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Operation Madago Raya: Indonesia's Joint Military-Police Approach to Counter-Terrorism

By Jasminder Singh

SYNOPSIS

The joint counter-terrorism operation mounted by Indonesian army and police units that eliminated the pro-IS East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) militant network in Central Sulawesi last September highlights a successful approach in combatting Islamist terrorism in Indonesia and may hold lessons for other countries. Amongst these was the need to include humanitarian and social efforts in counter-terrorism operations.

COMMENTARY

Over the past seven years, Indonesian security forces have been engaged in a protracted operation to track down the remaining members of the East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT), a pro-Islamic State (IS) terrorist network, in the forests of Central Sulawesi province. On [29 September 2022](#), the last of the terrorists, a senior operative going by the name Jaid, was killed in a gunfight with anti-terror police in Poso Pesirir Utara.

In post-independence Indonesia, the military, particularly the army, has long played a key role in maintaining internal security. This was crystallised by the pre-eminent role of the military in combatting the [Darul Islam rebellion](#) in 1948 as well as various secessionist movements in Aceh, West Papua and East Timor.

In the process, the Indonesian army developed dedicated [counter-terrorism units](#) such as the Anti-Terror Unit 81 of the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) that was active in countering the guerilla tactics of and acts of terrorism perpetrated by Darul Islam, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Fretilin in East Timor and the Papua Free Movement. Later, other services of the military also developed their own anti-terror specialised forces such as the Frogmen Command of the navy, the *Jala Mangkara* Detachment of the marines, and the Bravo 90 Detachment of the air force.

The importance of the counter-terrorism role of the military, first in the armed forces and later in all the main services, was legitimised from 1974 onwards in the Strategic Plan of Defence and Security of the armed forces, referred to as [Renstra Hankam](#), which mandated counter terrorism as one of its key capabilities.

Following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, successive Reformasi governments made efforts to [separate](#) the Indonesian police and the military, in an attempt to establish a line between internal and external defence. However, the military's role in counter-terrorism was never removed. Instead, the military's focus was dichotomised to fight "military operations in war" and "military operations other than war," with the latter involving the military's role in counter-terrorism operations. Eventually, it led to military-police collaborations in countering terrorism, and this has served Indonesia well.

From Operation Tinombala to Operation Madago Raya

The pro-IS MIT has its roots in the Christian-Muslim sectarian violence in Poso, Sulawesi, which killed around 1,000 people between 1998 and 2001. With a mission to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, the group has evolved, since its inception in 2010, into a dangerous and violent outfit, known for targeting police officers and civilians in grisly attacks. MIT-linked attacks included the [beheading](#) of four family members who were also members of the Salvation Army in November 2020. In [May 2021](#), four farmers in Poso were also beheaded.

In late 2015, the government launched Operation Tinombala, a joint military-police operation tasked with capturing or killing MIT militants. The joint operation has succeeded in eliminating top MIT leaders, including Santoso in [July 2016](#) and Ali Kalora [in September 2021](#). The number of militants killed during the security operation was 50 with the [last member](#) eliminated on 29 September 2022.

In February 2021, Operation Tinombala was renamed Operation Madago Raya (Operation Kindness), as part of a strategy that emphasised humanitarian and social activities to counter extremism in Sulawesi. In this regard, the police in Poso, which lies in the middle of Central Sulawesi province, initiated a deradicalisation programme called [Polisi Madago Raya](#), which proved largely effective.

Amongst the [initiatives](#) were several grassroots events organised by the local police, who also joined residents for prayers, visited schools for sharing sessions with students, and distributed food rations to villagers that were affected by the counter-terrorism operations. In Operation Tinombala and later Madago Raya, the security agencies became proactive not just in the jungles and intelligence arenas but also in cyberspace, especially in the Twitter channels to counter MIT messages.

These initiatives were driven partly by concerns that the local communities might be providing the MIT with food and hideouts. The locals also lived in fear of the MIT's retributions if they were found to have collaborated with the security apparatus. Through various methods and platforms, the joint military-police operations aimed not only on the degradation of the MIT but also at educating the local population in Poso on the dangers of supporting the terrorist group.

Impact of the Joint Military-Police CT Operation

By all counts, joint military-police cooperation in countering terrorism has been highly successful in neutralising the MIT threat in Poso and Sulawesi, even though the group still retains some community support in the area. Through both soft and hard approaches and a political leadership committed to backing the joint military-police operations, the terrorist threat has been largely reduced, albeit not eradicated completely yet.

In many ways, Operation Tinombala and later, Madago Raya, present a viable model for combatting terrorism in Indonesia with the military and police operating under a single operational command, and supported by the political elites at both the local and central levels. The experience gained in the joint operations also enhanced inter-service collaboration and understanding, and skills that would be useful in countering Islamist extremism and terrorism wherever they may surface in other parts of the country.

General Andika Perkasa, the TNI Commander-in-Chief, observed in [June 2022](#), that the joint operations provided a golden opportunity for the police to learn from the military and vice-versa. In particular, the military learnt much from their police counterparts in the areas of law enforcement and criminal investigation in tackling terrorism and radicalism.

In sum, the joint military-police counter-terrorism operation in Poso and Sulawesi provides much food for thought for counter-terrorism practitioners in Indonesia and elsewhere, even as efforts must continue to resolve socio-economic issues that can provide fertile ground for extremists to regroup and reemerge.

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