



JI's New Military Division: A Preliminary Assessment

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IN MARCH, the Indonesian police killed one suspected terrorist and arrested several others in a series of operations in Central and East Java. Those targeted were part of the JI network of Abu Dujana, Indonesia's second most wanted terrorist. Weapons, ammunition, explosives, chemicals, detonators and documents were also seized. One of the documents outlined a new military division within JI. Clearly, despite the arrests of several hundred of its members since 2002, JI not only continues to be active but also managed to reorganize itself. What are the implications and threat posed by this new military division? What could be done then to manage the problem?

The New Military Division: Implications and Threat

The new JI structure, which has been operational since August 2006, is still led by a central command council controlling five divisions -- propagation, education, economy, information, and military. It was the military division, allegedly headed by Abu Dujana, that has changed.

The division now consists of several areas of operations called *Ishobah* (the term *mantiqi* is gone): *Ishobah bin Haristah* (covering Surakarta), *Ishobah Jafar bin Abi Thalib* (covering Semarang), and *Ishobah Abdullah bin Rowiyah* (covering Surabaya). Reportedly there is one more *Ishobah* covering Jakarta. Under the *Ishobah* are units of around 10 men responsible for specific tasks, such as logistics.

There are several implications of this new military division. First, the compact structure poses a bigger threat since the operational units are smaller, possibly more lethal, and better organized. The new structure was designed to adapt to the difficult environment, partly caused by counter-terrorism (CT) measures and partly by the split within JI.

Second, the new localized operational area shows that JI might be changing its focus from the regional and even national objective to a more limited localized group focusing on local issues. This appears to be a tactical shift, one that hopes to allow for increased activity -- while at the same time regrouping. This also indicates a change in the possible target areas, with the attacks likely to be small-scale. However, a small-scale attack in a major Javanese city could still have significant impact.

Third, the shift back to Java -- their "home base" -- seems to show that they are more interested in consolidation rather than opening a new jihadi front in Poso for example.

Finally, the structure may be an attempt to "formally" sideline the weakened Noordin Top. Many JI leaders have been unhappy with Noordin because he never reported his activities and never asked permission for his "uncoordinated" bombing operations.

Meanwhile, the threat posed by the new division could be seen through their activities, intended targets, and the opportunity to attack. The main duty was to regain JI's strength by recruiting and training new members, as well as collecting and distributing weaponry and explosives. The training includes how to use and assemble rifles, sniping, and bomb-making as well as counter-intelligence techniques to make them harder to detect.

Their sniping and weapons skills could be used for assassinations or during police raids. Their bomb-making skills are lethal since they trained with Azahari Hussin, JI's bomb expert who was killed in a raid by security forces in East Java in 2005. The chemicals seized indicate a possibility, albeit remote, that they possess or are trying to acquire the capability to produce liquid chemical bombs.

Meanwhile, their intended targets are discomfoting. The anti-terrorism measures must have been strong enough that JI has shifted to less guarded targets such as hotels, hospitals and universities, as well as local figures and mid-level government officials. This could make their pattern of operations harder to predict.

Therefore, the opportunities to launch attacks are considerably higher than before. However, after the arrests, their first priority would be to run and then regroup. If the CT measures are maintained, such opportunities would be minimized for the near future, although they cannot be completely prevented.

The Way Forward: A National Strategy?

The government should step up operational counter-terrorism efforts to disrupt the entire network before JI moves from what may seem as its strategic pause, to a more offensive posture.

However, as long as JI survives and adapts, the problem of terrorism in Indonesia remains. Thus, the Indonesian government should come up with something beyond anti and counter-terrorism efforts, no matter how successful they may seem in the short-term. The focus should now be on strategic counter-terrorism – that is counter strategies aimed to transform the environment breeding terrorism and extremism. Such efforts are aimed at the underlying conditions and support structures that enable the terrorist groups to mobilize and strike.

For instance, the government could develop counter-ideological responses together with economic and educational development, complemented by public advocacy aimed at the local communities. This would mitigate local grievances while creating a hostile environment to the terrorist groups.

These strategic efforts however should be done in a concerted manner along with anti and counter-terrorism measures. Thus, it is essential that the Indonesian government outline a national strategy to eradicate terrorism. This national strategy should not only include anti-terrorism and operational counter-terrorism measures, but also incorporate strategic counter-terrorism.

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