

# Lessons from Aceh Terrorist De-Radicalization

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May 13, 2010

Report #1001

Consortium for Strategic Communication

Arizona State University

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although the International Crisis Group's reports on radicalism in Indonesia are extremely detailed and well informed, their recommendations tend to be short-term solutions aimed at preventing terrorist acts in the near term. This report argues the value of a longer term approach to both prevent radicalization as well as to rehabilitate *jihadis* who have been identified and arrested. Although the "soft" approach to imprisoning arrested *jihadis* is more successful than harsher approaches, this approach still has counterproductive shortfalls, such as allowing unrepentant radicals the opportunity to preach to inmates and guards. Allowing *ustad* and *imam* with similar theological backgrounds but without sympathies for terrorism would be an effective way to counter radicalism in prisons as it would not represent a major shift in theological views of terrorists but rather in how they act with respect to terrorism.

This report also shows that although there appear to be three different groups that have emerged from Jemaah Islamiyah, their goals remain the same and they differ only with regard to which tactics to employ. Thus, disengagement efforts aimed at shifting perceptions of operational or tactical matters may be more effective than attempts at de-radicalization that require the transformation of worldviews and identities. However further research is needed on the cognitive restructuring processes involved in these kinds of transformations.

On April 20, the International Crisis Group issued a report entitled “Indonesia: Jihadi Surprise in Aceh.”<sup>1</sup> It concerns efforts by Indonesian security forces to shut down terrorist training camps that appeared unexpectedly in Aceh and north Sumatra. The ICG almost always gets it right and this report is no exception. They are especially adept at connecting individuals and groups to specific events. In Indonesia they have followed terrorist groups, political upheavals, and ethnic and religious violence for more than a decade and are widely recognized as an authoritative source.

Our initial analysis of these developments appeared on March 28.<sup>2</sup> Like other analyses we have produced, it is based not so much on tracking individuals and events as it is on exploring the social, cultural and religious contexts in which they are located and to present theoretically driven analyses. While we often uncover the same surprising information that ICG does, we view Indonesian extremism through a different and complementary analytic lens. We generally come to similar and complementary conclusions, though often quite different “recommendations.” ICG tends to focus on the immediate – what might be done to prevent the next attack or disrupt existing extremist networks. We see no need to duplicate this effort and focus instead on longer-term strategies aimed at diminishing the appeal of radical messages.

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Our purpose in this paper is to bring these two approaches together and to contextualize and add nuance to some of ICG’s conclusions and recommendations about developments in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia. We will focus on two issues addressed in the ICG report: conditions under which detainees are held and ICG’s observation that the Aceh training camps established by a previously unknown group calling itself Al Qaeda Aceh were the product of a new strain of Indonesian Muslim extremism. Our discussions of detention conditions and de-radicalization are based on conversations with former jihadis and a recent report on de-radicalization by University of Indonesia psychologist Sarlito Sarwono.<sup>3</sup>

## **DETENTION CONDITIONS**

Indonesia is known for its “soft” approach to the treatment of accused and convicted terrorists.<sup>4</sup> Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Singapore have adopted similar approaches. In all of these countries detention practices are based on the assumption that detainees are more likely to cooperate with authorities and less likely to resume terrorist activities upon release if they are treated humanely while incarcerated.

Some convicted terrorists are held in prisons scattered throughout the country. Others who are believed to have knowledge useful to security

forces are held in a police facility in Jakarta that also is the location of a drug rehabilitation center and used to hold high profile suspects awaiting trial. Conditions in this facility are much better than in regular prisons.

Generally speaking detainees are well treated. Sanitation is adequate and the facility is clean. The detainees keep it that way. Food is more than adequate, much better than in regular prisons and than that available to Indonesia's poor. Detainees receive three meals similar to the "catering boxes" similar to those distributed at university seminars and other public events every day. Each includes rice, vegetables, *sambal* (chili sauce) and a small amount of chicken, beef or fish. Detainees formerly held in Bali, where most people are Hindu and pork is a dietary staple, are greatly relieved to learn that they are never offered pork and can be confident that their meals are *hallal* (religiously permissible). Detainees are not subject to the humiliating and degrading "harsh" interrogations (torture) of the sort formerly characteristic of US detention centers. Many are on quite good terms with their guards.

The unit in which Islamist extremists are held is much like a *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) though conditions are far less crowded. Each prisoner has his own cell. In *pesantren*, it is common for as many as fifteen students to share a single room. Many of the detainees spend a great deal of time praying, reading and reciting the *Qur'an*. There are no restrictions on what they can read, as long as it is legally published in Indonesia. This means that they have free access to the wide variety of Islamist and *jihadi* materials, just as other Indonesians do. Near complete freedom of the press is one of the hallmarks on Indonesian democracy. They are also allowed to watch TV.

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*Prisoners have free access to the wide variety of Islamist and jihadi materials*

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Some detainees have cell phones, or hand phones as they are called in Indonesia. Incoming and outgoing calls and text messages are monitored. Laptops and other computers are prohibited. They also have frequent visitors who often bring fruit, snacks and presents including radios, rice cookers and hot-pots for preparing coffee and instant noodles. Visitors include family members and friends. ICG is correct to point to potential security problems, particularly the fact that visitors are not closely screened and conversations are not always monitored. While detainees are not allowed to speak with journalists, there are almost no restrictions on "friends." Some detainees use visits to help family members run small businesses. Given the importance of family relationships in the Indonesian extremist sub-culture, it can be assumed that many family members are also political and religious extremists.

It should be noted that in Indonesia other high profile detainees, including those awaiting trial on corruption charges, are treated similarly. The wealthier or more important you are, the less restrictive conditions of incarceration are. In the police detention center in Jakarta some prisoners have large private quarters they furnish themselves, hire other prisoners as

personal assistants and bring pets including fish and songbirds, with them to prison. We are not currently able to assess conditions in other prisons.

Treating detainees humanely is in keeping with international norms and basic human decency. In some instances it has been instrumental in “turning around” even high profile terrorists. Some former detainees we have spoken with were genuinely surprised to be treated this way, because they have been taught that the authorities are brutal, savage unbelievers who would torture and then kill them if they were captured. Discovering that many in the security services are actually decent, congenial people *and pious Muslims*, leads *some* detainees to reject basic assumptions of the *Jihadi* worldview.

De-humanizing enemies plays a critical role in justifying violence. It enables people to behave in ways that they would normally find to be morally repugnant. Treating detainees with dignity and respect can *sometimes* lead to a process of “re-humanization.” We have spoken with former terrorist leaders who were so profoundly affected by simple acts of kindness that they have not only recanted but are now actively involved in anti-radical activities. De-humanization and re-humanization are both examples of what is referred to in the psychological literature as “cognitive restructuring”<sup>5</sup> and by scholars of religion as “conversion.”<sup>6</sup>

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*Some prisoners who were treated with kindness have recanted and become involved in anti-radical activities*

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People who undergo this sort of change are often among the most effective proponents of their new worldviews. They are enormously valuable “assets” in the struggle against Islamist extremism because, as one former jihadi we spoke with put it, “we know how to counter extremism because we know how extremists think.”

Clearly, efforts need to be made to understand factors contributing to the re-humanization process because it is an essential component in combating the extremist sub-culture that defines others as less than human beings, the spilling of whose “blood is *halla*l (permissible).”

It is also important to understand why in some cases these measures may have little, if any, effect on detainees. Some are completely recalcitrant. Some continue to equate Islam with violent *jihad*. They maintain that the 2002 Bali Bombings and atrocities they participated in, including beheading children, in Poso, Ambon and elsewhere were pious acts. They show no remorse and believe they will be rewarded for their actions in heaven. Some we have spoken with in the Jakarta detention center say that Muslims who do not share their understanding of *jihad* as unrestrained violence do not understand Islam.

This is a critically important problem because detainees who participated in atrocities and have no remorse or regret will be released when they have served their sentences. A substantial number will be freed in the next year. Unlike neighboring Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia does not have “preventative detention” laws that would allow authorities

to hold suspects indefinitely. Few Indonesians would like to see a return to the days of the New Order (1965-1998) when dissidents of all types were arbitrarily detained – or simply disappeared. ICG has strongly advised against draconian legislation that could foster distrust and resentment that could contribute to the spread of extremist ideologies.<sup>7</sup> We concur with this analysis.

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*Some detainees are allowed to teach Qur'an recitation, deliver Friday sermons, and serve as imams for communal prayers*

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For most of those detained on terrorism related charges, Islam is a vitally important part of prison life. Some detainees are allowed to teach *Qur'an* recitation, deliver Friday sermons, and serve as *imams* for communal prayers. Concerns about unrepentant terrorists preaching sermons are obvious. Allowing them to serve as *imams* (prayer leaders) is equally problematic. Ideally the *imam* should be an individual known for piety and knowledge of Islam. To pray behind an *imam* is implicit recognition of his Islamic legitimacy and authority.

Other prisoners respect terrorist detainees for performing these religious functions and often refer to them as *ustad* (religious teacher). Many of them have only the most basic knowledge of Islam and come to see these “*ustad*” as religious authorities. This creates the risk of “jail-house” radicalization, not only of prisoners but of guards and other prison staff.

Steps need to be taken to reduce this risk. Mainstream *imams* and teachers should be made available for the general prison population. Islamic education programs for people likely to be in sustained contact with radical detainees are advisable. The national police and prison officials should work together to implement these policies in Jakarta and in prisons throughout the country.

## DE-RADICALIZATION

Thousands of *jihadis* are incarcerated in many countries. The impracticality—and in many instances legal impossibility—of detaining them indefinitely has prompted concern with developing effective “de-radicalization” strategies. Many detainees have proven to be resistant to even well designed “re-education” programs. A recent report by the Psychology Faculty at the University of Indonesia describes what appeared to be a model program and how, in many cases, it failed to achieve the desired result.<sup>8</sup>

The program and evaluation of its effectiveness were professional in every respect. A team of University of Indonesia psychologists and Islamic scholars from Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, working together with officers from the security forces, academics from the Indonesian National Academy of Sciences and others, developed a “social intervention strategy” based on theoretical models formulated by social work professions.<sup>9</sup>

Islamic content was based on the works of the highly respected Muslim scholar Quraissy Shihab who is known for sophisticated, highly nuanced interpretations of the Qur'an. Shihab's *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an) is widely read. Talk shows based on it, in which he answers questions from a studio audience, are broadcast daily during Ramadan. The University of Indonesia project developed and tested a re-education program based on his book *Kekerasan atas Nama Agama* (Violence in the Name of Religion). This was a very logical choice. The program consisted of a series of lectures explaining the theological and legal (*Shari'ah*) complexities of the concept of *jihad*, including that in most cases *jihad* is nonviolent struggle in the path of God.

Most detainees were not receptive to the materials presented in the lectures. The report indicates that while some were willing to consider tactical issues, including the appropriateness of conducting *jihad* in Indonesia, efforts to alter their basic understandings of Islam and *jihad* were not successful. The program failed to accomplish the type of cognitive restructuring required to reduce the likelihood that they will recommence radical activities upon release.

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*The program failed to accomplish the type of cognitive restructuring required to reduce future radical activities*

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The report does indicate that it is possible to engage detainees in conversations about religious issues, including *jihad*, and suggests that longer-term facilitated discussion groups might be more effective than lecture-based educational programs. This suggests a convergence with cognitive behavioral therapy in which "group work" often plays an important role in attempt to accomplish cognitive restructuring.<sup>10</sup> It is reasonable to suggest that facilitators who share significant elements of the Wahhabi-Salafi understanding of Islam common among violent extremist but who are themselves committed to religious tolerance and nonviolence *might* prove to be more effective facilitators.

ICG has suggested that detainees be more closely monitored on release and that there be stiff penalties for those who return to violent activities. Unfortunately neither strategy is likely to be effective. In Indonesia it is not difficult to vanish into the crowd in either rural or urban areas. It does not seem reasonable to suggest that the prospect of stiff penalties will deter those who have embraced armed struggle and martyrdom as central elements of their religious and personal identities.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that many Islamist ideologies that view the world as unalterably evil consider both violent *jihad* and *hijra* (emigration) to be religiously sanctioned responses. Generally speaking, *hijra* groups are not violent. They chose to distance themselves from evil rather than confronting it. There are many Indonesian examples. They attempt to establish self-sufficient communities in which they can practice what they believe to be the true Islam in isolation from others.

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*It is possible that efforts to promote disengagement within the Islamist discourse of hijra could be effective*

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The distinction between confrontation and avoidance as responses to the perceived irredeemable evil of the world is not unique to Islam. It is also characteristic of Anabaptist Christianity, a movement that arose in Germany in the initial stages of the 16th century Protestant Reformation.<sup>11</sup> Some Anabaptists advocated destruction of the existing social order by violent means. This contributed to the German Peasants' War in which untold thousands perished. Other examples are the Mennonites and Amish, known for their "plain" lifestyles and pacifism.

The distinction between *jihad*- and *hijra*-oriented Islamist groups is also not unique to Indonesia. It can also be found in Egypt and throughout the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> A shift in the direction of *hijra* would not solve the problem of extremism but could reduce the likelihood of violent action in the near and medium term.

It may be the case that promoting cognitive restructuring that aims at shifting response to—rather than understandings of—the world would be more effective than either punitive strategies or the attempts to restructure higher order understandings of the world as attempted by the University of Indonesia team. Horgan's distinction between "deradicalization" and "disengagement" is useful for understanding the differences between these approaches. "De-radicalization" involves dramatic reconfiguration of worldview, "disengagement" only the abandonment of violent tactics.<sup>13</sup> De-radicalization is the preferred outcome, but is more difficult to accomplish. It is possible that locating efforts to promote disengagement within the Islamist discourse of *hijra* could prove to be effective.

Sustained research efforts are necessary to determine the efficacy of re-education programs based on this hypothesis. The Acehese examples discussed below indicate that "war wariness" and the realization that violent struggle is futile may facilitate both kinds of transformation.

## EMERGING JIHADIST STRATEGIES

ICG is correct to point to the existence of (at least) three strategic variants in the Indonesian *Jihadi* movement, but may overstate the differences. The first, associated with *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) and Abu Bakr Ba'asyir, on which ICG has reported extensively, has *for the time being* abandoned violent *jihad*. The second, linked to Noordin Top, focuses on dramatic, but politically ineffective, attacks on targets linked to the US and other western countries. The supposedly new stream represented by Al Qaeda Aceh, is intended to conduct a protracted campaign against Indonesians it defines and un-believers (which is most Indonesians) with the aim of establishing a state based on *Shari'ah* – or more precisely their own narrow understanding of what *Shari'ah* might be.



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*The variants of the movement share a common goal of establishing Shari'ah or a regional Caliphate*

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It is important to note that the differences are tactical. These variants share a common goal, the establishment of a *Shari'ah* based state or global or Southeast Asian regional Caliphate. JI has not abandoned the idea of *jihad*. They have simply come to the conclusion that this is not the appropriate time for violent struggle because there is little probability of success. Abu Bakr Ba'asyir, who is generally considered to be the spiritual leader of JI, made this very clear in an address in Yogyakarta last August. He explained that armed struggle against the US and its western allies is a religious obligation for the global Muslim community, but that in Indonesia, *jihad* should be conducted through proselytization for the time being. In short he called for a temporary ceasefire on the home front. In the same address he continued to support violent struggle outside of Indonesia.

Ba'asyir also rejects the idea that *hijra* can be substituted for *jihad*. In the address discussed above he explained that while *hijra* is theologically possible, it is practically impossible for two reasons. The first is that there is no place to emigrate to because the entire world is controlled by Zionists. The second is that it would be impossible for the more than 200,000,000 Indonesian Muslims to move even if there was a place to move. This is a very limited form of disengagement.

Describing the leaders of Muslim governments as unbelievers and targeting them for assassination is also not a new strategy. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 is an example of this strategy. Again, Ba'asyir has not openly called on his followers to kill Indonesian leaders, but he has often described them as apostates, who according to his interpretation of *Shari'ah* deserve death.

The idea of conducting a protracted war of attrition against the state, such as that planned by Al Qaeda Aceh, is also not new. ICG is correct in describing this group as being composed of *jihadis* who disagree with the tactics currently employed by others. Their strategy closely resembles that of the *Negara Islam Indonesia (Darul Islam)* movement that has roots to the 1940s.<sup>14</sup>

The ICG report includes two extremely significant observations concerning the current state of Islamist extremism in Indonesia. One concerns Aceh, the other relationships between terrorist and Islamist vigilante groups.

The first is that Al Qaeda Aceh was not able to mobilize significant local support in Aceh. They assumed that because Aceh was the site of a protracted armed struggle against the Indonesian government and that there is broad based support for "Islamic" governance in the province, this would translate into support for a new insurgency. But most Acehnese want no part of another insurgency. The benefits of peace are too great. It

is now possible to drive from Medan in east central Sumatra to Banda Aceh in the north with out encountering government or insurgent roadblocks, bombs, snipers or carjackers. People can go to coffee shops or fruit markets or have picnics on the beach in the evenings. They do not have to fear being gunned down simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. It is now possible to hope that one's children will grow up without the horror of seeing blood and mangled bodies in the streets and hearing the screams of the dying and wounded – and that parents will not have to bury their children.

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*A shared rhetoric of jihad does not necessarily imply a shared political agenda*

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A great deal has changed in Aceh since the Helsinki peace agreement was signed in August of 2005<sup>15</sup> and it seems clear that Acehnese embrace these changes at a very basic level. The leaders and financial backers of Al Qaeda Aceh did not understand this. It would also seem that they did not understand the Acehnese struggle was always as much nationalist as Islamist and that a shared rhetoric of *jihad* does not necessarily imply a shared political agenda.

The fact that *Al Qaeda Aceh* was able to recruit some members of *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) is disturbing but not surprising. FPI was established in 1998 during Indonesia's democratic transition. It is an Islamist vigilante group known for attacks on bars and nightclubs, especially during the Holy month of Ramadan, and on religious groups it considers to be "deviant." It is also known for ties with organized crime and violent petty criminals known as *preman*. It is not known to be directly linked to recognized terrorist organizations.

## CONCLUSION

*Al Qaeda Aceh* and other terrorist organizations including JI, vigilante groups such as FPI and legal non-violent groups including *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia* (Indonesian Council for the Propagation of Islam/DDII), *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (the Indonesian branch of the Islamic Salvation Party/HTI) and *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (Justice and Prosperity Party/PKS) all draw on a common Islamist sub-culture for support. This sub-culture is based on a combination of *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* understandings of Islam and the political philosophies of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is a well established component of Indonesian society.

Disengagement can lead terrorists to move in the direction of DDII, HTI or FPI. We have encountered numerous cases. ICG's observation about movements between FPI and *Al Qaeda Aceh* indicate that the process may work in either direction. This subculture is rooted in radical theologies. Most people who espouse these views are not violent. Engagement and disengagement with violence are two sides of the same coin.

This presents challenges and opportunities. It suggests that disengagement efforts aimed at shifting perceptions of operational or tactical matters may be more effective than attempts at de-radicalization that require the transformation of worldviews and identities. There are, to be sure, individuals who were formerly violent extremists who are now activists for progressive causes. These cases make headlines. Less dramatic transformations that are better understood as disengagement may be as important, if not more so, in reducing the danger of terrorist violence.

Understanding of the cognitive restructuring processes involved in either type of transformation remains very limited. As difficult as it is, further research on these and related topics is necessary for the development of radicalism prevention and rehabilitation programs.

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