

**Combating Terrorism in Indonesia:  
Where Are We Exactly Now?**

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## 1

Sometimes ago, the Detachment 88 —Indonesia's counter-terrorism unit— stormed one senior high school in North Sumatera. The raid was carried out not on a tip that terrorists were hiding in the school. Nor that the teachers or students were involved in terrorist acts. Rather, this unit was instructed to burst into the school simply because some teachers were trying to change the student answers of the nationally administered final exam. The move drew criticism: how it all possible for such an agency to seize a group of harmless teachers, knowing that its task is to crack down terrorism. The irony put aside, one might think that the fact that the Detachment 88 was willing to divert its attention to non-terrorist acts indicated that perhaps terrorism is no longer a task this unit needs to be preoccupied with. In other words, the long-hard efforts have yielded something, causing serious damages to institutions as well as individuals responsible for terrorism. Because of it, concentration could be shifted elsewhere!

But is it really the case? Should that be the case, where are we now exactly in the fight against terror?

When violent acts began to take place in Indonesia, in the early years after President Soeharto departed his office, they were generally believed to be the works of Soeharto's cronies. In spite of the fact that information were there, that terrorism may be at work, the government would not think in that line. Even after the dreadful attacks on the United States in September 2001, and that some radical Muslims eyed Southeast Asia, Indonesia in particular, for similar attacks, the government still would not budge. Things began to change, however, when terrorists blasted Bali in October 2002, killing more than 200 innocent civilians. Since then, serious measures have been undertaken, yet terrors remained frequent occurrences. Cases in point included the blasting of J. W. Marriot Hotel; the bombing of the Australian Embassy, and the Bali bomb-blast II.

With the help of the US and Australian governments, Indonesia was able to improve its capacity in countering terrorism. Within five-years of hard works, many important terrorist leaders were arrested; around 400 suspects were captured. Many of them were tried and given sentences, ranging from death penalty, life imprisonment, and years in jail.

In order to win "the hearts and minds" of the radicals, the government also conducted deradicalisation program, aiming at converting them into moderate Muslims who will preach moderation to their colleagues. Natsir Abbas, a former JI member, was one of them. This has resulted in the development of a discourse within the terrorist community (1) that bombing served no purpose at all, (2) that bombing

did not bring people to support them, and (3) that it was indeed a counter-productive measure. There is no clear picture to what extent that such a discourse has been received by, or has any effect on, those who are involved in terrorist activism. Given the rift that exists among them, certainly it has caused apprehensions among them.

## 3

These measures have been generally promising to eradicate terrorism. This is in the sense that they have caused serious damage, weakened the terrorist network, and their capacity to launch further attacks. Still, however, there are some serious problems. If taken into account all together, they will lead us to believe that the threat of terrorism is still very much out there.

*First*, the doctrinal or theological basis of terrorism has not been fully addressed. Other than blaming certain religious understandings and interpretations, or certain religious (educational) institutions, and hold them responsible for terrorist acts, there has been no serious efforts to deal with this particular issue.

*Second*, the question of terrorism vis-à-vis Islam remains unsolved. Many, if not all, actors have been identified as Muslims. Because of that, efforts have been made to link Islam with terrorism, as if Islamic teachings breed terrorism or radicalism. Even though many have said that it is not Islam that they are after, suspicion is still high.

*Third*, the lack of sensitivity in dealing with the issue of terrorism. The frequent attempts to link Islamic educational institution such as “pesantren” with terrorism have somehow irritated many Muslims, especially those with pesantren background.

The fact that some terrorists graduated from pesantren (such as Pesantren Ngruki, Central Java) should and could not be used to generalize the characteristics of this institution. Even more so is the use of the term "jihadist" to characterize those who are responsible for terrorist or radical acts. Jihad is a highly honored term, referring to those who struggle wholeheartedly. The use of the term jihadist to denote those who are engaged in terrorist activities only degrade the very meaning of it. More importantly, linguistically speaking, we actually condone the terrorist claim in translating jihad into terrorist acts.

*Fourth*, weak law enforcement. In spite of the relative success of counter-terrorism unit such as the Detachment 88, the government has yet to demonstrate its willingness to uphold the law earnestly. There have been a number of Islamic schools identified as having a link with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). If this is true, the government needs to take necessary action with regard to such identification. If not, then this false information should be stopped.

It is an irony to know that many terrorists still enjoy high-tech instruments to produce information and disseminate it. With the use of cell phone and computer they are able to communicate with the outside world. With these instruments, they make contact with their friends, write instructions and circulate them to their colleagues outside the prison. This, in a way, has helped them to constantly adapting and mutating to a new situation.

*Fifth*, there has been no concerted effort to include major Muslim figures to combat terrorism. Vice President Jusuf Kalla has assembled a number of Muslim leaders in his residence to help the government in eradicating radical and violent

ideas and actions. Unfortunately, it has only been managed in an ad hoc manner. Quite similarly is the establishment of Tim Pemberantasan Terror (TPT, or Terror Eradication Team) under the auspices of the Department of Religious Affairs. Without substantial involvement of major Muslim figures, it is understandable that some major terrorist figures are still very much at large.

## 4

What is to be done?

*First*, I have been trying to argue that trust is an important factor in fighting terrorism. Because of that, all parties involved need to put their cards on the table. Without such approach it is almost impossible to build trust among the coalition of the willing, and especially between the US and the Muslim world at large. Both parties have somehow developed some kind of distrust and cultural enmity. To begin with, it is important for the US government to give to Indonesian counter-terrorism unit an access to, for instance, Hambali —one of the most responsible individuals in spreading terror in Southeast Asian and Indonesia. Access to Hambali may now insignificant in term of information gathering. Symbolically, however, it is an important instrument to trust-building.

Second, upholding the law. The success in bringing the suspects into trial and imprisonment needs to be followed by coherent efforts to prevent them from communicating with, let alone issuing instruction to, their followers. Prison guards and wardens are susceptible to receiving bribes.

Third, to include major Muslim figures in the campaigns against terrorism. This will help people understand the nature of terrorism, bringing into the camp to combat terror and radicalism. With their participation in the effort, insensitivity will be greatly reduced. The use of inappropriate term such as jihadist can be avoided. In addition to court wider Muslim supports, the purpose of this approach is also to minimize distrust and to convince the Muslims that Islam is not what this counter-terrorism unit is after. It is also through this approach that a coalition of the willing among the Muslim moderates could be established. Should this be the case, it is hoped that the doctrinal or theological basis of terrorism or radicalism could be altered.\*\*\*