



# How Jemaah Islamiyah has Morphed Since Its Disbandment

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## How Jemaah Islamiyah has Morphed Since Its Disbandment

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### SYNOPSIS

*One year after its formal disbandment, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has shifted from being a structured organisation to a diffuse ideological movement, with its narratives still resonating across Southeast Asia. The ongoing Gaza conflict and digital platforms have amplified JI's worldview, making it emotionally relevant and easily spreadable. The challenge for ASEAN lies not in dismantling an organisation, but in disrupting the power of its ideas.*

### COMMENTARY

The war in Gaza, now into its second year, continues to galvanise Muslim solidarity across the globe. The images of suffering civilians, flattened neighbourhoods, and displaced families have triggered waves of emotion, from political protests to online outrage. But beyond humanitarian concerns, the conflict has also reignited long-standing ideological narratives – especially those claiming that violence is the only path to justice for the Muslim *ummah*.

These narratives travel fast, particularly in the digital world, where they are amplified through religious messaging, emotional appeals, and the immediacy of social media. In Southeast Asia, where public sympathy for Palestine runs deep, the Gaza war has become more than a distant conflict. It is now a potent symbol of grievance and mobilisation – a “proxy” for broader frustrations with global inequality and perceived Western double standards.

Amid this global and regional context, it is important to revisit a major milestone in Southeast Asia's counterterrorism landscape: the disbandment of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in June 2024.

## **JI's Exit – On Paper, Not in Spirit**

One year ago, JI's senior leadership officially declared the group's dissolution. The move surprised many. JI had survived years of crackdowns, maintained deep ideological roots, and operated across multiple countries. Yet, according to its internal review, JI had become unsustainable as a formal organisation – too exposed, too fragmented, and no longer effective in achieving its goals.

But the story did not end there. Disbandment, it turns out, was not the same as disappearance. JI has ceased to exist as a structure, but not as a set of ideas. Its key doctrines – about Muslim victimhood, resistance against oppression, and the religious legitimacy of armed struggle – continue to resonate. The Gaza war has only helped repackage those ideas into emotionally charged content that circulates widely across Southeast Asia's digital spaces.

Today, JI functions more like an *ideological movement* than a militant group. It no longer recruits operatives, but its worldview continues to attract minds.

## **Strategic Shift from Organisational Jihad to Cultural Jihad**

Strategically, JI's decision to disband reflects a shift from organisational jihad to *cultural jihad*. Rather than maintaining a centralised command structure vulnerable to state surveillance and arrest, the group's core ideologues promoted a distributed approach: let the ideology live on through pesantrens (Islamic schools), family networks, alumni groups, and online communities.

This shift makes sense in the digital age. Once a closed network, JI's ideological content now moves freely, attached to sermons, YouTube lectures, social media posts, and informal discussions. *You no longer need to join JI to think like JI.*

The Gaza conflict has become the perfect emotional trigger. It reinforces the core grievance narrative and legitimises a binary worldview: Islam versus the world, victims versus aggressors, action versus apathy. Such framing fits perfectly into JI's ideological mould and gives it new life.

## **Operational Adaptation**

Operationally, while JI no longer conducts structured activities, its ecosystem continues to function. Certain pesantrens still reflect its worldview, and several individuals formerly associated with the group remain ideologically active, particularly in online spaces. Among them are Indonesians who once trained or fought in Syria, some of whom continue to act as informal mentors or propagandists.

This brings into focus the evolving dynamics surrounding the repatriation of Indonesian JI members from conflict zones, especially Syria, and the implications for the group's broader global jihad trajectory.

Indonesia now faces a delicate dilemma. On the one hand, returning these individuals could worsen domestic and regional security challenges. Many possess advanced combat skills, including bomb-making and guerrilla tactics, acquired during their time

in Syria. Their return could revitalise local jihadist cells or inspire new ones. On the other hand, returnees could also bring back deep disillusionment with JI's direction or leadership, having seen at first-hand, the internal contradictions and failures of global jihadist movements.

Some have refused repatriation altogether, choosing instead to remain embedded in transnational jihadist networks. For JI's ideological network, their decision is not a setback. These individuals serve as valuable assets, as recruiters, translators, and facilitators, helping to sustain global connections even after the formal group's dissolution.

Key training grounds, such as JI-affiliated pesantrens, which have long been linked to JI's cadre development programme, remain relevant. Although not openly militant, these institutions continue to influence young minds through subtle indoctrination, providing ideological continuity even in the absence of formal directives.

This operational shift – anchored in informal education, diaspora networks, and digital communications – makes JI's post-disbandment model more fluid and enduring, and more difficult to disrupt.

### **Tactical Mutation**

Tactically, JI's ideological messaging has adapted to the modern era. While past recruitment relied on underground training camps or face-to-face meetings, the post-2024 generation is nurtured in online spaces.

TikTok videos, Telegram channels, and Instagram posts frame the Gaza conflict as a religious duty, often laced with Qur'anic references and urgent calls for solidarity. These are not overt calls for violence, but they prepare the emotional and moral ground for radicalisation.

This content is often produced or translated by Southeast Asian sympathisers, many of whom have never belonged to any formal jihadist group. In this way, the Gaza narrative is localised and domesticated, creating a seamless entry point into global jihadist thinking for new audiences, particularly the young.

### **Implications for ASEAN**

For ASEAN, JI's transition from a structured entity to an ideological movement represents a fundamental shift. The threat no longer lies in attacks planned from a central base, but in ideas and emotions circulating in shared digital spaces.

ASEAN member states have adopted a variety of counter-extremism approaches – from Indonesia's rehabilitation models to Singapore's targeted interventions and Malaysia's focus on religious literacy. Yet coordination remains limited, especially on the digital front.

A regional response will need to:

- Strengthen cross-border digital monitoring and content disruption.

- Invest in alternative religious narratives and critical thinking education.
- Harmonise repatriation and rehabilitation procedures for returnees from conflict zones.
- Build early-warning systems that detect ideological shifts before they turn operational.

## Conclusion

One year after its disbandment, JI has demonstrated that organisations may die, but ideologies persist. The group no longer recruits, trains, or leads – but it still inspires. Through pesantrens, returning fighters, and online narratives – especially those framed around Gaza – JI's worldview persists.

The region now faces a new kind of security challenge: not simply a matter of dismantling networks, but interrupting stories, especially those that justify violence as virtue.

In this post-organisational era, the question is no longer “Who belongs to JI?” but “Who still believes in its ideas?” The answer is unlikely to be found in a remote training camp or even a mosque – it is more likely to be glowing from a smartphone screen.

And while most former JI members have moved on, it is worth remembering that others may well try to resurrect the group's old ideas, repackaged for a new generation.

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