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Lone Wolf Terrorism: Does It Exist in Indonesia?

By Chaula R. Anindya

Synopsis

On the surface, the recent individual terror attacks in Indonesia seem to be a form of lone wolf terrorism, although they are not. Yet, the relevant government agencies in counterterrorism in Indonesia are prone to cognitive bias in generalising individual attacks as lone wolf terrorism.

Commentary

THE PATTERN of terror attacks in the Indonesian cities of Solo and Tangerang in Java and Medan in Sumatra has led to wrong initial judgements of the Indonesian police (POLRI) that those attacks reflect lone wolf terrorism. The three attacks show a similar pattern in which they were conducted by individuals.

Yet, POLRI later discovered that the attackers might be affiliated with terrorist networks. The relevant government agencies in counterterrorism must fully understand what is lone wolf terrorism to further identify the threat and take appropriate counterterrorism measures.

Increasing Trend of Individual Attacks

Besides the Sarinah Attack in Jakarta in January 2016, there was a rising trend of individual terror attacks in Indonesia. In July, a lone suicide bomber, Nur Rohman, attempted to attack a police headquarters in Solo but ended up killing himself and injured one police officer.

Later in August, an 18-year-old boy, Ivan Armadi Hasugian, who is believed to be obsessed with ISIS, failed to detonate a bomb and attacked the priest in a church in

Medan instead. Recently in Tangerang, a machete-wielding man attacked police officers at a busy intersection and tried to set off a bomb. He was fatally shot by the police.

These three attacks show a shifting pattern of terror attacks in Indonesia, from large-scale group attacks to individual attacks. Although less lethal than the group attacks, no one should underestimate the lone wolves. The individual attacker could also create fear among civilians, which is one of the aims of a terror attack.

Immediately after the Solo attack, the police tended to classify the individual attacks as a form of lone wolf terrorism. The then chief of POLRI, Badrodin Haiti, at first explained that Nur Rohman might be the only suspect as he produced the explosive device himself. In the following attack in Medan, Badrodin Haiti's successor, Tito Karnavian, stated that it was a new phenomenon known as lone wolf terrorism. Tito also claimed that the Tangerang attack was part of this pattern.

Solo Attacks May Not Be Lone Wolves

Nevertheless, an individual attack does not necessarily mean lone wolf terrorism. According to sociologist Ramón Spaaij, the key features of lone wolf terrorists are: they (a) operate individually; (b) do not belong to an organised terrorist group or network; and (c) their *modi operandi* are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy.

None of the three attacks fits into the key features as explained by Spaaij. In fact those three attacks were not by lone wolves despite the initial judgement of the national police. There are strong indications that the attackers are affiliated with terrorist networks. Nur Rohman was soon discovered to be a member of Tim Hisbah Solo and he is also believed to have a direct contact with Bahrún Naim, the Indonesian jihadi who has relocated to Syria.

Moreover, Ivan Armadi Hasugian revealed during investigation that he was ordered by someone to specifically blow up a church in Medan and received Rp 10 million for his action. However, he remained tight-lipped about the specific person who ordered him to carry out the attack. Lastly, the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) discovered that the attacker in Tangerang, Sultan Azianzah, was a member of militant group Jamaah Ansharut Daulah which is led by jailed cleric Aman Abdurrahman. Sultan Azianzah once visited Abdurrahman in Nusakambangan prison in June last year.

Avoiding Detection

To avoid detection, terrorist networks adopt a decentralisation strategy, which makes it harder for the security apparatus to trace them. This leads the relevant government agencies towards a typical cognitive bias in identifying the terror attacks. Firstly, they tend to generalise individual attacks as lone wolf terrorism by following the trend of the current threat posed by ISIS sympathisers.

ISIS highly encourage the sympathisers to launch lone wolf attacks and teach them through social media on how to conduct such an attack. Bahrún Naim, as a part of

ISIS, also called for his sympathisers to be a lone wolf with whatever means they can.

Secondly, the authorities simply used similar occurrences in other parts of the world to classify the individual attacks in Indonesia as lone wolf terrorism. The chief of BNPT, Suhardi Alius, referred to the lone wolf attacks in France and Germany to identify the problem in Indonesia.

Notwithstanding the changing strategy of ISIS, the three attacks show that lone wolf terrorism is not likely to be the cases in Indonesia because the existing terrorist networks still play a major role in directing the attacks; most of them are still part of the networks.

Avoiding Generalisation

It is important to fully understand the definition of lone wolf terrorism and not to classify all individual attacks as a form of lone wolf terrorism. The failure to fully grasp the idea of lone wolf terrorism will undermine the counterterrorism efforts in Indonesia. Furthermore, the relevant government agencies may downplay the future challenges from the existing terrorist networks to launch more individual attacks.

To avoid these cognitive biases in identifying the terror attacks, the officials should assess the attacks thoroughly. First, they need to check whether the terror attacks fit into the three key features of lone wolf terrorism. They should checklist what kind of relevant information they need to identify an attacker as a lone wolf. For instance they need to collect more information about his background and do a thorough investigation to unveil whether the attacker received an order from another person or not. If it does not fit into one of the key features, it is not a lone wolf terrorism.

Secondly, officials should review the inclination to use the attacks in other countries as a reference to assess lone wolf attacks in Indonesia. The so-called individual attacks in France and Germany were also later discovered to not be lone wolf attacks after all. Using irrelevant cases overseas as references for the Indonesian situation could lead the officials to neglect the attackers' ties with the existing networks.

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