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The Fatal Allure of Extremist Logic: Syaifudin Zuhri and the July 17 Suicide Bombers

Sulastri Osman

23 October 2009

Syaifudin Zuhri Djaelani was killed on October 9 during a police raid near Jakarta. Emerging details of how he recruited suicide bombers suggest that perhaps it is less the disaffected but more the intellectually curious who may be fodder for terrorist groups.

HE WAS TO be the next Noordin Top. Syaifudin Zuhri Djaelani, whose name gained notoriety after the July twin hotel bombings in Jakarta, was reported to be an explosives expert with an extensive network for operational assistance. A Poso veteran with suspected links to foreign terrorist finances, his reach went far beyond Indonesia. But Syaifudin's prospects as Noordin's replacement were, however, short-lived. Barely a month after Noordin was killed during a police raid in September, Syaifudin met with the same fate. Killed alongside his brother when the Indonesian police raided a terrorist safe house in Tangerang near Jakarta, Syaifudin brought with him to his grave many secrets surrounding his terrorist activities and associations.

Unanswered Questions

There remain many unanswered questions about the hotel bombings, countless related to the operational, logistical and financial aspects of the deed. But as investigations move forward, the intrigue lies less in Syaifudin's technical involvement in the operation than in his apparent ability to recruit suicide bombers. Said to possess a kind of magnetism and charisma that matched his mentor, Syaifudin was a talent scout constantly on the prowl for suitable "grooms" – insider lingo for suicide bombers – to be deployed on suicide missions. Dani Dwi Permana and Nana Ikhwan Maulana, the duo who blew themselves up in the bomb attacks on the JW Marriot and the Ritz Carlton, were in fact Syaifudin's handiwork. Investigations also revealed Syaifudin to be behind the video recording of the bombers' last statements, prodding them along off-screen to destroy the US, Australia and Indonesia.

It is no mean feat to convince someone of the logic of an excessively violent terrorist cause, especially so for individuals like Dani and Nana who had no prior history of violence. Syaifudin seemed to know what could make a person so willing to forsake everything, including family and friends, and latch on

to a narrative so extreme as to die for it. More significantly, Syaifudin seemed to know to target those who would.

His Targets: Bright Young Men

His targets were bright, young men. It was no accident that Syaifudin stationed himself in mosques that were frequented by students from a local Tangerang university. Based on an undergraduate's account to the local media of a meeting with him, Syaifudin would always take the time to engage them intellectually, often discussing the French Revolution and the Cold War. The student remembered being in awe of the soft-spoken man's knowledge of world affairs. Syaifudin would also often theorise about a cyclical seven-century ebb-and-flow of a great Islam – that Islam, strong between the 7th and 14th centuries and weak between the 14th and 21st, is once again in a cycle of ascendancy. The student recalled Syaifudin saying to him: "Islam will rise again. The question is do we want to be watching from the sidelines or play a part moving it along?"

Another youth recalled discussing the commandments of Islam with Syaifudin when they first met at a mosque. Soon after, Syaifudin started visiting him at his home and befriended other students at the boarding house by engaging in similar debates.

It was through such dialogues that Syaifudin built up personal relationships with the youths and invited some to join a Qur'an study group he led. Dani and Nana were members of such a group. While they did not study at the university, they were nevertheless bright, inquisitive individuals who were drawn to Syaifudin's seemingly rational arguments. Dani, Indonesia's youngest-ever suicide bomber, was 18 when he blew himself up. Fresh out of high school, the unassuming boy-next-door has been variously described as a keen student who loved basketball.

Troubles at home did not seem to quell his enthusiasm for life; even when his mother moved away with three other siblings to Kalimantan after his parents separated, he remained in Bogor to complete high school. He had also attempted to further his education to pursue a teaching career. Similarly, Nana, ten years older than Dani, was known by those around him to be a young man with a probing mind. A religious elder from Nana's hometown told local media that Nana was constantly discussing topics of social interests, politics and religion, and was "always full of ideas".

The Idealist and Intellectually Curious

Local reports have it that at least ten others from the study group are suspected to have been variously radicalised. Three – psychology graduate Fajar Firdaus and undergraduates Sonny Jayadi and Afham Ramadhan – are currently under investigation. They are most likely to be charged with abetting terrorism for helping hide Syaifudin and his brother at the boarding house in Ciputat which the police later raided.

The radicalisation of these youths goes to show that terrorist recruiters like Syaifudin sought to engage the intellectually curious and ultimately, convince the idealistic, that suicide bombings would help advance the Islamic cause. This is not to say, however, that the intellectually curious or the idealist is the problem. The danger is when ideals are manifested in violence. For impressionable youths looking to make an impact in the world, helping right wrongs makes perfect sense. As evident from Dani and Nana's last video recording, they seemed convinced they could change the world with that one (technically, two) act of self-sacrifice and this played right into Syaifudin's hands.

Dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the Muslim world helps the extremist narratives for a wider Muslim struggle. It also makes their call for bloodshed easier to resonate with the young, idealistic Muslim individual. Undoubtedly, this is an issue that needs to be addressed at multiple

levels. The more immediate threat lies with people like Syaifudin who help provide the warped logic for violence that necessitates the killing of others.

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