

The rise of Indonesia's 'accidental guerillas'?

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The arrest of two university students in Central Java on terrorism charges two weeks ago – following a wave of arrests in recent months – highlights several trends regarding Indonesia's evolving terrorist threat.

First, as a recent International Crisis Group report argued, there are now at least three jihadi streams in the country.

One is the "mainstream" Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that teaches jihad, advocates military training, but says the faithful currently lack the resources to take on the enemy and therefore should focus on building their ranks through religious outreach.

Another is the splinter group, previously led by the late Noordin Top, which tends to be more violent and focus on suicide bombings targeting Western interests.

Finally, as the recent terror arrests in Aceh and Java suggest, a new group has emerged, representing a coalition of individuals from various factions (including JI, Darul Islam and Kompak) who have grown disillusioned with the first two groups.

These men, initially led by the late Dulmatin, believed that while jihad could be applied now, it should be done as a means to establish Islamic law and should therefore use "targeted assassinations" as a tactic to minimise Muslim casualties – a departure from the Noordin-style indiscriminate suicide bombings.

Such permutations underscore the adaptive capability of local jihadi groups that often baffles the Indonesian authorities, who are still trying to keep up with the growing network while facing constraints in resources. It also serves as a stark reminder once again that Indonesia's terror threat is not straightforward, nor is it all about JI.

Also, the recognition that suicide bombings are counter-productive suggests that the next generation of leaders of violent groups realise the crucial importance of winning "the hearts and minds" of Indonesia's Muslim population.

The ultimate challenge therefore lies not in the traditional tactical attacks against terror cells, but in the local and national governments' ability to strengthen communal resilience and their "immune system" in the face of violent,

radical ideologies.

Especially when we consider the possibility that Indonesia might be witnessing a shift from being confronted by small, radical fringe groups targeting Western interests to one posed by an embryo of an insurgent movement: Grassroots "uprisings", large-scale or otherwise, that seek to supplant or perhaps overthrow established government structures.

This is indicated, for example, by the growing focus of terror groups with attacking government officials, their growing obsession with implementing Islamic law, and their continued search for a "local base" from which they can begin their quest to establish an Islamic state.

Though these goals are not new, the way they begin to take centre stage and influence operational decisions – including the establishment of the Aceh cell – suggest increasingly "localised" groupings with specific local goals, instead of the "internationalised" terror network of a decade ago.

Indonesia's jihadi groups, such as JI, have always drawn their foot soldiers from socio-economically impoverished groups, while their leadership typically originates from the alienated, radicalised elite (such as those affiliated with the banned Darul Islam, or political exiles).

Finally, the fact that the recent wave of arrests uncovered new leaders with new cells filled with individuals from various backgrounds, including professionals and students, may indicate the next evolution of the closely-knit traditional recruitment drive into perhaps the initial stages of an "accidental guerilla" syndrome.

This syndrome, first mooted by world-renowned counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen in reference to Al Qaeda's strategy, essentially describes how local traditional communities could be "infected" by violent ideologies coming from a group like Al Qaeda (or in Indonesia's case, JI) – leading to a "contagion" of those ideas.

If the government responds harshly, while failing to deliver basic governance, then the "infected" local community could join forces with the violence-inciting group and begin fighting the government – turning members of that community into "accidental guerillas".

As some factions within JI had previously adhered to Al Qaeda's ideology and strategy, this is what some JI leaders tried to do in Ambon and Poso following the ethnic-religious conflict there from 1999 to 2001. This is also what Dulmatin had tried to do in Aceh recently – and perhaps in other areas as well.

These arguments may not be new, but they attest to the need to rethink how we frame the terror threat facing Indonesia and propose a new approach – one that complements the existing "enemy-centric" strategy of tactical arrests and imprisonment with a "population-centric" strategy of attacking the ability of jihadi

groups to infect the local population.

This may be the "long war" that Indonesia needs to face. ■

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