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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The East Indonesia Mujahidin Commandos: New Faces, Same Ideology**

By Kumar Ramakrishna

### **Synopsis**

*The recent killings of militants belonging to the so-called East Indonesia Mujahidin Commandos point not to the rise of a brand new militant network, but rather, yet another “mutation” of the old Darul Islam separatist movement or “super-organism.”*

### **Commentary**

IN RECENT WEEKS the crack Indonesian police counter-terrorism unit, Densus 88, killed seven suspected militants in Sumbawa island in West Nusa Tenggara province, as well as in Makassar, South Sulawesi. The men were all linked to an emerging network led by Abu Wardah alias Santoso, a notorious militant. Last October Santoso, styling himself as “Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi Al Indonesi,” commander of the “East Indonesia Mujahidin Commandos”, had declared all-out war on Densus 88.

Santoso’s network is based in restive Poso, in Central Sulawesi, from which Police seized fifty kilograms of explosive material, enough for 261 pipe bombs. Santoso’s network was apparently responsible for the killings of five police officers in Poso between October and December. The fact that the latest militants killed were operating in the neighbouring island of Sumbawa suggests that the Santoso group is expanding its geographical footprint.

### **Fundamental Continuities I: more mutations**

The faces may be relatively new, but the Santoso network actually reveals fundamental continuities with existing trends in the evolution of Indonesian Islamist extremism since the heyday of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). But in fact, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Firstly, Santoso went on record on 24 December 2012 to deny any links with Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) – a mass organisation designated a year ago as a foreign terrorist organisation by the United States and the creation of incarcerated JI amir Abu Bakar Ba’asyir. However this assertion is problematic. Santoso himself is a protégé of Mustofa alias Abu Tholut – a leading JAT commander who was a key figure in the Al Qaeda in Aceh camp disrupted by the security forces three years ago. Santoso personally requested Abu Tholut to conduct combat drills in Poso for his new recruits.

Thus the East Indonesia Mujahidin Commandos are yet another mutation – like JI and JAT - of the old Darul

Islam separatist movement - or “super-organism” - that has been fighting for an Islamic Indonesia for more than half a century now. Santoso’s network hence mirrors the recently uncovered HASMI group led by Abu Hanifah. Densus 88 officers therefore observe that “all these people may have been new faces implicated in new cases,” but they “were all linked to one another and to known terrorists”.

Secondly, Santoso’s Mujahidin Commandos, HASMI and other emergent splinter networks of the ever-evolving Darul Islam super-organism share the broad ideological frames of Al Qaedaism and the more indigenous “Darul Islamism”. These frames provide common stories and narratives that the likes of Santoso and Abu Hanifah have weaved together in personalised, idiosyncratic ways to mobilise new followers against out-group enemies. Thus while Santoso has certainly trained his sights on the Indonesian police in general and Densus 88 in particular, he is not merely motivated by localised Darul Islamist grievances. His very nom de guerre – Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi Al Indunesi – suggests an ideological affinity with the late Al Qaeda in Iraq leader and the common desire to attack Westerners and Christians.

As it turns out, the targets in the latest case included not just police, but also places of worship in the mainly Christian tourist area of Tana Toraja in South Sulawesi. In addition, popular tourist sites such as Lakey Beach in Dompu district and Kalaki Beach in Bima district on Sumbawa island were also targeted. The ideological predilections of Santoso’s network are thus hardly groundbreaking.

Thirdly, Santoso’s group, like other elements of the Darul Islam superorganism, is sustained by an ideological ecosystem for indoctrinating new recruits. It is probably no accident that two of Santoso’s men were tracked down at a university mosque in southern Sulawesi, while he himself takes pains to conduct paramilitary training in isolated camps on forested mountains, well away from local communities. Within such insulated enclaves, both martial instruction and, no less crucially, the mental reconstruction of the impressionable young men who make up the bulk of the Santoso Mujahidin, can proceed apace.

### **Fundamental continuities II: counter-strategies**

Finally, fundamental continuities also exist in terms of necessary counter-strategies:

Firstly, the centre of gravity of the Santoso network – as in the case of the wider Darul Islam superorganism – remains the ideological frames. The urgent task for Indonesian authorities is to discredit the virulent worldviews of Darul Islamism and Al Qaedaism. Meanwhile on the ground, identifying and dismantling the various nodes of the supporting ideological ecosystem – training camps, certain schools or mosques – is a matter of priority.

Secondly, as elsewhere, what gives Santoso’s network its bite is an enabling environment. The archipelagic configuration of the country facilitates all-too-easy militant movement between islands. In post-conflict Poso, meanwhile, firearms are readily available, while bomb-making materials are easily obtainable from virtually unregulated wholesalers in Surabaya and Makassar. Closing the enabling environment through various legal, administrative and other capacity-building measures must also form part of the solution.

Finally, the Indonesian police must recognise that excessive use of force actually strengthens the hand of Santoso and his ilk. Granted, the police have suffered casualties themselves at the hands of the militants in recent years. Thus some police officers apparently maintain that “the best kind of deradicalisation is through killing (such) people”. Such an attitude however is counter-productive: worryingly, human rights observers complain that heavy-handed Densus 88 tactics are “driving militancy”.

More ominously JAT is actively feeding off perceived police brutality to rally support for extremism. At a Jakarta rally recently, a JAT spokesperson warned his followers to “Beware of this war on Islam”. Part of the solution must involve more thorough, professional training of police rank and file. Perhaps all police units should explore more systematically the calibrated use of so-called less-lethal weaponry, such as for instance acoustic and directed energy weapons, with Western assistance.

This is not merely a tactical innovation to potentially reduce militant fatalities. It may well be a political and strategic necessity in the continuing struggle against an ever-mutating, violent Islamist militancy in the world’s most populous Muslim country.

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