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## **Lone Attacker, Lone Wolf, or Loner? Making Sense of the Ulu Tiram Incident**

*By Kumar Ramakrishna*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Whatever the actual nature of the recent Ulu Tiram incident, one key take-away is that permitting, through benign neglect, the evolution of ultra-puritanical religious spaces cut off from the tempering effects of wider multicultural societal currents, may not be wise. It may well encourage the breeding of insular counter-cultures within which extremist ideologies may fester – to the detriment of all.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Some uncertainty appears to be surrounding the 17 May incident in the town of Ulu Tiram, in the southern Malaysian state of Johore, involving a man armed with a machete who attacked a police station, [killing two police officers](#) and injuring a third, before being shot dead himself. At first, Malaysian police indicated that they suspected that the violent Islamist Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network was behind the attack, with the probable aim of stealing weapons. “JI-related paraphernalia” was reportedly discovered following a raid on the home of the suspect, Radin Romyullah Radin [Imran](#). In addition, five family members of Radin’s were arrested, including his father, who police said was a “known JI [member](#)”. However, Malaysia’s Minister of Home Affairs subsequently played down the JI connection. He described Radin as a “lone wolf” who was “driven by certain motivations based on his own understanding because he rarely mixed with [others](#)”.

### **Jemaah Islamiyah in Context**

JI, to be sure, is not the same transnational Southeast Asian terror network as it was in its heyday in the 1990s and 2000s, with a presence in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and even Australia. A potentially devastating joint Al Qaeda-JI operation almost took place in Singapore itself before it was thwarted by the

security agencies. JI however succeeded in launching other high-profile attacks in the region, such as the October 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 [people](#). Concerted and ensuing security force pressure by Indonesia and other regional governments largely decimated the network. Today, it has switched to a “[long-game strategy](#)” in its Indonesian base, where it has focused on gradually and discreetly building up its resources and popular support through *dakwah* (preaching), infiltration of civil society and government agencies, while keeping [alive](#) its long-held aims for an Islamic State in Indonesia and even a wider regional caliphate.

Given this background, three possible scenarios concerning the Ulu Tiram attack seem possible:

### **1. The Attack was the Work of a Lone Attacker**

This is not unreasonable. It is well known that Ulu Tiram is the location of a now-defunct JI-linked religious boarding school, Madrasah Luqmanul Hakiem. This madrasah, located in an isolated, rural area in Ulu Tiram, used to be “a very important meeting point for terror group members” from JI in the [1990s](#). Luqmanul Hakiem was where senior Indonesian JI exiles fleeing then-President Soeharto’s staunchly anti-Islamist regime, were based at various times. These leaders included JI founders Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, as well as JI operatives associated with the 2002 Bali bombing, such as Mukhlas and Amrozi, and [others](#). Hence as one analyst put it, the absence of JI attacks on Malaysian soil does not necessarily imply that the JI does not exist [there](#). Significantly, the derelict Luqmanul Hakiem madrasah, that served as a key nerve centre of the JI network in Malaysia in the 1990s, is situated less than 100 metres from the current suspect’s [home](#). Around the same time as the Ulu Tiram attack, there were other worrying incidents at Istana Negara and another police station in Penang. Malaysian police are currently investigating to see if these are “isolated incidents or [coordinated](#)”. The bottom line? If the Ulu Tiram attack was indeed part of a wider coordinated action by a resurgent, organised JI cell, then the incident should really be seen as carried out – following a typology developed by counter-terrorism researcher Raffaello Pantucci – by a *lone attacker* at the explicit direction of a wider organised network, with clear command and control [links](#).

### **2. The Attack was the Work of a Lone Wolf**

That said, senior police officials investigating the Ulu Tiram incident have affirmed that the assailant Radin *himself* was [not linked to JI](#). What is notable moreover is that former Indonesian JI militants such as Ali Imron and Umar Patek have disagreed that the Ulu Tiram attack was an organised JI plot, as it did not fit JI’s low-key profile in [Malaysia](#). No less significantly, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the co-founder of JI, has also come out to debunk any notion of a JI directing hand in the Ulu Tiram [attack](#). What has since emerged is that the five arrested family members of the Ulu Tiram assailant Radin, have been remanded further under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act as the police have confirmed the family “held beliefs that had negative implications for [others](#)”. This raises the possibility that Radin had been radicalised by his own family, which “did not mix with the community”, regarding outsiders as [kafir](#) (infidels). If the attacker had been influenced to some extent by the extremism of his family members, especially his father who is a “known JI member”, then technically speaking, he acted as a *lone wolf*. That is, he acted on his own volition, but may have been

influenced – though not expressly directed – through “actual contact with other [extremists](#)”.

### 3. The Attack was the Work of a Loner

The third possibility is that Radin acted entirely on his own volition, as a natural outgrowth of his deep immersion in the insulated extremist subculture that has grown up around the Luqmanul Hakiem madrasah. In its heyday, the school was a “breeding ground for militant ideologies and [extremism](#)”. Radin’s immediate family aside, police are also investigating a wider group of twenty individuals with JI links. Radin’s family is one of several that still are associated with Luqmanul Hakiem. Although the madrasah itself is not officially functioning, its mosque reportedly continues to serve more than 10 families living in the compound, including those related to slain JI operational [leaders](#). This Luqmanul Hakiem community has long been regarded by the wider public as insular, judgemental toward outsiders, and “[fanatics](#)”. The point is, such an insular “counter-culture” is a risk factor for breeding [extremism](#), which does not even have to be expressly JI-linked. Tellingly, former Indonesian [JI](#) members Ali Imron and Umar Patek believe that the style of attack in Ulu Tiram was more reminiscent of ISIS rather than JI. Moreover, the ongoing Gaza conflict has been used by global threat groups like ISIS to incite calls for violence, and may have played a role in Radin’s [motivations](#).

What matters is that the basic us-versus-them mindset of the Ulu Tiram attacker, ingrained from a lifetime of immersion in an insulated enclave that sees the outside world as full of impure enemies, would be susceptible to radicalisation into a variety of violent Islamist ideological shades, not just that of JI. Hence, if the attacker self-radicalised on his own through his personal exposure to online influences from the Middle East, he should be considered as a *loner*. That is, he was largely influenced, not by contact with specific extremists, but “through passive consumption on the Internet or from society at [large](#)”.

### Conclusion

Investigations are still ongoing hence one should not jump to comprehensive conclusions about the nature of the Ulu Tiram incident.

That said, from a policy standpoint, one tentative, wider observation seems apropos. Permitting, through benign neglect, the evolution of ultra-puritanical religious spaces cut off from the tempering effects of wider multicultural societal currents, may not be wise. It may well encourage the breeding of insular counter-cultures within which extremist ideologies may fester – to the detriment of all.

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