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Suspected Terrorists Arrested: Indonesia and the ISIL Threat

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Arrests Reported

On 18 December 2015, the Indonesian national police arrested terrorist suspects in the West Java city of Banjar. This was the beginning of a series of raids by the police across the island of Java. On the evening of 19 December in Central Java, the police reportedly found bomb-making materials including fertilizer, ball bearings, nails and electronic switches.¹ As the raids continued to 23 December, Indonesia's special counter-terrorism squad arrested a total of eleven people suspected of being ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) supporters.

Based on the materials that the police obtained from the raids, it appears that members of the terrorist cell were planning a New Year's Eve attack in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia,² as well as a series of attacks on churches and police station across Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan.³

The news were widely reported both in the Indonesian media and international media, in particular the Australian media. They suggested that ISIL's hands were active in Indonesia and were plotting terror acts. Within the context of post-Paris terrorist attacks on 13 November 2015, it is understandable that the Australian media reacted vigilantly to the raids and arrests in Indonesia.

Unexpectedly to the Australian media and others, however, the Indonesian public did not seem to be rattled by the news, and instead many appeared to pay no attention to it. Why?

¹ "Suspected terrorists arrested in Indonesia 'planned to detonate bombs' in Java, Sumatra," *ABC News*, 21 December 2015. www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-20/suspected-terrorists-arrested-in-indonesia-over-bomb-threat/7044128 (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

² *Ibid.*

³ "Arrested terrorists have links to Poso, IS," *The Jakarta Post*, 26 December 2015. www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/26/arrested-terrorists-have-links-poso-is.html (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

Special Counter-Terrorism Squad

For most Indonesians the news about the so-called Islamic extremist and/or Islamic terrorist activities is not unusual. Indonesia went through a series of terrorist attacks orchestrated by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) from 2002 to 2005. The JI is known to be affiliated with the Al-Qaeda and conducted terrorist activities in Indonesia in the early years of the 2000s.

By the middle of the 2000s, the Indonesian national police have created a special counter-terrorism squad, the so-called Special Detachment 88 (Detasemen Khusus 88). It was formed on 30 June 2003, after the 2002 Bali bombings; it has been funded, equipped, and trained by the United States and Australia. Within five years of time, it “arrested 418 suspects, and about 250 of them have been tried and convicted.” It eventually dismantled the “JI’s secret organization, arrested or killed many of its top operatives.”⁴

Since the 2010s, the Special Detachment 88 has faced a new enemy – that is, ISIL related terrorism. As ISIL utilizes online propaganda and recruitment, more than 500 Indonesians are known to have travelled to Syria to fight with ISIL. A number of Islamist entities have openly campaigned for ISIL and more than 2,000 Indonesians have expressed support for the group.⁵ A terrorism specialist warns that ISIL trains a “new generation of Indonesian terrorists.”⁶

Australia and Indonesia

“The AFP (Australian Federal Police) and FBI (Federal Bureau Investigation) have been working together with the Indonesian National Police, sharing threat reporting,” which “has been used by the Indonesian National Police to shape their investigations,” an AFP spokesperson said.⁷

This report demonstrates that containing ISIL is an international collaborative operation among police forces. Thanks to the US and Australian supports over the decades, the Indonesian national police has been in the position to access international intelligence information on “Islamic” terrorism and to utilize it for their domestic operations.

⁴ Hamish McDonald. “Fighting terrorism with smart weaponry,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2008. www.smh.com.au/news/world/fighting-terrorism-with-smart-weaponry/2008/05/30/1211654312137.html (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

⁵ Peter Chalk. *Black flag rising: ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute. December 2015. https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/black-flag-rising-isil-in-southeast-asia-and-australia/Black-flag-rising_ISIL.pdf (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

⁶ “Islamic State training new generation of Indonesian terrorists, expert Sidney Jones warns,” *ABC News*, 9 October 2015. www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-08/islamic-state-training-new-group-of-indonesian-terrorists-expert/6838834 (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

⁷ “AFP helps stem threat of terrorism in Indonesia as nine arrested following raids,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 December 2015. www.smh.com.au/world/nine-terrorist-suspects-arrested-in-raids-across-indonesia-20151220-gls2yk.html (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

As *Global Terrorism Index 2015* issued by Institute for Economics & Peace demonstrates, “(t)he West is designated as the countries where the ISIL has advocated for attacks. They include the United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries. The report highlights the striking prevalence of lone wolf attacks in the West. Lone wolf attacks account for 70 per cent of all terrorist deaths in the West since 2006” (p. 2).⁸ It ranks Indonesia as the 33rd out of 124 countries, less dangerous than Thailand (ranked 10th) and the Philippines (ranked 11th) in the neighboring Southeast Asia.

Then why do Australian authorities paid special attention to suspicious developments in Indonesia? It is obvious that it derives from the history and memory of the 2002 Bali Bombings that killed 202 people, 88 of which were Australians. This is why the Australian government helped build the counter-terrorism squad of the Indonesian national police, and this is why the Australian media have closely monitored what goes on in this neighbor country.

Indonesia and ISIL

On 25 December, a week after the first raid, the Indonesian national police disclosed detailed information regarding the two men arrested on 23 December in Bekasi, West Java. The police said that they might have links to the Santoso-led East Indonesian Mujahidin (MIT) group,⁹ which is known to be affiliated with the ISIL movement.¹⁰ The two men are Arif Hidayatullah, alias Abu Mush’ab, and a Chinese Uighur identified as Ali. Ali was on his way to meet Santoso when he was captured and is a part of the Poso section of MIT group.¹¹ And since Santoso remains on the run, the Indonesian forces are mobilizing “for a manhunt in steamy jungles on the far-flung island of Sulawesi.”¹²

The information revealed that potential terrorists from abroad exist in Indonesia and the authorities have been cautious about their entries and activities. It also warns the public that ISIL related Islamic extremists are active in a small scale in the country. In fact, after the Paris attacks, the Indonesian police beefed up security outside several Western embassies, shopping malls and places of worship.

Commenting on the raids in the previous week, the news analysis of Indonesia’s leading English newspaper, *The Jakarta Post*, warns that the influence of ISIL in Indonesia “has

⁸ Institute for Economics & Peace. 2015. *Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*. economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

⁹ Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium. “Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT).” www.trackingterrorism.org/group/mujahidin-indonesia-timur-mit (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

¹⁰ Mitchell, Scott. 2015. “Police Combing Indonesian Island for the Country’s ‘Most Wanted’ Terror Leader,” *The Vice News*. <https://news.vice.com/topic/east-indonesia-mujahideen> (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

¹¹ “Arrested terrorists have links to Poso, IS,” *op.cit.*

¹² “Indonesia scours a jungle for country’s most-wanted man,” *The Straits Times*, 24 December 2015. [www.newsjs.com/url.php?p=http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-scours-a-jungle-for-countrys-most-wanted-man](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-scours-a-jungle-for-countrys-most-wanted-man) (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

become more apparent along with the rapid increase of radicalization within society.”¹³ This is the logic that most Western readers can understand. This is the logic that implicates the polarization of the society due to the growing influence of ISIL. And this is exactly what ISIL has attempted to do in non-battle fields – to create polarization in the society, to divide the society into supporters of the caliphate and the infidels.¹⁴

The media, domestic and international, have reported with caution the suspected terrorists’ arrests before Christmas and the Maulid Nabi Islamic holy day on 24 December. However, the Indonesian public appears to remain calm, unprovoked. It is a good sign because it demonstrates that the public does not fall into “the ISIL trap.”¹⁵ The general public does not seem to be concerned with picking sides – the ISIL or its foe. The public reacted as if there was no ISIL threat. It is safe to say that the Indonesia society is resilient enough to shield it from ISIL propaganda.

About the Author

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¹³ Marguerite Afra Sapiie. “News analysis: Between threat of radicalized IS supporters and homegrown terrorists,” *The Jakarta Post*, 28 December 2015. [www.newsjs.com/url.php?p=http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/25/news-analysis-between-threat-radicalized-is-supporters-and-homegrown-terrorists.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/25/news-analysis-between-threat-radicalized-is-supporters-and-homegrown-terrorists.html) (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

¹⁴ Polk, William R. 2015. “Falling into the ISIS Trap,” Consortiumnews.com, 17 November 2015. <https://consortiumnews.com/2015/11/17/falling-into-the-isis-trap/> (Accessed on 28 December 2015).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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- 1 Yamamoto Nobuto, "Two Sources of Abe's Confidence" (27 December 2015)
- 2 Yamamoto Nobuto, "Haze in Southeast Asia: A Complicated Story" (28 December 2015)
- 3 Yamamoto Nobuto, "Suspected Terrorists Arrested: Indonesia and the ISIL Threat" (29 December 2015)