

## Indonesia's Approach to Jihadist Deradicalization

By Kirsten E. Schulze

FOLLOWING THE OCTOBER 2002 Bali bombings by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an experimental deradicalization program was established by the head of the Indonesian police's Bomb Task Force, Suryadharma. The program has been active for five years now and focuses primarily on jihadist prisoners. While it is too early to pronounce the program a success, and despite some notable weaknesses in the areas of rehabilitation and prison corruption as well as ideological limitations, its holistic outreach beyond the prisoners to their families and community without stigmatizing them is an approach worth emulating.

### Program Details

There are approximately 170 jihadist prisoners in Indonesian jails who can be divided into three categories: Afghan veterans, JI members, and individuals from smaller organizations who were involved in the Ambon and Poso conflicts such as Mujahidin KOMPAK, Laskar Jundullah and Ring Banten. Of these, presently two dozen Afghan alumni, who are also members of JI, as well as many other JI prisoners and a few Mujahidin KOMPAK are involved in the deradicalization program. The two dozen Afghan alumni are mainly former prisoners, and they have received the most systematic attention. This is partially the result of the key "deradicalizers" Nasir Abas and Ali Imron coming from this pool and thus their initial "targets" became others from the same circle. The program, however, has been broadened since, with "Abas going around prisons across Indonesia, handing out money with the promise of more perks for more cooperation."<sup>1</sup>

The program aims at neutralizing the ideological foundations of militant Islam and is based on two key premises: the first is the belief that radicals will only listen to other radicals; the second is the belief that through kindness,<sup>2</sup> the police

can change the jihadist assumption that government officials are by definition anti-Islamic.<sup>3</sup> The thinking behind the first premise, as explained by the head of the counter-terrorism desk in the Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, police General Ansyad Mbai, is that the often-peddled line of moderates having to engage radicals is misconceived. While moderate Muslims may have a role to play in counter-radicalization, there is no place for them in deradicalization. "In the mind of the radicals, all *ulama* have already failed because they failed to establish an Islamic state," Ansyad Mbai explained. "Their credibility is nothing with the militants."<sup>4</sup> What is needed, therefore, is a reformed radical with different views, in this case on suicide bombings, to talk to the other radicals.

The second premise taps into one of the most deep-seated jihadist beliefs dating back to the Darul Islam (DI) rebellions of 1948-1965. It was these rebellions that pitted nationalist republican ideals against those of an Islamic state, or *Negara Islam Indonesia* (NII), and the violence experienced by the DI fighters as the state crushed the rebellions left lasting distrust and hatred of government institutions and officials. As JI is deeply rooted in NII culture, it is not surprising that it sees the Indonesian government "as *kafir*, starting with everyone who works for or with the government. They are the enemy and all products from that government are *haram*."<sup>5</sup> The police believed that if they could overcome this distrust and could get the prisoners to accept police assistance, then other deeply-held jihadist tenets would also be questioned.

similarly focus on embracing the families of the jihadists so as not to create the next generation of alienated Muslims. In Singapore, however, the religious counseling is being conducted by *ulama* with "solid credentials," meaning *ulama* who have studied at Egypt's al-Azhar or at one of the Saudi universities. As in Indonesia, both Singapore and Malaysia see their deradicalization programs as successful.

3 International Crisis Group, "Deradicalisation and Indonesian Prisons," November 19, 2007, p. 13.

4 Personal interview, Ansyad Mbai, head of counter-terrorism, Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Jakarta, July 24-25, 2006.

5 Personal interview, Nasir Abas, deputy head of Mantiqi III and former JI trainer in Mindanao, Jakarta, September 13, 2007.

At the heart of changing the image of the police is what Mbai calls "soft power," which amounts to money and in-kind aid.<sup>6</sup> During the last five years, the police have assisted the families of the jihadists in the program. This assistance has ranged from paying school fees to ensure that children remain in education; providing the wives with money to feed and clothe the family; allowing greater family access to the prisoners, even providing plane tickets for family members; allowing prisoner weddings; assuring that prisoners are treated well; and providing medical care. At the same time, the police have mixed with the prisoners, engaging in religious discussion, praying and breaking the Ramadan fast together. Upon release, the prisoners are provided with identity cards and papers as well as start-up money.<sup>7</sup>

The division within JI over the use of suicide bombings created a starting point for finding militant jihadists who would cooperate with the police. The police focused on recruiting those into their deradicalization program who disagreed with terrorism and saw bombings against civilians as a deviation from jihad, which they defined in purely defensive terms.<sup>8</sup> This was a common view among JI trainers such as Nasir Abas, deputy head of Mantiqi III, who ran training camps in Mindanao. According to Abas, the split within JI emerged following Usama bin Ladin's 1998 fatwa, which was taken up by al-

6 Personal interview, Ansyad Mbai, head of counter-terrorism, Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Jakarta, September 12, 2007.

7 A similar approach is also being pursued by the Saudi government. The Saudi deradicalization program pays "attention given to a prisoner's social needs. The Psychological and Social Subcommittee evaluates each participant to determine how best the Advisory Committee can assist them and their family. For instance, once a breadwinner is incarcerated, the committee provides the family with an alternate salary. Other needs, including children's schooling and family healthcare, are also provided. This is intended to offset further radicalization brought on by the detention of family members...The government further recognizes that if they fail to do this, then it is possible that extremist elements will move in to provide this support." For more information on this program, see Christopher Boucek, "Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:16 (2007).

8 Personal interview, Ansyad Mbai, September 12, 2007.

1 Personal interview, Sidney Jones, International Crisis Group, June 25, 2008.

2 A similar deradicalization program to that in Indonesia is also being pioneered in Singapore and Malaysia, which

Qa`ida's Southeast Asia operative and JI military commander, Hanbali. Abas said that "a debate opened up between those who wanted to stick with the old values and those who wanted to take the war to the civilians."<sup>9</sup>

Abas and Imron would approach new JI prisoners and try to challenge their beliefs. Abas focused on two key issues that he wanted to deradicalize in the jihadist mindset: the killing of civilians, and the "need" for an Islamic state. With respect to the killing of civilians, Abas asserts that JI's struggle has been corrupted by bombings against civilians.<sup>10</sup> On the question of an Islamic state, Abas is trying to show the militants that true *ulama* do not want an Islamic state: "The Islamic state is not connected with religion. The Prophet Muhammad never established a state. He struggled to make the people better persons. So why are we now struggling for an Islamic state?" He draws upon his own experience in Afghanistan and points to the collapse into *fitna* following the Soviet-Mujahidin war: "Afghanistan became an Islamic state in 1992 under the mujahidin and what happened was civil war. The Taliban fought an Islamic state in order to set up their own Islamic government. I saw this."<sup>11</sup> Abas concludes that the struggle for an Islamic state is driven by politics and power, not by religion, and that "true *ulama* don't want an Islamic state. The *ulama* historically have been used by governments. So they should stay away from worldly affairs."<sup>12</sup>

#### Program Weaknesses

Abas' and Imron's success in changing the jihadist mindset has been limited. It has been embraced primarily by Afghan veterans, and in many cases those who have become part of the program are those who were opposed to violence in the first place. For instance, Bali bombers Imam Samudra and Amrozi were not interested when they were approached.

The program also reveals five other weaknesses. First, while the idea that only radicals have the credibility to challenge other radicals makes sense,

it has a limited shelf-life as any radical who is cooperating with the police will eventually become discredited. Second, the ideological deradicalization itself is limited. While the killing of civilians by suicide bombings is being challenged, the jihadist violence perpetrated in the Ambon and Poso conflicts has been condoned. Third, there is no structured, thought-out, or even government-funded rehabilitation program to deal with the jihadist prisoners who are released from jail. Many of them have few skills, no work, little money and few opportunities outside their familiar circles. That means effectively that they return into the jihadist community to which they are often tied by marriage links and are re-exposed to militant ideas. Fourth, the lack of official budget for this program does not only raise accountability problems, but if, as a result of financial difficulties, the police fail to deliver on promises for assistance after release, these JI members will look elsewhere, most likely within jihadist circles; moreover, disillusioned ex-prisoners will not be as interested in sharing information with the police. Fifth, the Indonesian prison system and prison corruption are undermining the deradicalization program. Jihadist prisoners have been able to spread their ideas to non-jihadists in integrated prisons and have been able to radicalize moderate jihadists in segregated prisons. Prison corruption has allowed for the proliferation of mobile phones and laptops among jihadists who have been involved in the planning of further operations as well as the translation of Arab jihadist literature and its dissemination. The prison system has been undermining the deradicalization program to such an extent that the Indonesian police are doing "their best to keep top terrorists at police headquarters, out of the normal prison system, because the chances of backsliding are so high."<sup>13</sup>

#### A Success Overall

Despite these weaknesses, the program has been hailed as a clear success story by the Indonesian police. In the Indonesian counter-terrorism context, with the military sidelined and the national intelligence agency (Badan Intelijen Negara) having little if any grasp of the

situation, it certainly is. Mbai claims that the information that led to the arrest of JI military commander Abu Dujana in 2005 came from this program, and that as a result JI's military capacity has been reduced and there were no major bombings in 2006 and 2007.<sup>14</sup> This, however, is almost certainly not true as the arrest of Abu Dujana was the result of Poso police operations that drew upon straightforward police interrogation work following the capture of Wiwin Kalahe and Sarwo Edi Nugroho. Moreover, while the arrest of Abu Dujana and his network weakened JI's military capacity, this was probably not the only factor for the absence of major bombings.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, the value of the program lies in the insight that the police have obtained into the complexities of JI from talking to jihadist prisoners, allowing it to fine-tune its operations. Also, irrespective of whether anyone absorbs the religious counseling, the deradicalization program has created a link between the police and JI prisoners and ex-prisoners through which the police receives a steady stream of information about "who is doing what." Most importantly, its value lies in the holistic approach of reaching out not only to the prisoners but also their families and their communities without stigmatizing them, while at the same time conducting more conventional counter-terrorism operations. That has been the real success, and that is the area that other countries contemplating deradicalization programs should study.

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9 Personal interview, Nasir Abas, September 13, 2007.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 International Crisis Group, "Deradicalisation and Indonesian Prisons," p. 16.

14 Personal interview, Ansyad Mbai, September 12, 2007.

15 Personal correspondence, Sidney Jones, International Crisis Group, June 21, 2008.