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Im Fokus

Jemaah Islamiyah after the Recent Wave of Arrests: How Much Danger Remains?

Jemaah Islamiyah nach der jüngsten Verhaftungswelle: Wie viel Gefahr besteht noch?

Dirk Tomsa

Abstract

In June 2007, the Indonesian police arrested two top leaders and a number of other alleged members of Southeast Asia's most prominent terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The arrests were the latest in a whole series of successful police operations that has weakened JI over the last few years. Some observers now believe that JI no longer poses an immediate threat to Indonesian security, but others disagree, arguing that JI is merely in a temporary consolidation phase. This article will assess these claims by examining the importance of the recent arrests and placing them in the broader context of Indonesia's continuing efforts to promote democratization and reconciliation. It will be argued that JI is indeed still a dangerous organization, but that the nature of the threat seems to have changed. JI may no longer be an immediate threat to Western interests in Indonesia, but it continues to jeopardize stability in Indonesia because its quintessential ideological goal to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia still resonates with many young Indonesians. This is particularly dangerous in areas like Poso where years of communal violence have left many young people disillusioned and susceptible to JI's jihadi ideology.

Keywords: Jemaah Islamiyah, Indonesia, terrorism, Islam, democratization, Poso

Introduction

In June 2007 Indonesia's special anti-terror unit Detachment 88 arrested seven terror suspects in a series of operations in Central Java. The identities of the captives were kept secret for several days, but media reports quickly speculated that amongst those that had been detained in the raids may be a top aide of one of the most wanted men in Indonesia, the alleged Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) military

commander Abu Dujana.¹ A few days after the operation, on 13 June 2007, the national police stunned the press by confirming that it was actually not an aide of Dujana, but the alleged top terrorist himself who had been captured. And there was more to come. Another two days later, police also confirmed that in the same operation Dujana's alleged superior in JI, Zarkasih,² had also been arrested. In other words, within three days the Indonesian police had detained two of the highest-ranking members of JI, thereby dealing a major blow to Southeast Asia's most feared terror organization.

The arrests were widely and deservedly hailed as 'a major triumph for the police' (Jones 2007a) and another significant step in the fight against terrorism in Indonesia. More importantly, they were by no means an isolated or incidental success for the Indonesian police. Over the last few years some remarkable progress has been made in the efforts to disrupt the activities of Jemaah Islamiyah. More than 220 suspects have been jailed for involvement in terrorist activities since the first Bali bombing in 2002, and several others were killed in shootouts with the police.³ In view of these developments, there is no doubt that the consistent pressure from the police has left its mark on JI. For example, it is noteworthy to point out that since the second Bali bombing in October 2005, which killed 26 people, no more large-scale bomb attacks have been executed by JI. In fact, many observers believe that JI's capacity to repeat attacks of the scale of the two Bali bombings (in 2002 and 2005), the Marriot Hotel bombing (in 2003) or the Australian Embassy bombing (in 2004), has severely decreased over the last eighteen months or so (ICG 2007a).

Despite this cautious optimism, however, politicians and analysts alike do not tire of warning that JI still poses a significant threat. This article will assess these claims by recapitulating the most recent events and placing them in the broader context of Indonesia's continuing efforts to promote democratization and reconciliation. It will be argued that JI is indeed still a dangerous organization, but that the nature of the threat seems to have changed. With only a small and

¹ Like so many other terrorists, Abu Dujana used several aliases to disguise his identity. Other names under which he was known include Yusron, *Pak Guru* (teacher), Mahfud, Ainul Bahri, Sobirin and Dedi.

² Of course, Zarkasih, too, had many aliases. Before his arrest he had been identified as Zuhroni or Oni, Nuaim, Abu Irsyad and *Mbah* (grandfather).

³ The most prominent JI member who was killed was Malaysian bomb-maker Dr Azahari Husin who was shot dead in a gun battle with police in 2005.

rather isolated splinter faction around Malaysian-born fugitive Noordin Top still dedicated to Al-Qaeda-style tactics, attacks on Western interests in Indonesia appear increasingly unlikely to be committed in the name of Jemaah Islamiyah. Yet, the organization remains a threat to Indonesia's nascent democracy because its quintessential ideological goal – to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia – continues to resonate with many young Indonesians who, for a variety of reasons, hold grievances against the state. This is particularly dangerous in areas that in recent years have been affected by communal violence.

By looking at the latest dynamics within JI and the involvement of its fighters in the conflict region of Poso, this article will demonstrate that while continuous police pressure has substantially weakened the terror network, the concentrated utilization of human, financial and material resources in the fight against JI has been complemented by a dangerous neglect of reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in areas of communal conflict which have long provided fertile ground for the recruitment of new jihadist fighters. Thus, although the top layer of the organization may be weakened, its pool of new followers will probably continue to grow.

Significance of the Arrests of Abu Dujana and Zarkasih

The arrests of Abu Dujana and Zarkasih were the latest in a remarkable series of recent successes achieved by the Indonesian police in general and its anti-terror unit Detachment 88 in particular. This special unit was established in 2003 as a reaction to the first Bali bombing which killed 202 people, many of them foreign tourists.⁴ It is funded by the US State Department and its members have received specific anti-terror training from American and Australian intelligence and federal police officers. Today, Detachment 88 is widely regarded as a highly efficient and skilful anti-terror unit, with one former Australian security official going as far as describing it as 'one of the best community police forces in the world' (*New York Times* 2005).

⁴ Some observers have speculated that the name of the unit was chosen to honor the 88 Australians who died in the first Bali bombing. Others have suggested that the name was chosen because the number 88 looks like handcuffs, while yet another theory claims that it is meant to reflect a phonetic similarity between the word 'eighty-eight' and the acronym ATA, which stands for Anti-Terrorism Assistance, the US-program that provided the initial funds for the new Indonesian unit.

Indeed, Detachment 88's list of achievements is impressive. Once the initial training phase was over, the unit began its work with great determination and quickly diminished the ranks of Indonesia's terror networks. More than 220 suspects were detained since the establishment of the unit, but few arrests have made such spectacular headlines as the most recent captures of Abu Dujana and Zarkasih. Dujana in particular had been on the police's most wanted list for several years, but despite the good work of Detachment 88 he repeatedly eluded capture. His eventual arrest came as a direct result of previous police operations in Central Sulawesi (in January 2007) and in Central Java (in March 2007), both of which produced a wealth of information that finally led investigators on the trail to Banyumas in Central Java where Dujana was hiding.

In order to understand the significance of Dujana's arrest it is worth looking at his track record in a bit more detail. Born in 1968 in Cianjur in West Java, Abu Dujana was exposed to religious extremism from a very early age on when he received his Islamic education from a teacher with strong connections to Darul Islam, JI's progenitor. In his late teens Dujana was selected by his teacher to go to Pakistan and Afghanistan where he was not only trained in various terrorist activities, but also developed far-reaching networks with fellow Islamic fighters. Some observers believe that he may even have met Osama bin Laden while he was there.⁵

Following his time in Afghanistan, Abu Dujana moved to Malaysia to join a religious school set up by JI founders Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir. He eventually returned to Indonesia after the fall of Suharto, committing himself to JI's armed struggle for the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia. While the exact nature of his involvement in the various attacks perpetrated by JI between 2000 and 2005 remains unknown at this stage, the Indonesian police believes that he was either involved or at least had knowledge of all major JI attacks since the first Bali bombing. Moreover, Dujana played an important linkage role in the organization since he was 'the conduit between the organisation's mainstream and the radical splinter network run by the architect of the bombings in Bali and of Australia's Jakarta embassy, Noordin Top' (*The Age* 2007).

⁵ In an interview with CNN conducted after his capture, Dujana himself also claimed that he met bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Dujana's Role in JI

Before his capture, Abu Dujana's actual position in the hierarchical structure of JI was disputed among foreign observers. While all experts agreed that he was certainly one of the highest-ranking commanders, his exact level of influence remained a matter of speculation. Just a few weeks before the June raids, the police had declared him the most wanted man in Indonesia, based on the belief that Dujana may have risen to the top leadership position of emir. Independent observers like Sidney Jones or Greg Fealy, however, questioned whether Dujana was senior enough for the top position. Jones, for instance, has long argued that Dujana was not emir, but 'only' the top military commander of JI who was still reporting to someone higher up (ICG 2007a). Similarly, Greg Fealy has been quoted as saying that

he [Dujana] is very bright, one of the smartest in the JI leadership, operationally and administratively. [...] But he is young. He's also not particularly religiously knowledgeable. That's why people doubted he was emir [...] Also the fact that he was a high priority fugitive from the police made him an unlikely head of JI (*The Australian* 2007).

After the arrests in June, it is now clear that Dujana was indeed not the emir. Both Dujana and Zarkasih have confirmed that it was Zarkasih – and not Dujana – who led JI in the last few years. On a videotape shown to the press by the Indonesian police shortly after his arrest, Dujana said,

From 1993 to 2000, Jamaah was led by *ustadz* [teacher] Abdullah Sungkar, then he was replaced by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, from 2000 to 2002. Then from 2002 to 2003 [JI] was led by *ustadz* Abu Risyan. From 2003 to 2005 it was led by *ustadz* Adung, and from 2005 until now [it] was [led] by Zarkasih (*The Jakarta Post* 2007a).⁶

Implications of the Arrests for JI's Organizational Development

It could be argued that the frequent changes of leadership in Jemaah Islamiyah are yet another indicator of the successful work of the Indonesian police. Indeed, the aforementioned list of leaders shows that with the exception of Abdullah Sungkar, who died of natural causes in 1999, all emirs were sooner or later

⁶ The exact time when Zarkasih became emir, however, still remains unclear as Zarkasih himself claimed that it was 2004, while Dujana said it was 2005 (*The Jakarta Post* 2007a).

captured by the Indonesian police. At the same time, however, the frequent changes also demonstrate that JI has, so far, not had any problems with replacing their top ranks. However, this may change after the arrests of Zarkasih and Dujana, since the organization has now lost two of the last representatives of the so-called ‘Afghanistan generation’ (*The Age* 2007). As a matter of fact, few of the new generation of JI fighters can match the battlefield credibility of leaders like Dujana and Zarkasih who, just like Sungkar, Bashir or Risyan, had built their reputations on the experience they gained during their spells alongside the Afghan mujahideen.

The lack of authority of the new JI generation may have serious implications for the future organizational structure of JI. At the top of the hierarchy, it seems unlikely that whoever succeeds Zarkasih as emir and Dujana as military commander will command as much respect and authority as the early emirs. Even Zarkasih was initially only appointed ‘emergency emir’ when his predecessor was arrested in June 2004, despite his track record from Afghanistan and his status as leader of Mantiqi II,⁷ which has arguably emerged as the most important *mantiqi* in the last few years.⁸ Significantly, this incremental decline of authority may in turn impact on the structural coherence of JI. Some observers fear that the lack of a powerful JI leader may pave the way for further factionalism (Abuza 2007) and the emergence of new, potentially more radical splinter groups which may want to follow in the footsteps of Noordin Top rather than those of Abu Bakar Bashir or Zarkasih. According to Sidney Jones (2007b), for example, such trends are already observable in parts of Java

where a network of JI schools (some 20 out of a total of 30,000 schools, so the Islamic school system is not the problem) continues to produce a new generation of potential recruits, and where the increasing reluctance of JI leaders to sanction attacks is pushing some hotheads into the arms

⁷ JI was, until recently, believed to have four territorial divisions (*mantiqi*), with Mantiqi II covering Java, Sumatra and most of Eastern Indonesia. These administrative divisions are now believed to have been abandoned, primarily as a result of the recent wave of arrests and the dysfunctionality of Mantiqi I (Malaysia and Singapore) and Mantiqi IV (Australia) in the wake of anti-terror crackdowns in these countries (Jones 2005).

⁸ Many observers today regard Java as the main gravity centre of activity for Jemaah Islamiyah. Indeed, one could argue that Zarkasih may have become emir in 2004 more or less by default since ‘the commands that covered Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia [are] destroyed or in disarray’ (Jones 2007a).

of more radical groups.

The prospect of a factionalization of JI into numerous small jihadist groups is certainly an immensely terrifying scenario. On a broader scale, however, an arguably even more dangerous threat that emanates from JI – whether it is united or factionalized – seems to be the enduring appeal of the terrorists' quintessential ideological message which continues to resonate with a small, but dangerous group of Muslim hardliners. For more than fifty years now extremist Islamist ideology has survived in Indonesia in one form or another, first through Darul Islam and more recently through JI (ICG 2005). Neither the authoritarian New Order regime nor the current democratically elected government have been able to effectively and conclusively root out this sentiment. While the number of Islamist extremists has never been large, their continuous presence remains a serious cause for concern, especially in areas where unresolved localized grievances continue to provide fertile ground for the recruitment of new jihadists.

Jemaah Islamiyah in Poso

One of those areas is Poso, a small town in the province of Central Sulawesi, which rose to prominence for all the wrong reasons in late 1998 when it was ravaged by a bloody communal conflict. The initial period of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims lasted until December 2001 when a peace agreement was reached between the warring parties in the South Sulawesi town of Malino. Despite the accord, however, Poso was never genuinely pacified. After large-scale communal clashes had subsided, a new pattern of violence quickly emerged which consisted predominantly of selective terror attacks such as targeted assassinations, bombings, beheadings and armed robberies. For the period between November 2003 and January 2006, the International Crisis Group listed a total of fourteen such crimes, including the beheading of three Christian schoolgirls which made international headlines (ICG 2007b:2).

It is now well-known that much of this terrorist violence was orchestrated by Jemaah Islamiyah and local fighters affiliated with or at least trained by the organization. JI had been active in Poso since 2000 when it began to send trainers to support local Muslim fighters in their armed struggle against Christian militias. As the conflict progressed, JI leaders began to regard Poso not only as an important place to fight an armed struggle, but also as an ideal location to nurture support for the establishment of an Islamic state (ICG 2004:14/17). It is indeed important to note that the activities of JI in Poso were just as much about

proselytisation (*dakwah*) as they were about waging jihad.⁹ In this regard, it was actually in the interest of JI that large-scale violence came to a halt after the Malino accord because the organization could use this relative calm to consolidate its infrastructure on the ground.

Nonetheless, violence was and continues to be a key means for JI to achieve its objectives, and therefore it was also necessary for the group to perpetuate the conflict in Poso. In the immediate aftermath of the Malino accord this task was taken over by another jihadist group operating in the area, Mujahidin KOMPAK, but by 2003 JI was back in the mix, orchestrating a number of targeted attacks like the ones mentioned above.¹⁰ Over the next three to four years this kind of low-level violence would characterize the situation in Poso, thereby continuously undermining tentative government efforts to reconcile local communities. It was not before January 2007 that the police finally dealt a major blow to JI's activities in Poso when it swooped on a housing complex in Tanah Runtu, a neighborhood in the southwest of Poso. At least twelve alleged terrorists were killed in the course of action, prompting fears that the operation would set in motion a new wave of retaliation and violence. By the time of writing, these fears have not eventuated, but many observers remain concerned about the deterioration of relations between the police and the local Muslim community since the raid.

The Importance of Zarkasih and Dujana for JI's Poso Operations

Information gathered from the January operation led the Indonesian police to other JI hideouts in Java and eventually to Zarkasih and Abu Dujana. This was by no means a coincidence as the two leaders had long been suspected of strong involvement in the Poso violence. Yet, their exact roles remained a mystery until the very end. In a report published shortly before the July arrests, for example, the International Crisis Group speculated extensively about the nature of the connection between JI cells in Java and Poso, but stressed that no conclusive evidence was yet available: 'The conundrum may only be sorted out when Abu

⁹ Apparently, the rigorous religious indoctrination annoyed some impatient locals who were mainly interested in learning how to fight, but not so much in learning how to read the Quran (ICG 2004:8/9).

¹⁰ As noted in a report by the International Crisis Group, these attacks were needed in order to 'keep the spirit strong' (ICG 2004:16).

Dujana, Zulkarnaen and Nuaim [Zarkasih], or one of the three, is arrested' (ICG 2007a:4).

Now that two of the three have been detained, some of the missing mosaic stones in the puzzle have been pieced together, but the full details are yet to be revealed. It is, however, clear now that Zarkasih and Dujana were indeed key driving forces behind JI's engagement in Poso. According to the Head of Detachment 88, General Surya, Zarkasih was the key figure who orchestrated much of the violence in Poso from behind the scenes. *The Jakarta Post* (2007a) quotes the general as saying 'He [Zarkasih] sent explosives from Surabaya to Poso. He also sent ulema and mujahideen there.'

Their detainment therefore should mean good news for Poso and according to some observers the prospects for peace and reconciliation in Poso are indeed quite promising now.¹¹ Others, however, disagree. Peng Kuan (2007), for example, claims that 'it is highly probable that the JI would seek to stage another incident in Poso'. Drawing comparisons between JI and the insurgency in Iraq, he argues that

JI's motives for stirring up civil violence and religious strife in Sulawesi would follow the same logic as deviant insurgent groups in Iraq. Where anarchy reigns, terror and disparate groups can thrive (Peng/Koo 2007). Given the importance of Zarkasih and Abu Dujana for the continuation of JI's Poso operation, Peng Kuan's fears appear slightly exaggerated. Without the two leaders, crucial channels of communication and logistics are disrupted, and it seems likely that those JI members who are still in Poso will discontinue their activities at least in the near future in order to distract the authorities' attention from the area. Ironic as it may seem, however, this is exactly where one of the biggest dangers looms for Poso.

Poso without JI: Peace at Last?

In the last few years the Indonesian government, police and judiciary have concentrated large material and human resources in their fight against JI and as mentioned above, this concentration has yielded a number of remarkable results. In a region like Poso, however, it is crucially important that the fight against terrorism is complemented by effective measures to facilitate the reconstruction

¹¹ At a public lecture in Melbourne on 3 July 2007, Sidney Jones expressed this view when replying to a question from the audience.

of infrastructure and the reconciliation between the religious groups. After all, the conflict in Poso began long before JI became involved in the violence (Aragon 2001; Klinken 2007). Unfortunately though, many reconciliation efforts so far have been marred by shortcomings and failures.

Judicial trials, for example, have contributed relatively little to restoring peace and trust between the communities. As McRae (2007) has demonstrated in his analysis of the trials of three Christian militia members, judicial investigations have often been characterized by procedural shortcomings and the absence of a systematic approach to prosecution that could have placed individual crimes within the broader context of the ethnic conflict in Poso. Similarly, political efforts have been hampered by the weak leadership of regent Piet Inkiriwang who has also been dogged by allegations of corruption and nepotism (*Sinar Harapan* 2007). Even civil society groups have so far achieved fairly little in facilitating dialogue between the two religious communities (Azca 2007). The lack of progress on all fronts has frustrated many residents in Poso, some of them now campaigning for the partition of the town into two districts (*The Jakarta Post* 2007b).

Concluding Remarks

In sum, Poso is still far from being pacified. In this enduring climate of fear and suspicion, tensions continue to simmer underneath the surface, waiting to be reignited by the smallest of sparks. For the moment, it seems unlikely that JI will provide that spark, but it is not inconceivable that others will step in where JI has left off. As the International Crisis Group wrote a few years ago,

if JI were to disappear as an organization tomorrow, there would still be groups like Bulan Sabit Merah with a commitment to jihad as armed struggle and the potential to wreak havoc, although on a much smaller scale (ICG 2004:13).

Shortly after the arrests of Zarkasih and Abu Dujana in June 2007, Ansjad Mbai, the head of the anti-terror desk at the Office of the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, echoed this sentiment when he said:

The organization is weak for the moment with the recent arrests, but there are always replacements. We could capture all the figures, but still the ideology will linger the way it has since rebel movements wishing to create an Islamic state in Indonesia emerged decades ago (*The Jakarta Post* 2007c).

The remarks make it clear that Indonesia's fight against terrorism is far from over. Without a doubt, the recent series of arrests was a significant milestone, and large-scale bomb attacks as in Bali appear increasingly unlikely. But in the long term the good police and intelligence work that has made these arrests possible will need to be complemented by intensified efforts to provide an alternative socio-political and socio-economic vision for Indonesia's future which can weaken the appeal of JI's message of an Islamic caliphate. Nowhere is such a vision more urgently needed than in Poso where the lack of progress towards peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of the Malino Agreement has made it easy for JI to recruit a multitude of new fighters. More often than not, these fighters are not the kind of dedicated Islamists we often associate with JI. Rather, they are often disillusioned youths who have turned to JI as a means to deal with their unresolved grievances (Jones 2007b). It is these grievances that need to be addressed if the government wants to take the fight against terrorism to the next level.

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