



Reflections on Addressing Terrorism Post-Medan Bombing

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Introduction

Last November 13, 2019, an act of terrorism once again took place. A suicide bomb exploded at the Medan Police precinct headquarters in North Sumatra. Aside from the perpetrator who died in the act, six police officers were injured as a result of the attack. The incident was the second bombing to have taken place in North Sumatra in 2019. Previously in Sibolga on March 12, 2019, the arrest of a terrorist network was also marked by a bomb explosion. The terrorist actors in North Sumatra are suspected to have originated from a pro-ISIS cell, *Jamaah Ansarut Daulah (JAD)*.¹ The two terrorist acts have taken place amidst a wave of arrest and prevention measures that have been carried out extensively by the Government over the last two years.

The defeat of ISIS in Syria and the death of Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi does not automatically mean the end of ISIS or the reduction of terrorist acts by its supporters. Instead, the defeat of ISIS has provoked its supporting cells to demonstrate their existence and loyalty towards the ideology it promotes and to the ISIS ideals of a caliphate. Less than a week after the death of Al-Baghdadi, ISIS announced its new leader, Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Quraishi.

The Shift in the Terrorist Threat

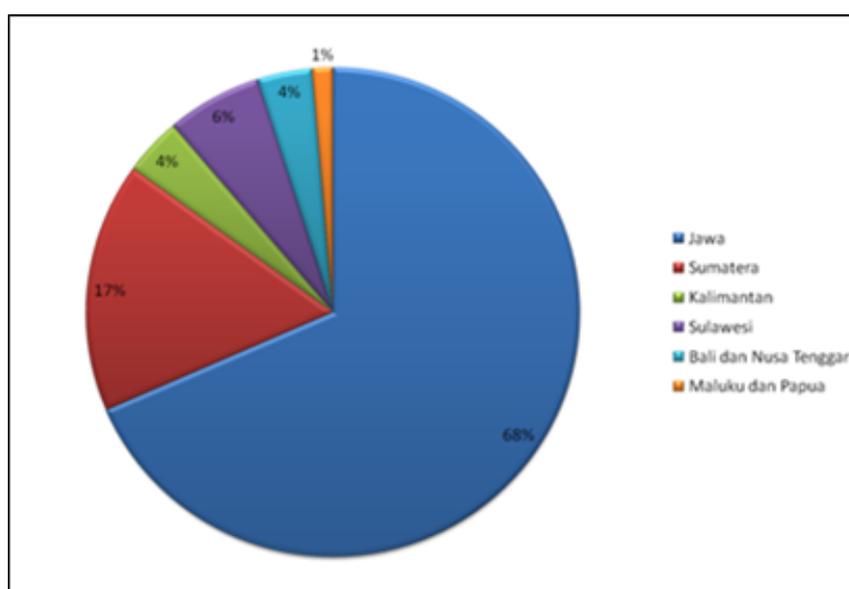
Following the emergence of ISIS, the characteristic of the terrorist threat has indeed experienced some changes. Prior, terrorist acts tended to be coordinated in terms of hierarchy and was based on a leader's fatwa such as was the case with Al-Qaeda. Now, terrorist networks tend to be looser, where each member is encouraged to carry out terrorist acts even if there is no command from its leader.

Even though it is less organized and the number of victims is less, the sporadic terrorist acts as well as the growth of terrorist networks actually make it more difficult to be detected and anticipated by the authorities. Aside from that, the targets of these acts have also shifted. During the period of Al-Qaeda and Jamaah Islamiyah, the targets were usually Western and non-Muslim symbols. Terrorist acts since the emergence of ISIS now usually see the state apparatus, mainly the police, and whoever holds a different ideology as targets for attack.

Java-centric Approach

Amidst the shift in the character of the terrorist threat, the security apparatus has strengthened its effort to handle it. Following the Surabaya Bomb Attack and in the run-up to the regional elections as well as the presidential elections, arrests of terrorist groups were conducted on a large scale. The same was true with preventative activities such as seminars, talkshows, and workshops. However, as noted by the Deteksi website portal that was developed by The Habibie Center, the effort to handle terrorism, at least from January 2017 to November 2019, is still focused on the island of Java. The Java-centric approach is suspected to be the reason behind the spread of terrorist networks to other regions of Indonesia. Cells have begun to thrive outside of Java, including JAD cells in North Sumatra.

Distribution of Counter Terrorism Efforts in Indonesia
January 2017 – November 2019



(Source: www.deteksiindonesia.com)





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The JAD cell in North Sumatra is not a new cell. However, this cell has increasingly grown and emerged to the surface over the last year. Following the suicide bombing at the Medan police precinct headquarters, Densus 88 arrested 74 persons who were suspected to be terrorists in ten regions: 30 from North Sumatra, 11 from West Java, 11 from Central Java, 5 from Riau, 5 from Banten, 4 from East Kalimantan, 3 from Jakarta, 2 from Aceh, 2 from East Java, and 1 from South Sulawesi.² From the investigations that were carried out on the suspects in North Sumatra, it was revealed that the group previously carried out training in Mount Sibayak in May 2019 and that they also prepared themselves for *amaliyah* (operations).

Recommendations

Following the suicide bomb attack on Medan police precinct headquarters, a number of changes need to be carried out by the Government and other relevant interested stakeholders. First, efforts to address terrorism, including monitoring and preventing, must be strengthened based on mapping and assessing threats that have been carried out and are continually being renewed. A number of regions, including outside of Java, are known to have become locations for the growth of terrorist networks. These regions include Aceh, North Sumatra, West Sumatra, Banten, West Java, Central Java, East Java, West Nusa Tenggara, Central Sulawesi, and South Sulawesi.³ A Java-centric counter terrorism approach is no longer adequate amidst a rise of terrorist network activities outside of Java. Moreover, developments that utilize communication technology make recruitment and the spread of ideology through online platforms, such as social media and instant messaging applications, means it is increasingly more possible to reach all regions in Indonesia.

Second, in order to strengthen surveillance and prevention, the Government needs to strengthen a society-based approach. The pattern of spreading radical ideology nowadays largely make use of interactions at the community level, whether it is through interactions among individuals, through forums such as for religious recitations, or even through social media. In the case of the Medan bombing, for example, the perpetrator was suspected to have been exposed to radical ideology through his wife who is known to have on several occasions visited a female terrorist convict at the Medan correctional facility and to have routinely attended a religious recitation forum where the content was suspected to be radical. These small cells that grow amidst the community will be easier to detect if there is cooperation between the Government and the community via a society-based approach that actively involves community figures.

Third, the involvement of women in addressing terrorism, both at the policy level and the operational level, needs to be strengthened. The Medan Bombing case showed the risk of radical understanding being





spread through religious recitation forums that were specially for women. These forums usually tend to be difficult to monitor because they are closed off to men who are not *muhrim* (immediate relatives or spouse) or who are not from their group. This condition is exploited by terrorist groups to spread its ideology, to recruit new members, and to increase the level of radicalism among the females in its group.

At the same time, until now the number of female personnel in agencies and institutions that are responsible to combatting terrorism, such as BNPT and Densus 99, is known to still be low. The percentage of women admitted into Densus 88, for example, is still around 20%.⁴ Moving forward, increasing personnel and raising the capacity of female personnel in agencies and institutions responsible for combatting terrorism needs to be carried out.

Endnotes

1 Tempo (2019, November 18). "Polisi Beberkan 23 Orang Jaringan Bomber Polrestabes Medan." Retrieved from: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1273703/polisi-beberkan-23-orang-jaringan-bomber-polrestabes-medan/full&view=ok>

2 VOA Indonesia (2019, November 22). "Kapolri: 74 Terduga Teroris Ditangkap Setelah Bom Bunuh Diri di Medan." Retrieved from: <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/kapolri-74-terduga-teroris-ditangkap-setelah-bom-bunuh-diri-di-medan/5176784.html>

3 CNN Indonesia (2019, November 21). "BNPT Sebut Jaringan Teroris Besar Bersemayam di 8 Provinsi." Retrieved from: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20191121210118-20-450467/bnpt-sebut-jaringan-teroris-besar-bersemayam-di-8-provinsi>

4 Asumsi Bersuara, "Bom Lagi, Bom Lagi", <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6QOCsPPZSi9gdADock5Ear?si=tkUU6KzOQAGZeO-EsVeo7Q>





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