“Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Indonesia: Adapting to a Changed Threat”

An Open Forum with

Shari Villarosa
Deputy Coordinator for Regional Affairs,
US State Department Office of the Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism

And

Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Goucher College

November 17, 2011

Many changes have occurred in the leadership structure of terrorist activities in Indonesia since the incidence of the 2002 Bali bombing, the twin bombing of Marriott and Ritz-Carlton in 2009, and other attacks. These include both the perceived structural changes and the degree of fragmentation in the terrorist movement. As such, measures to counter radicalization and terrorism have since changed and become better understood.

On November 17, 2011, USINDO hosted an open forum on the nature of terrorism in Indonesia and the response of American and Indonesian counter-terrorism strategy, with Shari Villarosa, the Deputy Coordinator for Regional Affairs at the US State Department Office of the Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, and Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Goucher College.

Our panel discussed (1) the United States engagement with Indonesia in counter-terrorism activities, (2) the changing trends in terror methods and other aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism, and (3) the current status of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) and its affiliates and splinters in Indonesia.

Shari Villarosa began with an overview of the evolution of terrorist threats in Indonesia. Prior to 2002 Bali bombing, JI was led by people who were trained in Afghanistan, including those with links to Al Qaeda (AQ) and their global anti-Western ideology. Since then, their ranks have depleted due to internal struggle, imprisonment, and/or death. The organization splintered between those who opposed violence (or focused...
more on proselytization) and those who were interested in pursuing violent methods.

Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAT), including some JI splinter groups, gained prominence, not as a group but as a network of like-minded extremists. However, these groups have also weakened after the Indonesian police raided their training camp in Aceh in February 2010. The discovery of the camp led to the prosecution and conviction of Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, a founder of JI, along with several others (some cases are still in process).

Bombing of such tourists areas as Bali and hotels that cater to foreigners, Villarosa argued, have also evolved. While this development should not be taken to suggest that foreigners are no longer a target, recent trends indicate that smaller groups tended to focus more on targeting local interests (letter bombs targeted to security officials and prominent moderate religious leaders, suicide bombing of a police mosque and a church, and attempted pipe bombing of a church).

According to Villarosa, the shift in the focus and methods of terrorist threats could represent (a) a reaction against the considerable success of the police in capturing terrorist suspects, (b) a reaction against the loss of leaders with sophisticated training and attack planning expertise, or (c) a resurgence of Darul Islam (DI), a strain of thought seeking to establish an Islamic state that predated Indonesian independence. The degradation of terrorist groups by Indonesian authorities does not necessarily suggest that individual terrorists no longer pose dangerous threats. Foreign targets are also not off limits. A prominent terrorist, Abu Umar, was arrested earlier this month, and six alleged members of his group were also arrested in Jakarta, suspected of planning a bombing of the Singapore embassy in Jakarta. Some other people from the same group were also detained in Sabah, Malaysia, for planning attacks in Malaysia and the Philippines.

With regard to counter-terrorism activities, Villarosa commended Indonesia’s strategy and efforts to counter radicalization and terrorism. Indonesia’s commitment has enabled dedicated police officers and prosecutors to work together since 2006 and successfully prosecuted 152 cases, with 112 cases still pending (including Aceh training camp cases). Indonesia also continues to prosecute Umar Patek, one of the Bali bombing suspects, who was recently extradited from Pakistan and will be put on trial early next year. Indonesia recently adopted a civilian led approach, through the establishment of BNPT (counter-terrorism coordinating body) to combine efforts by police, military, judiciary system, and civilians in sustainable counter-terrorism activities. This corresponds to the Obama administration’s approach to counter-terrorism.

Villarosa emphasized that the US strongly support the rule of law approach Indonesia is taking and have noted its success. However, some improvements are still needed. Court sentences have been relatively short; they should commensurate with the crime. The trial of Ba’asyir in the Aceh camp case also demonstrates a need for appropriate legislation on training activity and material supports for terrorist
organization. Indonesia recognizes this loophole and tries to create legislation to address it to be consistent with the international principles and guidelines.

The law against terror financing also needs to be strengthened. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF, a global standard setting body to protect the international financial system from money laundering or terror finance risk) identified shortfalls in Indonesia and recommended actions to address some of the deficiencies. These include adequately criminalizing the financing of terrorist groups and individuals, establishing and implementing adequate procedure to identify and freeze terrorist assets, and amending the law to fully implement the 1999 international convention for the suppression of the financing of terrorism.

Another important area for action is countering violence extremism to dry up the pool of recruits for terrorist organizations. This can be done in various ways, including de-legitimizing violence, countering the message that justifies violence (by important interlocutors who can appeal to the potential recruits), and providing positive constructive alternatives.

The radicalization issue received new focus when Aceh camp members were identified as former prisoners who became radicalized in prison when they come in contact with convicted terrorists. According to Villarosa, NGOs have also become involved in mobilizing society against violent extremists. One international NGO has a long-term goal in establishing an environment where government and civil society can exercise their ability to advance pluralism and religious tolerance. In the short term, the goal is to play a constructive role in de-radicalization efforts through working directly with the department of correction and local NGOs.

Villarosa also highlighted religious violence (distinct from but related to terrorism), seen as rising in Indonesia. The International Crisis Group recently reported that religious tolerance was challenged and increasingly strained. The recent Ambon clash raised fear of the return of communal violence. While communal tension remains, the grass-root peace advocates and local officials managed to keep violence from growing.

In conclusion, Villarosa emphasized that Indonesia is now seen as a leader in counter-terrorism issues in regional and multilateral fora. Indonesia is a founding member of the recently launched Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), and presently co-chairing Southeast Asia working group with Australia. Indonesia has shown remarkable political will, both of the government and the people, to develop an effective strategy and adapted to the changing threat of terrorism.

Following Villarosa’s presentation, Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang shared her recent research on the disengagement of Indonesia’s jihadis and discussed why JI is now fragmented and cannot retain a common vision (jihadi is used as it is the preferred term used by the people interviewed). In 2002, JI possibly was a hierarchical structured organization with a central command, with a possible link to AQ, and sought to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. Today, we have a
clearer picture. JI today is a cell of its former self.

Dr. Chernov Hwang posed the following critical questions to understand the Salafi jihadi landscape in Indonesia that has shifted dramatically in the past decade: (1) what is the current status of JI; (2) how to best understand the fragmentation that is happening and why they keep happening; (3) why the jihadis disengaged from violence and what were the motivational factors; and (4) what is the implication of this shift to our understanding of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

According to Dr. Chernov Hwang, radicalism in Indonesia is not new. It existed since the Padri rebellion in the 19th century, in the independence era when DI sought an Islamic state in Indonesia, and it existed underground during Suharto era. JI and its affiliates are the recent reincarnation of the radical fringe within a minority that seeks to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. Today JI does not function as an organization. Instead of structure, they use their study circles and pengajian (teaching in certain areas) led by specific clerics. Many of these clerics adopt a mainstream JI position, which is dakwah (Islam propagation) first, but jihad later. Others prefer Nordin Top’s approach of iterated attacks. JI members are bound by marriage, kinship, common experience of training, and some common business partnership.

JI fragmentation is about attitude and ideology. They may agree on the idea of an Islamist state, but they do not agree on the method and approach to jihad to achieve this goal.

Under Abdullah Sungkar, JI’s dakwah also meant socialization and education about the method and approach used to support the goal of Islamist state before revolution can occur. Many JI members today believe Nordin Top’s action is counterproductive. It risks alienating many people from the goal of establishing an Islamic state. They believe Indonesia is not an appropriate place for jihad, it is not the time, and bombing is counterproductive. This view is championed by Abu Rustam and widely supported by many.

Since Bin Laden’s 1998 fatwa, many JI splinters emerged. Their goal is the same, but their preferred method is different. Hambali, for example, did not seek approval from the central command. This fragmentation, Dr. Chernov Hwang hypothesized, was due to the weak JI leadership since the death of Abdullah Sungkar, who was described as both firm and charismatic. Ba’asyir on the other hand, is perceived as not strong enough to project JI vision and strategy.

The Lintas tanzim project in Aceh attempted to find an alternative path between Top’s approach and JI mainstream strategy through their training camp. A similar attempt has failed in Poso, and now they also have failed in Aceh.

Dr. Chernov Hwang elaborated the factors that motivated individual members to disengage (cease using violence). These are based on behavior and highly complex factors (rational, emotional, psychological, relational).

The majority of her research respondents (JI and its splinters in Jawa and
Poso/Palu) went through various disengagement processes: (a) migrated from active to non-active role; (b) migrated from jihad centric to dakwah centric role; and (c) migrated from supporting terror action to dakwah centric or non-active role.

She identified the following common drivers toward disengagement: (1) pronounced disillusionment with bombing and other factors (roles, mindsets, ideology); (2) development of relationship with those outside the jihadi circles; (3) change of priorities; (4) law enforcement soft approaches; and (5) cost benefit analysis.

The disengagement is conditional on the existence of a valid fatwa and financial compensation (Jawa), or on the expectation of being under attack again (Poso). The latter is more alarming as they view violence as likely to happen again. Government religious tolerance event, she argued, should include trust building and not merely ceremonial.

Dr. Chernov Hwang reiterated that JI is now fragmented. People who favor violence remain, and individuals with a shared goal will find each other. However, those who disengaged by role of migration, she argued, should not be dismissed either. Disengagement is a gradual process and it will take a long time before it has an impact.

A brief Q&A session followed the panel’s presentation.

Q: Counter-terrorism bilateral or multilateral meetings usually focus on three issues: strengthening the capacity of police and law enforcement, legal reform, and judiciary process. But the core issue is implementation. What is required is not more capacity building, but assistance in ensuring the court system and buildings are suitable for terrorist proceeding, in witness protection as well as prosecutors’ safety, and in improving the prison condition. How do you see other country can assist us?

Shari- I think capacity building is still needed. It is a continuum; threats and tactics evolve. However, I agree with the need for more assistance. The real issue is the state did not provide adequate resources. The international community is prepared to work with Indonesia. Prison reform and de-radicalization do not need high tech solution all the time. It can be a matter of separating those who proselytize from the regular prisoners. The US and other nations are interested in assisting Indonesia to ensure the necessary security to have a fair judicial process.

Q: Three main issues are obvious: legislation, updating strategy, and inter-agency operational level. But the solution and the problem are mostly political consensus. How do you see this? Also, it is good if the US can offer courses to civilians (in addition to the military) on how the US inter-agency collaboration works. Is TNI currently doing anything to expand the role of military? How BNPT addresses this?

Shari- BNPT does bring in military component. The US believes a civilian led approach is the correct one. But there is a role for the military. A larger talk is needed to address the military territorial control. The US has started with human rights training for Kopassus (army
special force), as required by the Leahy law. Julie mentioned a good observation about the soft approach by the Indonesian police toward disengagement. And we try to get input from all actors involved to inform the US and other countries on how to assist Indonesia in counter-terrorism activities.

Q: What is the current status on JI and AQ in Indonesia, and Abu Sayaf in the Philippines?

Shari- Abu Sayaf is now perceived as a criminal organization (kidnapping for ransoms). In 2000, some JI members were trained in the southern Philippines. Some stayed and married local women, but we do not see any active training group now. There is a link to AQ for some individual members, but they are out of the picture. We do not see active AQ leadership with various groups in Indonesia at this time.

Julie- There maybe a more clear line 6-7 years ago between AQ and JI. The links to AQ are always tenuous. In Malaysia it is more of admiration toward AQ, but there is no link. It is more of a ‘tweet’ link. Ideas may go back and forth, but the action is counterproductive. In the Philippines, under Sungkar’s leadership, everybody should receive training and so they set up training camp. But this has ended a long time ago. They now have mostly social relational links. They are more individual links to Abu Sayaf or to MILF. The bombing group (Hambali, Top, Azhari, etc) was a sub-group within JI, when the central command still held a key role in leadership.

What about their younger generation? And what is the role of women?

Julie- There is a younger generation in JI schools. The older people, who fought in Afghanistan, saw all their gains and loss. They look down on the new recruits. Older recruits received strong indoctrination from DI, then from JI under Sungkar. Young recruits were invited to several study groups and they moved from one group to another. They do not have deep indoctrination, and can easily move to another group that fits their needs. Not all young people in JI schools will become JI members or will be invited to become JI member.

In terms of JI women, they are not like Hamas; they are not suicidal. They provide familial support and bringing in extra money through side businesses. They built alliances through marriage.

Shari- Recent information suggests that continuing violence may indicate a resurgence of DI. But this is generational. These are people who grew up in DI family. It is a very small community; they are not wide spread. They are actively searching for recruits. Currently, public high schools are the most popular space to recruit. They target young people from middle class family who are searching for higher spirituality.

Julie- JI families are similar. But it can be that the father is DI member, the son belongs to JI, and the grandchildren are affiliated to smaller groups.

Some studies suggest that public schools now teach more intolerance, and this needs to be addressed.

Q: The statistics on the number of JI members who disengaged seems a lot.