

JI's Two-Pronged Strategy in Indonesia

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Two recent reports based on Indonesian police and intelligence sources regarding Jemaah Islamiya's (JI) changing strategies suggest that the organization continues to have a two-pronged strategy of both targeting Western interests and fomenting sectarian conflicts. While some analysts have suggested that these strategies reflect deep-seeded factionalism within the organization, these reports suggest that the differing strategies and targeting reflect limited resources and capabilities in the current period.

The first report contends that last year Noordin Mohammed Top, one of JI's leaders, instructed his subordinates to conduct reconnaissance on Paiton Energy's coal-fired thermal power plant, some 150 kilometers southeast of Surabaya. The power plant, which is owned and operated by a consortium of Japanese, British and U.S. companies, provides much of the electricity for Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city and the province of East Java. Two men, arrested for their roles in harboring the JI fugitive, revealed that the plot was abandoned simply because JI did not have the material resources to mount an attack on such a large target (Yomiuri Shimbun, April 17).

Those same sources also suggest that Noordin ordered operatives to find Japanese-related targets in Indonesia. Japan has never been directly targeted by JI, although there were a number of Japanese victims in the Bali bombing. This could be seen as an attempt to implement the al-Qaeda line, espoused in several al-Qaeda statements that identified Japan as an enemy (Japan was mentioned in Osama bin Laden's October 7, 2001 statement that aired on al-Jazeera, in a 2004 statement by Abu Hafs al-Masri and in an audiotape by Ayman al-Zawahiri that aired on al-Jazeera on October 1, 2004).

Lacking the resources, and arguably avoiding the dragnet across central Java, the second report cites police intelligence that Noordin was planning a suicide bombing in mid-April in the capital of the strife-torn province of Central Sulawesi (Detik.com, April 12). This report is interesting for two reasons. First, it stated that a man carrying a backpack would likely carry out the operation. Noordin and his compatriot Dr. Azahari bin Husin, who was killed in October 2005, were unhappy with JI's rate of attacks. Major truck bomb operations were conducted on roughly an annual basis (for instance, Bali in October 2002, the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in August 2003, and the Australian Embassy in September 2004). Beginning with last October's triple bombings in Bali, perpetrated by three suicide bombers with backpacks, Azahari and Noordin began a wave of smaller bombings in a faster tempo. When police raided Azahari's East Java safe-house, they found some 30 bombs being prepared.

Second, Central Sulawesi, like the Maluku, has been the site of an intensified push by JI and affiliated groups to foment a new wave of sectarian bloodletting. In the immediate post-Suharto period, JI members established two paramilitary organizations to engage in sectarian conflicts. Not only did these lashkars, or militias, give JI an important pool of indoctrinated militants, but they served to discredit the state that did not come to the defense of the Muslim community.

In 2002, the government brokered a fragile peace in these provinces, but since then there has been a concerted effort to undermine the fragile peace process and renew the bloodletting. Since October 2004, incidents in Central Sulawesi have included the seizure of two caches of more than 125 IEDs, the bombing of a church, arson attacks in a Christian community that killed six, the beheading of three Hindu schoolgirls, the targeted assassinations of two witnesses in criminal trials of Muslim perpetrators of sectarian conflicts, a bomb that ripped through a crowded marketplace in Palu, killing six and wounding 45, some three other bombings, and a number of machete attacks. Very clearly, militants hope to renew the fighting as JI's leaders set about regrouping and recruiting a new generation of militants (Jakarta Post, May 21, 2005, October 30, 2005, October 29, 2005, November 29, 2005; Tempo, August 5, 2005). A large percentage of apprehended JI militants come from these conflict areas.

Additionally, recent press reports suggest that Noordin Mohammad Top has broken away from JI and formed his own jihadi organization, called Tanzim Qaidatul Jihad (TQJ). TQJ, according to some analysts, reflects the fact that most JI members eschew JI's past strategy of focusing on the far enemy, rather than the near enemy. Yet, the recent reports of Noordin's activities cast further doubt on the intensity of those factional schisms. The main determinant in targeting remains available human and material resources, capabilities, and a desire to hit where Indonesian security forces least expect it.

Clearly, JI is a much more horizontal organization, loosely organized around increasingly autonomous cells. Command and control is weaker than in the past. More than 300 JI members have been arrested throughout Southeast Asia, more than 200 of which have been in Indonesia—roughly one-tenth of the estimated size of JI in Indonesia. Members of JI are encouraged to establish their own organizations (Kompak in Ambon, for example) with varying degrees of covertness that simply have a more local geographical range of operations and activities. That does not mean, however, that they are completely autonomous or that they are working at odds against JI's goals.

Moreover, the two strategies—targeting Western interests and engaging in sectarian conflict—are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing. What is interesting is that on May 2, 2005, Indonesian police arrested three suspects wanted in conjunction with the August 2003 bombing of the JW Marriott in Jakarta in a small village outside of Poso, Sulawesi. All three, as well as a fourth who escaped, were involved in not only the sectarian bloodletting in Ambon in 1999-2000, but also the April 24 attacks in Mamasa, Sulawesi.

Therefore, there is a clear connection between the same people engaged in both "international jihad" and sectarian conflict. They are simply different tactics employed at different times. JI has demonstrated an ability to learn and react to changing security environments. Sectarian violence attracts less attention from the security forces—especially from the United States and Australia. Refocusing on sectarian violence by Noordin's cells, however, taps into a broader strategy of fomenting sectarian conflict that JI has long used to recruit and indoctrinate a new generation of jihadists.

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