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The Disbanding of Jemaah Islamiyah: Flash in the Pan or a Moment of Real Change?

By Joshua Snider

SYNOPSIS

This short analysis argues that the dissolution of Jemaah Islamiyah must be understood in the context of the announcement itself and the wider context of Islamist politics in Indonesia. Indonesia's Islamist space, whether violent or non-violent, has always been fragmented and adaptable, and in that sense, this announcement fits into a broader historical pattern. Furthermore, it argues that while significant at an organisational level, Indonesia's violent Islamist space has fragmented and consequently JI's decision to disband is unlikely to dramatically shape the trajectory of Islamist violence in the country.

COMMENTARY

For terrorism analysts and officials, the recent announcement by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that it would disband is an important development and one worthy of reflection and analysis. The group has been the most potent violent Islamist actor in the region over the past two decades, notably from 2002 to 2014, when it was responsible for deadly attacks, including the Bali bombings, and various attacks in Jakarta and elsewhere in the archipelago.

While somewhat overshadowed by successor networks and ISIL-affiliated groups, JI remains the most organised and centralised in the region. Rather than disbanding, it is more likely that this is essentially a rebranding exercise in which the movement will evolve from a violent "Jihadist" organisation engaged in aggressive Islamisation of Indonesia through force, into a political movement that seeks sectarian goals through non-violent activism. As many commentators have noted, JI's move is likely to be marked by a period of fragmentation within its ranks as some members reject the latest statement and continue on a path of violent activism.

Understanding JI

Jl's history is well known and has been written about extensively. It was formed in the mid-1990s by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar. The group operated Pondok Ngruki, a pesantren (religious school) in Central Java, and evolved from a teaching or *da'wa*-oriented movement into one that openly challenged the state and pursued a violent agenda to supplant the secular Indonesian state with an Islamist secession, leading ultimately to the establishment of regional and global caliphates.

The growth of JI and the salience of its narratives were bolstered by several separate but interrelated phenomena connected to the political dynamics in the late New Order period. First, was the return of several hundred Indonesian foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Afghanistan who fought with the anti-Soviet mujahideen. While many FTFs resumed normal lives, others sought out movements that maintained a similar revolutionary agenda.

Second, the charged sectarian environment of the late 1990s and early 2000s saw inter-communal violence between Muslim and Christian communities in Poso and elsewhere. During this period, JI, along with other self-professed jihadist and self-defence movements such as Laskar Jihad, mobilised in the archipelago's conflict areas.

Third, the "politics" of post-New Order Indonesia and the democratisation of sectarian identity created the space for Islamist actors and sectarian identity entrepreneurs to express themselves. The synergistic effects of all three dynamics were toxic and provided a fertile ground for JI to recruit and radicalise sympathisers.

Why the Change and What Do They Hope to Achieve?

At a basic level, JI's disbanding or likely rebranding exercise can be explained as a desire to maintain relevance in an ever-changing strategic environment. Like all violent extremist organisations, JI makes rational and calculated decisions about its strategic environment at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels based on a mix of ideologies, but also on its own assessment of the strategic environment. Among the many factors that contributed to JI's recent decision, three stand out.

First, this decision was possibly a response to a changing and competitive strategic environment and an awareness that it can be more potent as an ideological force advocating hardline Islamisation than a revolutionary anti-state terrorist organisation. Therefore, the goal of achieving an Islamic state and the creation or re-creation of a regional and global Ummah might be better achieved through non-violent activism. In Muslim-majority states, cultural Islamisation and aggressive but non-violent sectarianisation are far more effective than trying to achieve versions of political change via violent attacks. Violent activism might succeed in capturing the imagination of a small vanguard of highly radicalised ideologues; however, it universally fails to persuade the masses.

Second, there was also very likely an awareness among JI's leadership that Indonesia's Islamism is growing increasingly competitive. At its inception, JI was a closed and exclusive social network of like-minded ideological travellers. Over the

decades, Indonesia's violent jihadist environment evolved dramatically from one in which JI (a disciplined and hierarchical organisation) perpetrated attacks and ostensibly owned them, to an environment in which extremist activity (violent and non-violent) is carried out by a diffuse labyrinth of threat actors and identity entrepreneurs who operate in digital media spaces and in real life. These self-styled/self-radicalised individuals draw broad inspiration from ideology without taking orders from an organisation. Given this changed environment, JI risked falling between two stools, i.e., not as revolutionary or violent as ISIL-affiliated groups, and yet still considered a terrorist organisation and therefore not able to participate openly in mainstream debates.

Third, as it currently stands, JI operates a shadow sectarian system in which they run mosques and are involved at some level in religious education through unofficial and small unregulated pesantrens. If it chooses to rebrand and if executed effectively, this would allow JI to normalise and engage in *da'wa* and preaching activities in the open. Such a move would also allow them to raise funds openly.

What Does It Mean? Old Wine, New Bottle?

The question of adaptation and acceptability is perhaps the most vexing and existentially challenging problem JI faces. Presumably, the organisation will rebrand and espouse a different version of the same ideological discourse it has perpetuated for decades. The task is not an easy one. It can renounce violence, but the question remains as to how significant an ideological transformation it is willing to undergo while retaining the core aspects of its ideological paradigm.

It is highly probable that segments of JI's base will be dissatisfied with the decision and form splinter movements. In the Indonesian context, this is not unprecedented as JI has faced significant internal issues and fragmentation over the years. Apart from potential new factions, disenchanted yet non-entrepreneurial JI members might leave the organisation and seek affiliation with other movements. Consequently, in the short to medium term, this may result in increased recruitment for other movements.

It is possible that this represents more of an "old wine, new bottle" dynamic, where a splinter group, could adopt JI's mandate of violent anti-state activism, picking up from where the former organisation left off. In this scenario, rather than being transformative, JI's decision to disband (or rebrand) represents another permutation in Indonesia's fragmented Islamist sphere.

The relationship between a disbanded or rebranded JI and the Indonesian state raises numerous questions for both parties. Over the past decade, the Indonesian state has taken a proactive and aggressive stance against both Salafi Jihadist and many hardline Islamist organisations. The state must determine the extent of time and leniency it will afford a rebranded JI to reform and decide how to engage with JI members operating covertly.

JI itself must decide whether it intends to reform ideologically, enter the realm of acceptable sectarian activism, and comply with the state's expectations. Rebranding in a manner that satisfies both the state (particularly security services like Densus 88 and BNPT) and the group's core base will be extremely challenging for JI.

Three likely scenarios could emerge from this decision. One involves a rebranded JI proposing an altered version of its current ideology. Another sees JI fully disbanding, with its members seeking other movements. A hybrid option involves JI both rebranding/reforming and retaining some members but losing a large section of its base to either old or new movements.

In any of these scenarios, the state will face increased complexity as militants shift allegiances, while JI figures out its new platform. Despite the changes and complexity that they present, the state must continue to proactively consider its Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policy implementation and address trajectories of non-violent extremism, particularly the growing issue of aggressive religiosity and intolerance.

In sum, despite the significance of JI's announcement that it would disband, it changes little regarding the pernicious problem of Islamist-inspired violence in Indonesia and does not impact the state's P/CVE (including deradicalisation) strategy.

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