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Jihadi Recidivism: The Case of Indonesia

By V. Arianti

Synopsis

In 2010 Indonesia has seen “a significant” number of jihadi recidivists or relapsed cases. Why has it occurred and what has the Indonesian government done to address this problem?

Commentary

SINCE THE 2002 Bali Bombings, almost 600 jihadists have been arrested and some 240 of them have completed their sentences. In 2010 alone, 100 radicals were arrested, with more than a dozen of them repeat offenders, including the prominent jihadi leaders such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, Abdullah Sunata, and Mustofa alias Abu Tholut. Despite the low number of jihadi recidivists – or relapsed cases -- they should not be underestimated. They are the leaders who have orchestrated Lintas Tanzim or Tanzim Al Qaeda Serambi Mekkah – a loose jihadi coalition which planned to launch attacks on Indonesia’s president and ministers, embassies of the United States, Australia, Denmark, as well as the police headquarters last year. What are the factors that have contributed to jihadi recidivism in Indonesia?

Lapses in Prison Security

Some notorious jihadists have taken advantage of the lax security in certain prisons in the country to build terror groups, prepare attacks and develop their ideology. Rois, who is in prison awaiting execution for his role in the 2004 Australian embassy bombing, was found in possession of eleven mobile phones, which he used to recruit some Lintas Tanzim members. Toni Togar, currently serving 20 years in jail, borrowed a prison warden’s mobile phone to mastermind a string of robberies in North Sumatra last year. He also used a prison warden’s bank account for unspecified purposes. Abu Tholut, a leader of the Lintas Tanzim, recruited IT experts while in prison. The authorities subsequently moved Rois and Toni to an isolated maximum-security prison in Nusa Kambangan Island. Correctional officers implicated have been investigated.

Recruitments in Prisons

The United Kingdom-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) outlined that prisons have served as a place for peaceful change and transformation through individual deradicalisation. On the other hand, prisons could also act as a key “manpower generator” for the jihadi movement. In some cases, prisons provide recruits through the process of radicalising criminals. Aman Abdurrahman managed to indoctrinate a few criminal inmates to join the Lintas Tanzim. Therefore, when Aman was re-arrested last year, his cell was isolated from other jihadi or criminal prisoners.

The 2010 ICSR report argued that there are no hard and fast rules whether terrorist prisoners should be concentrated or separated and isolated. Meanwhile concentrating jihadi inmates in some penitentiaries or same cells could serve as a place for ideological reinforcement or a chance for them to develop a strategy upon their release -- unless they experienced a structured deradicalisation programme. Fadli Sadama, a jihadi recidivist who was rearrested for the same crime -- bank robbery -- was imprisoned in the same penitentiary in Medan with Toni Togar, who was convicted for the 2003 Lippo Bank robbery. Both of them have orchestrated a series of robberies in Medan last year.

ICSR has noticed that imprisoned terrorists may want to use their time in jail to help develop their movements' strategy and ideology. Aman Abdurrahman translated a book of Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a global jihad strategist, which has inspired the formation of the Lintas Tanzim. Therefore, it is important for correctional officers to monitor the inmates' visitors as well as the inmates' writings that get smuggled out of prison and disseminated to the public.

Deradicalisation and Remission Programmes

Dennis A. Pluchinsky, a senior terrorism expert, posited in his article "Global Jihadist Recidivism" in the journal *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, that the jihadists' uniqueness lies in their use of *takeyya* (to prevent, or to guard against). This justifies them to lie -- even to the extent of denying their faith -- as long as they do not mean it in their hearts, under circumstances that they perceive as life-threatening. In this regard, no one could assure whether terrorist inmates who participated in deradicalisation programmes are sincere or more driven by incentives offered in the programmes.

Abdullah Sunata's case explained this well. He participated in a prison's deradicalisation programme, and in one instance, he was modelled as a successfully reformed prisoner. In prison, the two-faced Abdullah Sunata showed that he had become a reformed inmate and hence deserved a few years of remission. Sunata clearly used the incentive to get early release and to set up the Lintas Tanzim.

The Indonesian government has also given remission to inmates, including terrorists, which is typically awarded to commemorate the Indonesian Independence Day and Eid al-Fitr, the annual Muslim celebration after the fasting month of Ramadan. On these days, a terrorist will receive a remission due to good behaviour during their time in prison, even if they had broken prison regulations or were preaching jihad during detention. Recognising the problem of terrorist recidivism, the Minister of Law and Human Rights Patrialis Akbar planned to prohibit remission for terrorists. However, to pursue such a policy involves a complex political negotiation process which makes it unlikely to be implemented soon.

Success Stories

There are some success stories of the country's prison deradicalisation programme, including converting Nasir Abas and Ali Imron as well as some other jihadi ranks to denounce violence. However, the government still needs to take some serious steps to address the jihadi recidivism in Indonesia. A more comprehensive and structured curriculum including meticulous psychological assessment for terrorist inmates is needed. More seriously, the problems of some correctional officers receiving bribes should be addressed immediately. Failure to do so will undermine the effectiveness of any deradicalisation programme.

Above all, inter-agencies cooperation is required because the problems of relapses are outside the domain of law enforcement agencies. It remains to be seen whether the newly established National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) -- which serves as a supreme body that manages various government agencies in combating terrorism -- could tame the terrorists in prison.

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