 October 2004 as he had already been in police custody for the amount of his sentence. Abu Jibriel then quickly began propagating his militant views to the Indonesian public. Today, he continues disseminating extremist thoughts with the assistance of the technologically-savvy younger generation represented by his son, Muhammad Jibriel. Together, they expanded the reach of their messages through the Internet.

Prince of Jihad

Muhammad Jibriel manages the operations of Arrahmah.com where he is known as Prince of Jihad (POJ). He is also the overall administrator for Arrahmah.com, a password-protected forum where he is sometimes referred to as an Ustadz or Islamic cleric by the participants. Involved in most of the discussions and news updates in the forum, POJ has a prominent presence among the participants, well-liked and respected. Arrahmah.com is known for its support of Al Qaeda, and timely news coverage on the Bali trio. It was always among the first if not the first 'news agency' to release propaganda by the Bali bombers which peaked in October and November 2008, just before and after their execution.

Belonging to the big umbrella of Arrahmah media, Arrahmah.com serves also as an advertising tool for Arrahmah media to promote its publishing activities. This included JihadMagz which contained speeches by Osama bin Laden, and the autobiographies of the Bali bombers. The scope and professional appearance of Arrahmah media, raised a critical question: Where does the money for this operation come from?

Shortly after POJ was arrested, Detachment 88 also raided the Arrahmah.com office, confiscating several documents and laptops. Since then, Arrahmah.com could no longer be accessed; and the reason given was high server demand. This was exactly what happened after the execution of the Bali bombers, when a page replaced the website stating that the server was down due to high viewing rate. The Arrahmah team quickly shifted supporters to a new URL, using an international registered domain, wordpress.

A facebook account titled "Support for Mujahid Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman" was promoted in POJ's father's facebook account. It had gathered 365 fans thus far and a long list of comments defending his innocence and highlighting the malevolence of the Indonesian authorities they deemed to be coming down hard on Islam and Muslims. This information, as is always the case when it comes from Arrahmah, is speedily making its way to other websites and blogs of the extremist online community. The support is greater than that seen for JI operatives Mas Selamat Kastari, Hambali, Abu Dujana and Noordin M Top.

Prohibiting Extremism

The interesting development here is that the community reacted not to an active terrorist, but to an online leader -- one who attacks with words and media, rather than actual operations. Time and again, we were told by the extremists and terrorists in their books and online articles that they are aware of the power of the masses, that the battle of ideology requires them to gather more support on their side. The significant support garnered following the arrest of POJ yet again demonstrates this reality.

As President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono states, Indonesia needs to tackle extremism in its quest against terrorism. That which exists on the Internet is not trivial, and mitigating it is needed. One way for this is to invest in countering extremist websites and to immunise the public against radical ideology with education.

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