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## **Indonesia's Detachment 88 – A Model for Countering Extremism**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Indonesia's Detachment 88 has developed innovative strategies to combat extremism in complex ecosystems where groups like Jemaah Islamiyah thrive. It offers a potential regional counterterrorism model, which emphasises innovative "soft" approaches and inter-agency collaboration, and the need to overcome institutional challenges.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Indonesia has long been grappling with the menace of terrorism. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an extremist group, has posed a significant threat to the nation's security. This discussion highlights two crucial aspects in countering the threat: the process of deradicalisation and an understanding of the intricate ecosystem within which extremist groups operate. In this arduous struggle, Detachment 88, Indonesia's elite counterterrorism unit, has revealed the multifaceted nature of counterterrorism efforts and emerged as a beacon of hope.

### **Innovative Strategies**

The early 2000s marked a period of experimentation and refinement for Detachment 88. Formed after the Bali bombings, Detachment 88 was initially focused on dismantling terrorist networks through traditional methods. The unit gradually adopted innovative "soft" approaches in its investigative efforts. The introduction of these soft approaches, including counselling and dialogue, extracted invaluable insights from key JI figures, notably Ali Imron and Nasir Abbas.

The innovative strategies allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the JI network, besides emphasising the importance of moving beyond conventional law enforcement methods. Detachment 88 recognised the need to address the ideological roots of

extremism and sought to rehabilitate individuals who had once subscribed to radical ideologies.

## **Understanding the Ecosystem of Extremism**

The concept of an “ecosystem” in the context of counterterrorism refers to a complex web of factors, organisations, and environments that contribute to radicalisation, recruitment, and the sustenance of extremist ideologies. Detachment 88’s engagement with incarcerated JI leaders in Lampung, Sumatra, provides a vivid exposition of the intricate and often hostile ecosystem within which these extremist groups operate.

Senior JI figures in the region, some of whom have yet to undergo any form of reconciliation, present substantial challenges due to their unwavering commitment to extremist ideologies. These individuals add layers of complexity to Detachment 88’s efforts and are a reminder of the need to understand the psychological intricacies and motivations of such figures.

In such a diverse and complex ecosystem, a one-size-fits-all approach to deradicalisation is ineffective. This underscores the need for tailored and adaptive strategies to counter the allure of extremist ideologies and their believers.

## **Regional Impact**

As a result of its success, Detachment 88’s influence extends beyond the borders of Indonesia, positioning it as a compelling model for comprehensive counterterrorism efforts. This becomes particularly significant in a region where the spectre of terrorism continues to loom ominously. Neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines confront distinct yet interconnected challenges in their endeavours to combat extremist groups and to prevent radicalisation.

### Malaysia

Geographically close to and sharing cultural and historical ties with Indonesia, Malaysia has faced threats from various extremist groups, including those affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Detachment 88’s balanced tactics, which combine law enforcement measures with deradicalisation efforts, serve as an instructive paradigm for Malaysia. The country stands to benefit from the experiences and knowledge gained by Detachment 88, which would enhance its counterterrorism efforts and help to maintain regional stability.

### Singapore

As a global financial hub with an ethnically diverse population, Singapore faces unique challenges in its counterterrorism efforts. Its cosmopolitan nature makes it a potential target for terrorist attacks, and it has already witnessed individuals radicalised by extremist ideologies. Detachment 88’s multifaceted approach, from intelligence-led operations to rehabilitation initiatives, can provide Singapore with valuable insights. Cooperation in training and intelligence sharing have the potential to significantly bolster Singapore’s capabilities in addressing radicalisation within its borders.

## The Philippines

With its own complex terrorist organisations, most notably Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Philippines has witnessed various acts of terrorism. The violence have been exacerbated by historical conflicts, socio-economic disparities, and the presence of insurgent factions that provide fertile ground for radicalisation. Detachment 88's success in addressing the intricate ecosystem of extremism can serve as a source of inspiration for the Philippines. The country can adapt and implement some of Detachment 88's methods to effectively tackle radicalisation and contain the influence of extremist groups within its territory.

In essence, Detachment 88's effectiveness in handling extremism and engaging with JI leaders provides a regional benchmark for counterterrorism. Its experiences and methods offer valuable lessons and inspiration to neighbouring countries facing similar threats. By leveraging Detachment 88's successes and collaborating closely on intelligence sharing, training, and policy coordination, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and other regional stakeholders can collectively strengthen their capacity to confront the multifaceted challenge of terrorism. This collaborative approach not only enhances regional security but also contributes to broader efforts to promote peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

### **Institutional Challenges and Collaboration**

However, Detachment 88 faces distinctive challenges due to its primary mandate as a law enforcement agency responsible for arresting terrorists. This mandate can potentially conflict with the objective of rehabilitation, hence leading to rivalry with the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), which focuses on deradicalisation and rehabilitation.

To overcome these challenges and to avoid potential rivalry between them, the two agencies need to collaborate closely to ensure a comprehensive national counterterrorism effort. This can be facilitated by clearly defining their roles and responsibilities and enabling them to leverage on each other's respective strengths. There is also a need to have protocols that would facilitate the sharing of intelligence and sensitive information, thus fostering trust and cooperation.

Of crucial importance is the need to ensure that both agencies receive the necessary resources for their respective tasks. Lastly, it is imperative to implement joint decision-making processes that can help resolve jurisdictional disputes, particularly those concerning the treatment of arrested individuals. This would ensure that individuals can be effectively managed within the prescribed limits of law enforcement and rehabilitation.

### **Conclusion**

Detachment 88's innovative engagement efforts represent a critical pillar of Indonesia's counterterrorism strategy. As Indonesia confronts evolving threats like Jemaah Islamiyah and the broader extremist ecosystem, Detachment 88's adaptive strategies underscore the country's commitment to counter extremism while promoting security and inclusivity.

In this holistic approach, there is hope in a world where terrorism remains a global concern. Detachment 88's remarkable transformation of Indonesia's counterterrorism efforts offers guidance to other nations striving for a safer world. With Detachment 88 working in collaboration with BNPT, Indonesia can continue to make strides against the JI threat and contribute to peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's Detachment 88 offers a model to nations grappling with similar challenges.

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