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## **Disbandment of Jemaah Islamiyah: The Impact on Militant Groups**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent changes within Jamaah Ansharut Syariah indicate significant fractures and defections following the disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah. The shifts, driven by external pressures and internal disillusionment, indicate a broader trend of disengagement from jihadist movements in Indonesia, potentially altering the regional security landscape.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The recent upheavals within Jamaah Ansharut Syariah (JAS) following Jamaah Islamiyah's (JI) disbandment, reflect significant fractures and strategic shifts in militant movements with implications for Indonesia's terrorism landscape and regional security.

Similar trends have been observed globally, such as the fragmentation of al-Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden, which led to the rise of various splinter groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shabaab, each adapting to local contexts while maintaining core ideological tenets.

Another example was the formation of new insurgent cells across the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, as militants sought new affiliations and strategies for survival following the collapse of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) territorial caliphate.

These examples underscore how internal disruptions within militant groups can trigger broader shifts, influence the local and regional security landscapes, and challenge counterterrorism efforts.

Although other militant groups have been affected, the reasons for the focus on JAS in this commentary are: i) The disbandment of JI could have important implications for JAS as many of its members were formerly from JI; ii) JAS is still encouraging its members to engage in jihad abroad, notably in Yemen, which presents a lingering threat; and iii) The fluidity of membership among Indonesian Islamic activists could lead to further interaction between hardcore JI members and JAS.

Observations by a senior JAS member in an August 2024 interview revealed that JAS was grappling with internal challenges even before JI's disbandment. JAS' difficulties were exacerbated by external pressures, such as the arrests of its key figures. This triggered internal discord and led to defections and fragmentation within JAS.

Defections from JAS are a significant development. In Solo, Central Java, notable defectors included a former treasurer of the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and the treasurer of the JAS Central Office. Defections were also observed in Tawangmangu and Karanganyar, Central Java.

The formation of new groups like "Sedulur Muslim" (a Javanese term meaning "brotherhood among Muslims") by a former JAS leader signifies a leadership crisis. It reflects their militants' ongoing search for belonging, affiliation, and security. Despite calls for steadfastness from senior figures like Afghan veteran Abu Thalut, maintaining JAS' integrity remains uncertain.

External pressures from the Indonesian counterterrorism unit, Detachment 88, have been crucial in shaping JAS' internal dynamics. The fear of becoming new targets for Detachment 88 and suffering the same fate, akin to the fate of former JI members, influenced many JAS members to leave.

In the Philippines, pressure from the armed forces and intensified operations by the police against Abu Sayyaf and other militant groups also led to internal fractures within the groups. These pressures prompted defections and the formation of new, smaller factions, as members sought to evade capture or death, demonstrating again how counterterrorism efforts can drive strategic shifts and realignments within militant organisations in the region.

### **The Future of JAS: A Struggle for Relevance and Cohesion**

JAS' future remains uncertain, with internal cohesion compromised despite the leadership of Achwan, a former Islamic activist from Malang, East Java, who was detained for many years by the Soeharto government. The shift of former militants from ideological to economic activities may indicate a broader trend within the jihadist movement in Indonesia, as shrinking space for militant activities forces these groups to adopt survival strategies, whether through legitimate businesses or illicit means.

This broader disengagement from militancy is also evident in the evolution of the Dewan Syariah Kota Solo (DSKS), a local Islamic council in Solo, which has moved away from confrontational activism towards more general issues such as Palestine. The departure of Ba'asyir's son, Abdurrahim Ba'asyir (better known locally as lim Ba'asyir), from JAS, along with other key figures, further highlights the jihadist movement's diminishing operational space. lim Ba'asyir's rise to the leadership of

DSKS reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the constraints imposed by state pressure and shifting public sentiment, marking a significant change in the strategic approach of former militants in the region.

## Conclusion

Changes within the JAS following the disbandment of JI reflect a complex interplay of external pressures, internal fractures, and societal shifts. This highlights significant implications for regional security. The fragmentation of JAS and affiliate/splinter groups and their change towards economic pragmatism suggests a potential reconfiguration of militant activities across Southeast Asia.

From a regional security perspective, this trend could mean a decrease in overt militant activities but an increase in covert economically motivated threats. As groups like JAS struggle with cohesion and relevance, they may seek alternative methods to sustain their influence, potentially engaging in illicit economic activities or radicalising recruits through non-traditional means.

Furthermore, the reduced operational space might drive jihadist groups to collaborate or merge with other extremist entities in the region, exacerbating security challenges. The shifts within JAS and other groups could lead to a more fragmented but potentially more resilient network of extremist actors, complicating counterterrorism efforts.

Understanding these evolving dynamics is crucial for counterterrorism practitioners and policymakers. They underscore the need for a nuanced approach that not only addresses immediate threats but also anticipates and mitigates potential regional security risks stemming from the changing landscape of militant activism. As JAS and other groups navigate these shifts, their actions will likely influence the broader jihadist movement and regional security architecture, necessitating adaptive and proactive strategies from regional security agencies.

With the Jokowi administration nearing the end of its tenure in the coming months, it is imperative that the next president, Prabowo Subianto, takes the issue of JI's disbandment and its impact on other militant groups seriously. Prabowo must get on top of the situation to ensure stability, not only for Indonesia's security but also that of the region and beyond. By addressing this challenge effectively, the new administration will strengthen Indonesia's counterterrorism efforts and contribute to a more secure and stable region.

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