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## **The Evolving Dynamics of Jemaah Islamiyah and Its Splinter Groups**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Despite Jemaah Islamiyah's recent dissolution, the threat posed by it remains significant in view of its potential for reorganisation and the enduring operational capabilities of its fighters deployed in Syria and Southern Philippines. This highlights the need for continuing vigilance and regional cooperation to counter the evolving threat.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The recent announcement by sixteen senior leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to dissolve the group in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, on 30 June is a significant moment in the history of the organisation. They expressed their commitment to the Indonesian republic, promised to follow Indonesian law, and aimed to ensure that the teachings in JI-affiliated boarding schools (pesantren) align with orthodox Islam.

This development raises important questions: Why this sudden change in the leaders of JI? What are their real motives? And how will this impact regional security, especially since JI's influence is still strong?

### **JI's Evolving Threat Dynamics**

JI has always been a persistent and evolving threat in the world of global terrorism. Understanding this recent shift is crucial because it has serious implications for regional security, especially for neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Singapore, in particular, with its status as a major economic hub, is an attractive target for terrorist groups.

Historically, JI has experienced fragmentation, particularly from breakaways by its

more violent factions. For example, the group led by Noordin Top – the suspected mastermind of twin suicide attacks on two hotels in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta in July 2009 – started as part of JI but broke away in 2004. This pattern of breakaways by splinter groups is likely to continue when internal disagreements arise.

Within JI, there has been growing scepticism about the effectiveness of their violent tactics. Para Wijayanto, a veteran of the Moro movement in the Philippines, led JI from 2008 until his arrest in 2019, tried to steer JI towards a more moderate stance. He disassociated JI from violence in Indonesia but maintained a commitment to an Islamic state. This shift included the forming of political alliances and support of campaigns, like the one against Ahok, the Christian governor of Jakarta, in 2016-17. Such changes might lead JI to focus more on non-military approaches.

### **Questioning JI's Motives**

It is important to scrutinise the motives behind the JI move. The concept of *taqiyya*, which involves concealing one's beliefs to avoid persecution or to achieve a higher goal, is a speculation in this context. Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, a key figure within JI, is known to practice *taqiyya*. This raises the question: Is the dissolution of JI a genuine shift towards moderation, or is it a strategic move to avoid pressure and continue their activities under a new guise?

Dissolving the organisation could be a calculated effort to avoid further crackdowns while preserving their capabilities. By committing publicly to Indonesian law and orthodox Islam, JI leaders can gain legitimacy and support from unsuspecting parts of society. This allows them to allay the suspicions of the authorities while they continued with their mission.

Furthermore, the dissolution of the radical organisation might make it easier for JI members to infiltrate mainstream political and social organisations, subtly furthering their agenda. By embedding themselves in legitimate institutions, they can influence policies and public opinion, advancing their objectives without causing suspicion. That this could be a strategy shows that JI leaders have a deep understanding of power dynamics and highlights the need for ongoing vigilance and comprehensive counterterrorism measures.

### **JI's Transnational Reach**

Despite the internal changes within JI, the threat it poses remains significant both regionally and globally. JI's capabilities are persistent as evident in its command of active fighters in conflict zones like Syria (where it has about 20 fighters) and the Southern Philippines. This shows JI's capacity for orchestrating transnational terrorist activities, which is why continuing vigilance against the threat from JI is necessary.

JI's continuing presence in these conflict zones demonstrates their ability to adapt and continue operations despite setbacks. Fighters in Syria, for example, acquire combat experience that would be useful military operations when they return to Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Southern Philippines provides a base for recruiting, training, and planning attacks.

## **Jl's Potential to Reorganise**

We should also be mindful that the dissolution of Jl could be a strategic reorganisation. Dispersed fighters and splinter groups could reconstitute under different names or integrate into other militant networks thereby preserving, and possibly expanding, their influence. This potential for reorganisation means that security agencies must stay vigilant and proactive in identifying and countering any emerging threats.

## **Importance of Regional Cooperation**

The ongoing threat from Jl underscores the importance of regional cooperation in counterterrorism. Collaborative initiatives, including intelligence-sharing, joint operations, and coordinated policy measures, are crucial if Jl networks are to be dismantled and prevented from resurging. Strengthening partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines is vital in addressing the transnational nature of the threat effectively.

Fostering community engagement and resilience is also essential in countering the radicalisation and recruitment efforts of Jl. By promoting social cohesion and addressing the root causes of extremism, countries can reduce the appeal of militant ideologies. Initiatives aimed at countering extremist narratives and supporting vulnerable individuals play a crucial role in a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.

## **Conclusion**

While the dissolution of Jemaah Islamiyah might suggest a reduction in immediate threats, the enduring operational capabilities of its fighters and the potential of Jl to reorganise highlight the need for continuing vigilance. The regional implications are significant, with countries like Singapore needing to adopt proactive and multifaceted approaches to counterterrorism. By fostering regional cooperation, enhancing security measures, and promoting community resilience, the region can effectively counter the evolving threat posed by Jl and ensure long-term stability and security.

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