S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

Almost Another 9/11:
JI's Planned Aviation Attack

John Harrison and V. Arianti

25 November 2009

Findings from Noordin Top's laptop, which was seized following his death, reportedly suggest that his group had planned a 9/11- style aviation attack in Indonesia. What does this mean for civil aviation in the region?

THE HARDLINE breakaway faction of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), led by the now deceased Noordin Top had arguably a pyrrhic victory with the 17 July bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels. The attack did cause loss of life and exposed a weakness in security, as reflected in the infiltration of hotel staff by the organisation. But the quick reaction of the Indonesian police led to the disruption of a plot to assassinate President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and the eventual death of Noordin himself as well as several other key figures. Just as critically, the authorities seized documents and Noordin's laptop which exposed the potential of a much deadlier operation: Noordin, as reported in the Indonesian media, was attempting to infiltrate the aviation system to conduct attacks against civil aviation, including a suicide hijacking against skyscrapers in Jakarta.

Aviation as a tool of terror

Besides information gathered from Noordin's laptop, the 9/11-style plot, drawn in a sketch, was seized by the police in Banjarmasin (South Kalimantan) during the arrest of Abu Zar in May 2009. This plot was reportedly confirmed by Abu Zar and Amir Abdillah, both members of Noordin's network. While the details remain sparse, what is known is that Mohamad Syahrir, a key aid to Noordin who was killed in a raid in October 2009, was tasked with recruiting more pilots and others with aviation background. Syahrir was a former technician who worked for the national airline, Garuda Indonesia, until 2004.

The global jihadis have shown a specific interest in using aviation as a tool of terror – Bojinka in 1995 to blow up 12 airplanes as they flew from Asia to the US; 9/11 and the planned second wave attacks that were to occur shortly after using Southeast Asians as the hijackers; JI's Singapore cell's plot against Changi Airport; the 2006 Liquid plot in the United Kingdom to bomb transatlantic flights using liquid bombs; as well as the 2008 plot by East Turkestan Islamic Movement/ETIM against a

---

Chinese airliner. Given this trend, it seems odd that it took this long for Indonesia's most notorious terrorist to even attempt such an operation. It is believed all the key members of the plot are either dead or in custody, but it does highlight a critical area of aviation security that is rarely discussed -- staff screening.

Securing Staff: The Mohamad Syahrir Story

Mohamad Syahrir's story is still being pieced together, but by all accounts he was a model employee. He was qualified to ensure the safety of Boeing 737, the most common short-haul airplane in the world, and one used by President Yudhoyono for domestic flights. As a Garuda staff, he underwent an-18 month training course with the Navy in Surabaya. Three months were for basic military training, including weapons operation. It is not clear if he had gone through the introduction to bomb detection course offered by the Navy. Syahrir left Garuda in 2004; it is not known if his recruitment by JI occurred while he was still employed by the airline. But his knowledge and potential access to staff and premises would clearly be useful to Noordin, and was being exploited.

The international community has spent enormous sums, and caused considerable passenger inconvenience, in trying to prevent terrorists and weapons from getting into an aircraft. The obvious weakness has always been the individual staff who circumvents security to either assist a potential attack, or conducts one himself. While anyone with access to aircraft must be security-screened for weapons and other prohibited items, the real concern is how to detect radicalised or compromised staff.

There are still fundamental questions that remain unresolved: How do you balance the rights of staff to hold views, even if some may be inclined to violence, with the passengers' right to safe and secure travel? In the Indonesian context, it is not illegal to be a member of JI, so could you fire someone for declaring himself to be a JI member? What about a non-member who espouses JI's views but does not support terrorism? This begs the larger question -- what views are consistent or inconsistent with working in a security-sensitive environment? Even if there is a clear policy, is it enforceable? Does working in the aviation environment require staff to face intrusive background checks? If so when and how often?

Airlines, airport authority aviation security experts, passenger groups and unions are all struggling with these questions, with no answers having been reached as yet. Ultimately, since the aviation industry is a global system, and only as safe as its weakest link, these decisions must be addressed in the context of the international aviation system, represented by the International Civil Association Organisation (ICAO) and International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Implications for Regional Aviation

The demise of Noordin Top and key members of his cell over the last few months has been a laudable success for Indonesia. The deaths and arrests have significantly weakened JI, but they have raised troubling questions with respect to the changing tactics of this dangerous terrorist group. Shifting from land, where they have had considerable success, to the aviation environment suggests access to considerable resources. Additionally it suggests that Southeast Asian aviation faces a potentially changing security threat.

Aviation has served as a strategic platform for terrorists for more than 40 years. Unless we take serious steps to address security in this critical area, we will face a potential catastrophe in the not-too-distant future. The international community needs to build on the success the Indonesians have had by exposing the plot against civil aviation and deal decisively with the emerging threat of terrorism against international civil aviation.

John Harrison is an Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He heads terrorism research at the school's constituent unit, the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) and is the author of <u>International Aviation Terrorism</u> (Routledge 2009). V. Arianti is a Senior Analyst at the school.