ASSESSING INDONESIA'S EVOLVING THREAT ENVIRONMENT

EBSCO HOST

Assessing Indonesia's Evolving Threat Environment

Indonesia's terrorism landscape continues to defy simplistic narratives of rise or decline. Rather than dramatic ruptures, the current phase is characterised by recalibration and diffusion—of ideology, actors, and participation across multiple strands of extremism. The contributions in this issue collectively demonstrate that militant movements are neither monolithic nor static; they are shaped by internal debate, doctrinal reassessment, generational turnover, and shifting strategic environments. The evolution and eventual dissolution of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), for instance, underscores how even entrenched organisations can undergo profound ideological re-evaluation. At the same time, emerging anxieties over far-right and ultra-nationalist currents—though less operationally visible—signal that Indonesia's extremism landscape is diversifying in ways that warrant early attention.

Patterns of radicalisation further reveal a complex interplay between digital ecosystems and enduring social ties. Online propaganda, including content inspired by networks aligned with the Islamic State (IS), continues to circulate widely and resonates with segments of youth. Yet the broader evidence tempers alarmist conclusions: radicalisation rarely occurs in isolation from offline relationships, and youth participation, while increasing, remains proportionally limited relative to adult involvement. These dynamics point not to a wholesale generational takeover or purely online phenomenon, but to hybrid pathways in which virtual exposure and face-to-face trust networks reinforce one another.

As the threat spectrum widens—from jihadist networks to nascent far-right expressions—the task ahead lies in developing responses that are proportionate, evidence-based, and attentive to the evolving social foundations of extremism itself. Against this backdrop, this edition comprises four articles that collectively scope the ideological, generational, and relational dynamics shaping Indonesia's extremism landscape, highlighting both the internal transformations within militant movements and the emerging contours of future threat trajectories.

In the first article, **Alif Satria** draws on his own dataset to analyse patterns of youth radicalisation and involvement in jihadist terrorist organisations in Indonesia. He explores three issues in particular. Namely, the frequency of youth involvement in terrorist groups, the platforms through which youths are drawn into extremist organisations, and the positions youths may fulfil upon joining such networks. The author also highlights the phenomenon of memetic, far-right inspired violence among youths as an emerging issue.

Next, **Muhammad Haniff Hassan** examines the impact and implications of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s dissolution in June 2024, and explores the significance of its evolution from violent jihadism to non-violent Islamism. While a significant development, the author argues that its actual transformation into a wasatiyah (moderation) and mainstream actor largely depends on its conduct in Indonesia's socio-political scene in the coming years.

Third, **Mahfuh Haji Halimi, Ahmad Saiful Rijal Hassan and Ahmad Helmi Mohamad Hasbi** examine the conditions for JI's ideological transformation following its dissolution in June 2024. They identify internal ijtihad (independent, expert reasoning) and theological reflection as instrumental to this process. By analysing key JI documents, they demonstrate how Islamic hermeneutics can dismantle extremist ideologies from within.

Lastly, **Unaesah Rahmah** surveys the role which social relations may play in pathways into and out of terrorist groups, using the case study of a pro-Islamic State (IS) group in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. She argues that while social relations were a significant factor, these interpersonal ties were not sufficient to drive disengagement from the group, with the latter requiring additional conditions such as ideological justification and physical separation.

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Understanding the Patterns of Youth Radicalisation in Indonesia

Alif Satria

This article examines youth involvement in terrorist activities in Indonesia. Drawing on a newly constructed database developed by the author—the Indonesian Terrorist Inmate (ITI) Dataset—it analyses patterns in how young people radicalise and become involved in jihadist terrorist organisations in Indonesia. Specifically, it aims to answer three key questions: i) How frequently are youths involved in Indonesian jihadist terrorist organisations and networks? ii) Through which platforms and under whose influence, if any, do youths become involved? iii) What roles and tasks do youths take up once they join? The findings indicate that although youth participation has risen in the 2020s compared with the early 2000s, youths continue to constitute a relatively small share of the overall terrorist population relative to adults. The study also shows that while online platforms play a significant role in most cases of youth radicalisation, radicalisation rarely occurs exclusively online. Furthermore, once affiliated with a group, youths are no more likely than adults to take on operational roles.

Introduction

Indonesia continued to experience a declining threat level throughout 2025. On the one hand, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)—once the country's largest and most lethal pro-Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation—has consistently demonstrated its commitment to its disbandment decision in 2024. While concerns about possible dissent among members remain,[1] the group's key leaders have continued to closely cooperate with Indonesia's Special Detachment (Detasemen Khusus 88, Densus 88) to monitor and facilitate the reintegration of its former members.[2] On the other hand, Indonesia's pro-Islamic State (IS) groups such as Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) have also remained operationally weak. While the network's online activity has increased in the past year and some groups continue to pursue greater centralised coordination,[3] the broader milieu has neither carried out nor successfully inspired any attacks over the past three years.[4]

Despite this decline in the terrorism threat, by late 2025 authorities had grown increasingly alarmed about the risk of youth radicalisation and involvement in terrorist activities. This heightened attention was triggered in part by the SMAN 72 Jakarta bombing case, where a 17-year-old student detonated three explosives at a high school mosque while carrying toy guns marked with far-right extremist symbols.[5] Although police did not classify the attack as "terrorism" due to the perpetrator's lack of political motivation,[6] it nonetheless underscored youths' susceptibility to radical influences. Indeed, a week after the incident, Densus 88 announced that it had arrested five terrorist suspects who had attempted to recruit youths.[7] Additionally, it noted that over 110 children were identified as victims of attempted terrorist recruitment in 2025 – a stark difference from the 17 identified between 2011 and 2017.[8]

However, there is a lack of research and data examining the broad patterns of youths' processes of joining and roles within Indonesian terrorist organisations and networks. While multiple large-scale surveys have explored Indonesian youths' exposure to radical content or their support for violent jihad,[9] they do not clarify whether, or how, these attitudes translate to actual participation in violent terrorist organisations. When research does analyse this subject, it often relies only on a handful of case

studies. While such qualitative approaches enable these studies to provide extensive detail on youths' radicalisation processes—ranging from the role of the family,[10] online platforms[11] and the desire for personal connections[12]—they are limited in their ability to assess whether these observed patterns can be generalised across the wider population.

This article aims to address this gap by analysing the broad patterns of youth involvement in Indonesian terrorist organisations and networks. Specifically, it explores three key questions: i) How frequently are youths involved in terrorist organisations and networks? ii) Through which platforms and under whose influence, if any, do youths become involved? iii) What roles and tasks do youths take up once they join? To answer these questions, the study uses the author's Indonesian Terrorist Inmate (ITI) dataset, which contains radicalisation and terrorist career information for over 400 terrorist suspects arrested between 2018 and 2019. Following this section, the article provides a literature review on Indonesian youth radicalisation, before analysing the broader patterns of youth involvement. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for the emerging phenomenon of memetic far-right inspired youth violence.

Literature Review: Youth Radicalisation and Participation in Terrorist Activities

The definition of "youth" varies considerably across Indonesian terrorism and radicalism studies. Under Indonesia's Law No. 4/2009 on Youth, the term legally refers to individuals aged between 16 and 30.[13] However, existing research and surveys on youth radicalisation often narrow this range in their analysis, concentrating on specific subgroups such as "school-age youths"[14] or "university students."[15] In some cases, studies also extend the category to include younger demographics, such as adolescents and early teenagers.[16] For the purposes of this article, the term "youth" is defined according to the legal age range (16-30) established by Indonesian law. Nonetheless, this literature review considers all relevant studies that address youth, regardless of whether they concentrate on specific sub-demographics or include younger age groups.

Most studies on Indonesian youth and terrorism largely focus on measuring the extent of youths' exposure to radical ideologies. In this regard, most findings agree that a considerable proportion of youths have encountered, and to some degree sympathised with, extremist ideas. A 2010 survey by the Institute for Islamic and Peace Studies (Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Perdamaian, LaKIP), for example, reported that 48.9 percent of students in the Greater Jakarta area expressed support for "radical ideas".[17] In 2017, a survey by the Wahid Foundation found similar results, indicating that approximately 40 percent of high school students involved in Islamic organisations (Rohis) supported the establishment of a caliphate in Indonesia.[18] That same year, research by the Alvara Research Center also found that 23.4 percent of university students supported the idea of Indonesia becoming a caliphate.[19]

However, while these studies may offer a broadly representative snapshot of the extent to which youths are exposed to radical ideologies, they do not indicate how many actually participate in terrorist activities. Notably, the limited research that examines youth participation in terrorism suggests that, contrary to levels of ideological exposure, their actual involvement in terrorist organisations remains relatively low.[20] Indeed, a graph published by Makruf and Pratiwi in 2012 showed that out of all terrorist suspects arrested between October 2002 and March 2003, only 22.4 percent were under the age of 30.[21] Similarly, several reports published by the National Counter Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, BNPT) in 2017 also noted that out of 1,800 terrorist suspects arrested between 2000 and 2017, "only 16 were children or teenagers" and just 11.8 percent of suspects were under the age of 21.[22]

This is not to suggest, however, that youth participation in terrorist organisations is a trivial concern. As a number of studies have noted, youth involvement in Indonesian terrorism has been a continuous problem for Indonesia.[23] Aside from the well-documented 2018 Surabaya Bombing attacks, which

involved six children, youths have played key roles in numerous major Indonesian terrorist attacks.[24] In the 2002 Bali Bombings, for example, AH (21) and AO (22) played crucial roles in helping finance the attacks through fa'i (robbery).[25] Similarly, the 2009 JW Marriott Bombing involved two youths, namely NM (28) and DP (17), the latter of whom served as the attack's suicide bomber.[26] In the 2015 Sarinah Bombing, police also arrested two teenagers: AB (17) who helped assemble the explosives for the attacks, and FL (14), who helped conceal information about one of the perpetrators.[27]

Another substantial body of work on Indonesian youth and terrorism focuses on unpacking how youths radicalise. In this regard, two factors have been identified as critical enablers of youth radicalisation. The first is the role of youths' social networks, namely family and friends. As Haula Noor explains in her 2022 study, families that adhere to extremist ideologies frequently function as their children's agents of ideological socialisation – often normalising radical identities for them from an early age before they have the chance to experience alternatives.[28] Similarly, Suyanto et. al.'s 2022 study also found that peers play a similar socialising role for older youths. As they noted, university students' participation in radical networks was often less driven by their need to deepen religious beliefs, "but because of their need to socialise and build a broader network of relationships with their friends."[29]

A second key factor in youth radicalisation that is often highlighted is the influence of online platforms. As Huda, Runturambi, and Syauqillah noted in their 2021 study, social media often becomes a key platform that introduces youths to radical content and gives them access to training materials.[30] More importantly, online spaces also often provide avenues, likely in the form of group chats and forums, where radicalising youths can interact with like-minded individuals and reinforce their sense of belonging to extremist ideologies.[31] In a more recent 2025 study, Ismail identifies similar dynamics in radicalisation cases involving minors. He characterises their recruitment as a "subtle, highly digitalised process" that typically begins on widely accessible public platforms before migrating to more private, encrypted messaging applications.[32] Although these studies offer detailed insights, their case study-based approach limits their ability to determine whether these patterns can be broadly generalised.

Patterns of Indonesian Youth Radicalisation and Involvement in Terrorism

Number of Youths Involved in Terrorist Activity

Data from the ITI Dataset[33] indicates that throughout 2018 and 2019, the majority of individuals arrested on terrorism charges were adults. That said, youth participation in terrorist activities was also considerable, albeit less prevalent. Notably, out of the 477 cases of terrorist arrest recorded in the dataset, 180 (40.2 percent) were reported to be aged 30 or under at the time of their arrest. A more detailed breakdown of their age indicates that most youths arrested were between 20 and 25 years old (52.2 percent), followed by those aged 26 to 30 (42.7 percent). Notably, while teenagers were also apprehended for terrorism-related activities during this period, they comprised only a minimal share of the total sample (0.5 percent).

Graph 1. Number of Indonesian Youths Arrested by Selective Year

Number of Youth Arrested by Selective Year
Data from Makruf and Pratiwi (2012), Court Documents, and Open Source Data
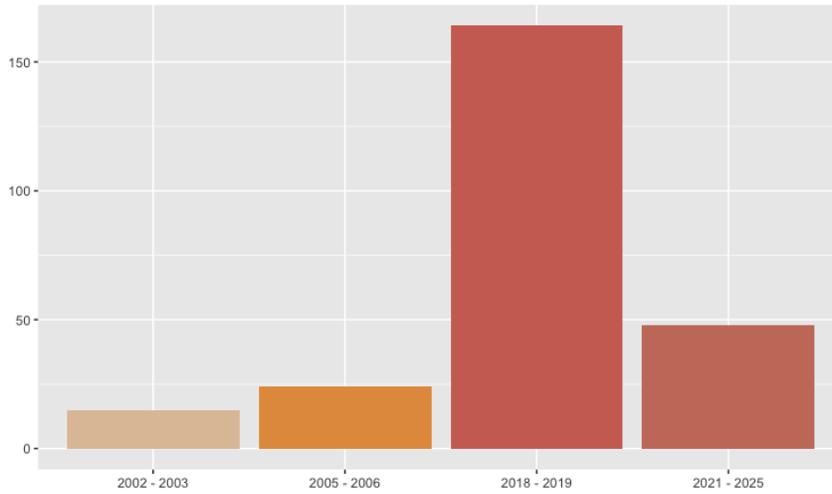
When compared with available data on terrorism arrests in the early 2000s, the ITI Dataset numbers suggest a marked rise in youth terrorist involvement in the late 2010s. Data compiled by Makruf and Pratiwi, for example, showed that between October 2002 and March 2003, police only detained 15 youths in connection with terrorist activities (see Graph 1). Similarly, from May 2005 to January 2006, just 24 youths were arrested on terrorism-related charges.[34] However, more recent arrest figures suggest that the surge in youth involvement observed in 2018-2019 may have been an outlier. Notably, of the 255 terrorism-related arrests reported between 2021 and 2025 where age data were available,[35] only 59 individuals were recorded as 30 years old or younger. While this still represents an increase compared to the early 2000s, it does not approach the notably higher figures recorded in the late 2010s.

Graph 2. Percentage of Indonesian Youths Arrested by Selective Year

Percentage of Suspected Terrorists Arrested by Age and Selective Year
Data from Makruf and Pratiwi (2012), Court Documents, and Open Source Data
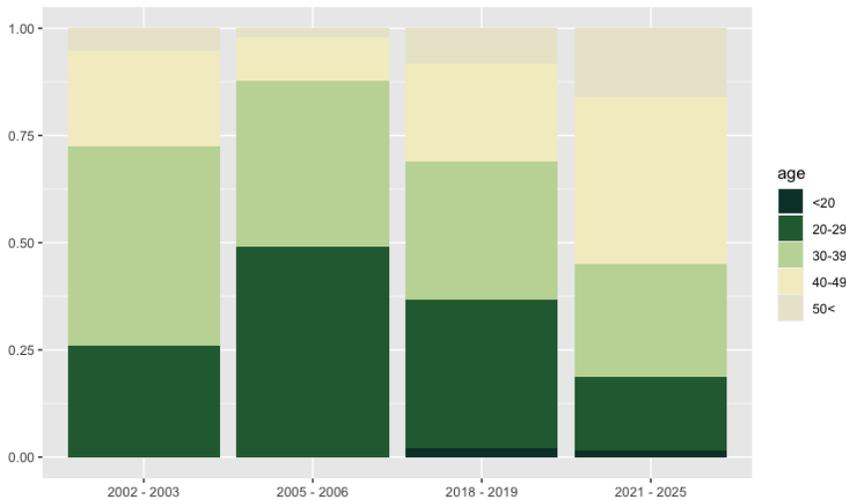
In fact, when examined in percentage terms, data suggests that youth involvement in terrorist activities has remained proportionally consistent between the early 2000s and the 2020s, despite some fluctuations in the mid-2000s and late 2010s. For instance, Makruf and Pratiwi's data showed that,

between 2002 and 2003, youths made up 25.2 percent of all terrorism-related arrests (see Graph 2).[36] Although this proportion rose to 47.9 percent between 2005 and 2006 and 40.2 percent between 2018 and 2019, it declined again in the 2020s, with youths only accounting for 23.1 percent of all recorded terrorism-related arrests between 2021 and 2025.[37] Overall, these findings suggest that while the number of youths participating in terrorist activities has increased in the 2020s, this may simply reflect the overall increase in the number of terrorist arrests during the period compared to the early 2000s.

Pathways of Youth Involvement in Terrorist Activity

Consistent with previous research on the subject, data from the ITI Dataset shows that most youths who were arrested for terrorist-related activities between 2018 and 2019 were radicalised with the assistance of a social tie. Indeed, out of the 162 youths whose radicalisation processes were recorded in the dataset, 87 percent were found to have been radicalised with the help of either an acquaintance, religious teacher, friend, or family member. It is important to note, however, that the heavy involvement of social ties in youths' radicalisation is not unique to this age group. Social ties also played a significant role in the radicalisation processes of adults: out of the 210 adults whose radicalisation process was recorded, 91 percent were found to have been radicalised with the assistance of a social tie.

Graph 3. Number of Social Ties Effecting Radicalisation by Age Group (2018-2019)
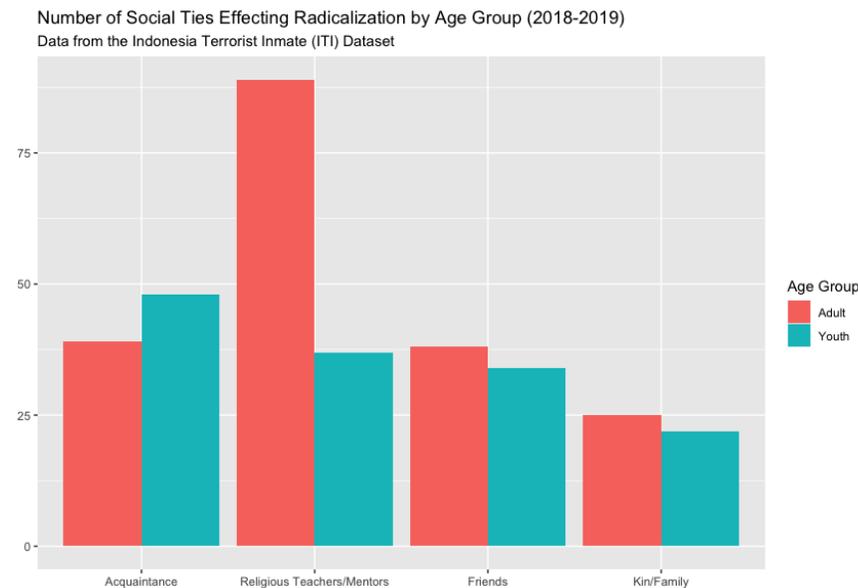
However, while social ties play a similarly prominent role in the radicalisation of both youths and adults, there is a notable difference in the type of social tie most commonly involved in their radicalisation. As Graph 3 shows, for adults, religious teachers are the most common social tie aiding their radicalisation, accounting for 46.6 percent of cases. These are typically ulamas whom these adults respect and have regularly followed through mosque sermons or Quranic study circles.[38] For youths, however, the dataset shows that acquaintances are the most common social tie involved in their radicalisation (34 percent). Unlike religious teachers, acquaintances are people with whom the individual has only limited or secondhand familiarity, with many initially encountered as strangers through online forums or mosque gatherings.[39]

As for the platforms facilitating youth radicalisation, the ITI Dataset corroborates earlier findings on the significant role of online spaces. Notably, out of the 162 youths whose radicalisation pathways were recorded in the dataset, 51.2 percent were found to have been radicalised at least in part through online platforms. Broken down in more detail, the dataset shows that the most common types of online

platform involved in youths' radicalisation are social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook (73.2 percent), followed by encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram and Whatsapp (14.6 percent), then websites and forums (12.2 percent). Notably, however, the prominence of online platforms is far less evident in adult radicalisation pathways: among the 210 adults whose radicalisation pathways were recorded, only 29 percent experienced radicalisation involving some form of online platform.

Graph 4. Number of Youth Radicalisation by Pathway (2018-2019)

Number of Youth Radicalization by Pathway (2018-2019)
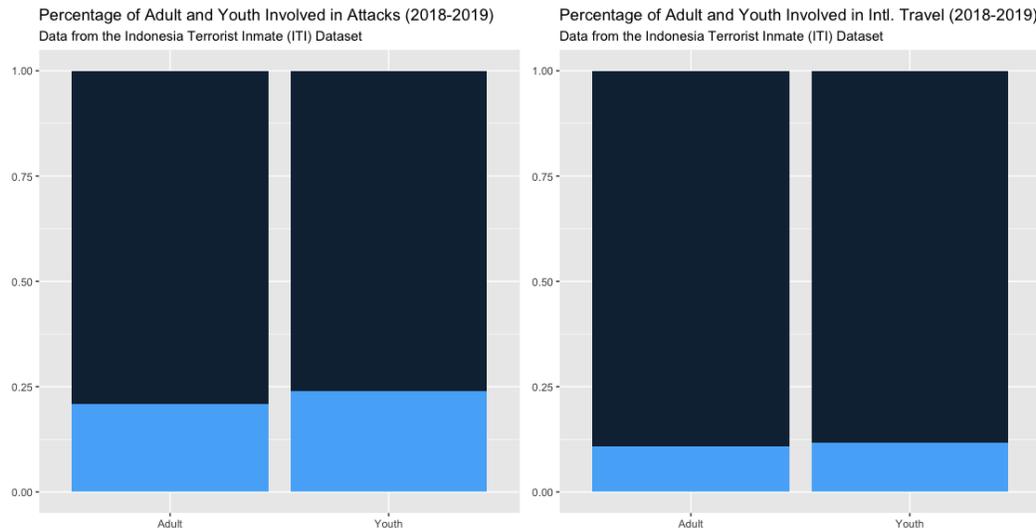Data from the Indonesia Terrorist Inmate (ITI) Dataset
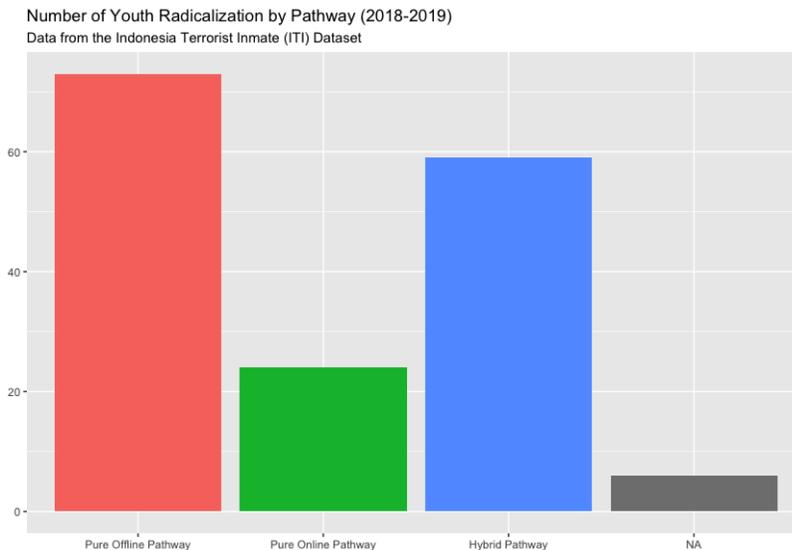
This does not mean, however, that offline pathways are insignificant in youth radicalisation. As shown in Graph 4, when examining radicalisation trajectories in their entirety, youth radicalisation that occurs through exclusively online means is relatively uncommon. Among youths recorded in the dataset, the most prevalent radicalisation pathway occurs purely offline, accounting for 45.1 percent of cases. This is followed by hybrid radicalisation pathways involving both offline and online avenues, which make up 36.4 percent of cases. In contrast, only 14.8 percent of youth radicalisation cases in the dataset occurred purely through online means. While these findings do not diminish the importance of countering radical content targeting youth online, they underscore the need for stakeholders to also address the offline environments where youth radicalisation still predominantly occurs.

Roles of Youth Involvement in Terrorist Activity

Once youths become members of a terrorist group or network, they have the same likelihood as adults of taking up operational roles. In terms of their involvement in attack plots, for example, youths and adults have the same likelihood of taking either a preparatory or execution role. As Graph 5 shows, out of the 180 youths recorded in the dataset, 23.9 percent were reported to have planned or participated in one or more attack plots. Similarly, among the 267 adults recorded, 21 percent were involved in preparing or executing at least one planned attack. These similarities also extend to youths' and adults' involvement in international travel. Among youths arrested for terrorism-related activities between 2018 and 2019, 11.7 percent were reported to have attempted to travel abroad. For adults, this number was a comparable 10.9 percent.

Graph 5. Operational Involvement Percentage by Age (2018-2019)

Percentage of Adult and Youth Involved in Attacks (2018-2019)
Data from the Indonesia Terrorist Inmate (ITI) Dataset

Percentage of Adult and Youth Involved in Intl. Travel (2018-2019)
Data from the Indonesia Terrorist Inmate (ITI) Dataset

It is important to clarify, however, that this finding does not intend to suggest that the absolute number of youths involved in terrorist attacks or international travel is equivalent to that of adults. Consistent with prior observations, the dataset shows that the majority of both terrorist attack perpetrators and foreign terrorist fighter aspirants from Indonesia are adults. Indeed, the ITI Dataset finds that, between 2018 and 2019, adults constituted 56.6 percent of those involved in attacks and 58 percent of individuals who attempted to travel abroad. Interestingly, a recent 2025 BNPT report showed an even wider disparity between youths' and adults' involvement in terrorist operations. As they noted, of the 31 individuals arrested between 2023 and 2025 who were found to have participated in the planning or execution of attacks, 74.1 percent were adults.[40]

While the likelihood of youths and adults taking up operational roles is similar, the likelihood of them assuming managerial roles—defined as roles involving responsibility for overseeing one or more cells or divisions—differs notably. Indeed, the overall percentage of individuals who held such roles is small. Out of the 447 individuals recorded in the author's dataset, for example, only 25.9 percent ever held a managerial role throughout their terrorist career. Notably, out of this subset, youths comprised just 17.2 percent. This disparity becomes even clearer when comparing the proportions of those appointed to a managerial role within each age group. Among the adults recorded in the dataset, for example, 36 percent were reported to have occupied a managerial role during their terrorist career. By contrast, only 11.1 percent of youths were recorded as having held such roles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides three key insights into the radicalisation and involvement of Indonesian youths into jihadist terrorist networks. First, while youth participation in terrorist activities has increased in the early 2020s compared to the early 2000s, youths still represent a relatively small proportion of the overall terrorist population when compared to adults across both periods. Second, the majority of youth radicalisation cases involve the influence of social networks and the use of online platforms. However, instances of radicalisation occurring through exclusively online means remain uncommon and are outnumbered by those occurring through exclusively offline avenues or through a hybrid combination of offline and online channels. Third, once youths join a group, they are no more likely than adults to take on operational roles. By contrast, they are considerably less likely to be appointed to managerial positions than adults.

Concerningly, Indonesia is facing not only an increase in youth involvement in jihadist terrorist groups, but also a rise in youths' involvement in memetic, far-right-inspired violence. The earlier SMAN 72

bombing, for instance, was categorised by Densus 88 as memetic violence – referring to attacks which appropriate the aesthetic and methodologies of previous far-right violence, often carried out for personal recognition or notoriety.[41] Indeed, subsequent police statements indicate that the phenomenon was not isolated. In late December 2025, Indonesian authorities identified 68 youths who had been "exposed to neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideologies," with several reportedly found in possession of firearms.[42] This trend continued in February 2026, when a student hurled a Molotov cocktail into his high school in West Kalimantan while carrying a backpack marked with the names of past far-right mass shooters.[43]

Although the study's findings are drawn from youth involvement in jihadist terrorist organisations, they offer insights for addressing this emerging phenomenon of memetic far-right inspired youth violence in Indonesia. First, it is important to devise early detection mechanisms capable of identifying offline behavioural pattern changes among radicalising youths. As the dataset shows, although most instances of youth radicalisation involve online platforms, they rarely occur entirely online. In the case of jihadists, nearly all youth radicalisation processes involved interaction with other members in real-world activities. While structured offline group activities are likely less common among youths involved in far-right memetic violence—given the absence of real-world groups to facilitate it in Indonesia—this does not imply that their predominantly online radicalisation leaves no offline behavioural indicators. Supplementing online monitoring initiatives with offline prevention and detection strategies involving schools and families will therefore be crucial.

Second, it is important to address the social networks that facilitate Indonesian youths' adoption and mimicry of far-right violence. The dataset indicates that youth radicalisation seldom occurs in isolation. In most instances, radicalising youths depend on like-minded peers not only to access extremist content but also to cultivate a sense of belonging within the community that reinforces such beliefs. In the context of jihadist groups, these peers often take the form of "acquaintances" encountered online. Similarly, several studies suggest that the radicalisation of Indonesian youths involved in far-right memetic violence also involves the role of a social network, namely the True Crime Community, through which these youths gain a sense of visibility and importance.[44] Restricting access to such environments while, more importantly, empowering alternative communities where youths can develop a sense of belonging, will be critical to curbing the future growth of far-right memetic violence among youths.

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Will Jemaah Islamiyah's Ideological Shift Lead to *Wasatiyah* (Moderation)?

Muhammad Haniff Hassan

The dissolution of Indonesia's most dreaded terrorist network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) since June 2024, marks a significant milestone in counter terrorism research. This article delves into the implications of JI's dissolution and the significance of its ideological shift from being violent jihadists to non-violent Islamists. While recognising the significance of JI's ideological shift, its actual transformation into a wasatiyah *(moderation) and mainstream actor will depend on its behaviour within the socio-political scene in Indonesia in the coming years.*

Introduction

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)—founded in 1993 by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir—splintered from Darul Islam Indonesia (DI), which sought to establish an Islamic state post-independence. Listed as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations, JI maintained links with Al-Qaeda and other foreign militant networks. It became Southeast Asia's most dangerous terrorist group and was responsible for mass-casualty attacks, such as the 2002 Bali bombings.[1] The sudden announcement of JI's disbandment and ideological revision in June 2024[2] therefore raises a crucial question: What lies ahead? Given its past lethality, operational sophistication and resilience against decades of counter terrorism measures, the announcement was met with cautious optimism.

Ostensibly, there are concrete signs that JI is abandoning its violent jihadist practices. The group's disbandment declaration by its former *emir* Para Wijayanto included a formal apology from the leadership for past misdeeds, such as acts of terrorism and the propagation of a radical ideology that harmed both the Indonesian state and Islam's broader interests. The apology was directed towards the government, the public and the victims of JI-associated attacks.[3] JI also outlined a series of corrective actions, which included revising its ideological framework, reviewing the curricula and education materials of its *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), surrendering its remaining weapons and urging wanted members to surrender. To underscore their pedagogical reformation, the leadership also announced the formation of a committee tasked with reforming its education curricula and materials.[4]

All indications point towards sincere cooperation with the authorities, who have not detected any major splinter groups stemming from this disbandment. Crucially, there have been no major attacks. The Indonesian authorities have received these developments positively.[5] The Indonesian authorities took two decades of intensive counter terrorism efforts to reach this crucial point. However, security practitioners remain cautiously optimistic, given the nascency of JI's ideological shift from violent jihadism to non-violent Islamism.

From an ideological perspective, JI's recognition of NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) as a legitimate polity, its pledge to uphold the state constitution and its commitment to revising its ideology away from extremism, represent a seismic shift. JI's original guiding document, PUPJI (*Pedoman Umum Perjuangan al-Jamaah al-Islamiyah*, or the *General Guide for the Struggle of Jemaah Islamiyah*), outlined a radical vision of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia and designated NKRI as a *taghut* (worship of another besides God) entity, which must be brought down by militant jihad. That premise no longer holds. The leadership now affirms NKRI as a theologically legitimate polity for Muslims, given its historical and socio-political context. The new JI ideology argues that many elements of NKRI already align with the *shariah* principles, even if these are not explicitly labelled. There is an admission that JI's violent acts irreparably tarnished its association with extremism and terrorism, rendering it a liability not only to its members, but also to the wider Indonesian Muslim community. The continuation of

JI is therefore seen as constituting major *darar* (harm), which the shariah obliges Muslims to eliminate—grounded in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) maxims that require harm to be eliminated and prohibit causing harm to both oneself and others.[6]

Post-Disbandment Evolution

Established jihadist organisations like JI do not dissolve instantly. Rather, their structure and membership adapt to internal dynamics and external pressures. Thus, it is unlikely that JI will vanish or even fade away in the coming few years. JI's deep roots in Indonesia can be traced to the anti-colonialist DI in the 1940s, before it broke away in the 1990s due to theological differences to become an independent organisation under the leadership of Ba'asyir and Sungkar.[7]

JI was also founded on multiple bonds of kinship, discipleship, friendship and membership, forged over the span of 30 years.[8] Although the *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance) to JI leadership may be nullified following disbandment,[9] this deep sense of bonding will continue to bind JI members together. This is evidenced by the post-disbandment meetings between leaders and members, held throughout Indonesia, to explain and socialise the theological shift and to pre-empt any negative reaction.[10]

Nevertheless, JI's shift could reveal fluidity in allegiances since JI members are free to join any organisation that aligns with their values. There are three possible scenarios: 1) an exodus of disillusioned JI members could form new splinter groups to continue pursuing the old vision; 2) dissenting members could join existing hardline entities; and 3) the emergence of a brand new platform that provides the basis for a new JI.

The multiple and deep-rooted bonds that maintain JI's network therefore represent a potential security threat, while also offering an opportunity to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives as well as post-radicalisation community building. This network enables the authorities to maintain engagement with former leaders and members, and to facilitate the dissemination of JI's new ideological position—which ensures compliance and organisational alignment, and anticipates potential splinter trajectories. On this note, it would be prudent to continue a longitudinal analysis of JI's network.

JI's Current Status Through the Lens of Political Islam

To supplement a longitudinal analysis, an exploration of the various shades of political Islam could be useful to gauge JI's positioning within the broader typology of Islamic groups. Due to space constraints, only a brief overview of political Islam will be discussed. Muslim attitudes towards the relationship between Islam and politics can be broadly categorised into two main camps: 1) those who believe the two are inseparable; and 2) those who are secular, i.e., who believe religion and politics are separable.[11]

For the purposes of understanding JI's attitudes, this article will cover the camp which views Islam and politics as inseparable. Interpretations on what this means in practice can vary widely. Some believe that Islam indeed permeates all matters, but do not regard an Islamic state as a necessity or a religious obligation, because there is no clear injunction to establish an Islamic state. Others are more pragmatic, arguing that an Islamic state is unfeasible and that a democratic, Westphalian nation-state is the best alternative for Muslims in today's context. These are non-Islamist Muslims.[12]

The other group, known as Islamists, believe not only in the inseparability of Islam and politics, but also in a Muslim's absolute duty to establish an Islamic state to achieve Islam as the complete way of life. However, this group is also diverse, and can be illustrated in a typology ranging from very mild to very strong, with at least five categories: 1) deferential passive; 2) deferential active; 3) Islamist democrat; 4) Islamist non-democrat; and 5) jihadist. These categories offer a helpful analytical structure, although individuals and movements are often more fluid within the spectrum, depending on changing contexts and ideological trajectories.[13]

Deferential Passive

Deferential passive Islamists are the mildest type of Islamists. They do believe that Islam commands the creation of an Islamic state. They refrain from promoting their beliefs in an activist or aggressive manner for practical reasons. Instead, they prioritise personal piety. In their view, if most Muslims are practising their religion, the establishment of an Islamic state would occur naturally. They may be politically quietist or even apologists for certain regimes. Two contrasting examples of deferential passive Islamism are the Tablighi Jamaat and segments of Saudi Salafi-Wahhabism. The former promotes personal piety while eschewing politics, enabling broad tolerance. The latter promotes political quietism and views obedience to a Muslim ruler, regardless of the shortcomings, as doctrinally obligatory, so long as Islamic practice is permitted.[14]

Deferential Active

This second category of Islamists typically operate in Muslim-minority countries. Deferential active Islamists do not advocate loyalty to rulers based on Islamic precepts, nor do they promote an immediate obligation to establish an Islamic state. They view an Islamic state as a theoretical ideal and a long-term principle, rather than a practical goal, in the present realities. While they value individual piety, their focus extends to pursuing social change within the legal and political frameworks of the countries they operate in. They do not call for a systemic overhaul, but instead engage the state as a civil society actor through advocacy, cooperation and, when necessary, pressure. A pertinent example is the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas). It promotes a resilient Muslim minority within a secular, multicultural state through credible religious leadership. In *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Pergas affirms that while an Islamic state is theologically ideal, it is neither obligatory nor feasible in Singapore. Instead, it prioritises safeguarding Muslim interests, moral integrity and constructive participation in secular democratic institutions. Although it is ideologically critical of secularism, Pergas accepts it as necessary to multiethnic coexistence and religious freedom, and advocates a moderate Islamic identity aligned with national harmony.[15]

Islamist Democrat

Islamist democrats promote Islam through non-violent means and embrace democracy as a means to their ends. Unlike deferential active Islamists, who engage as civil society actors without pursing political office, Islamist democrats actively contest elections, form or join political parties, and present their agendas to the electorate. This category of Islamists argues that democratic participation is permissible in Islam. They operate primarily in Muslim-majority countries, where their prospects of electoral success are more feasible. Prominent examples include Malaysia's Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. These Islamist democrats justify political participation through Quranic accounts, such as that of Prophet Yusuf seeking office from the king of Egypt.[16]

Islamist Non-Democrat

For Islamist non-democrats, democracy is anathematic to Islam. They regard it as a flawed concept that entrusts governance to the fallible wisdom of the masses and that is easily manipulated by the media, corporate interests and powerful elites. Islamist non-democrats reject the concept of elections, as they were not practised by the Prophet and his immediate successors, and forbid partaking in the electoral process. While they typically do not explicitly advocate violence, Islamist non-democrats circumvent regular democratic norms to achieve their political agendas. These measures include mass mobilisation, inciting popular revolution and coup d'états—which can be violent. Hizb ut-Tahrir, founded in Jerusalem in 1953, is perhaps the most prominent example of Islamist non-democrats. The group is committed to re-establishing the caliphate via non-violent means—which it regards as obligatory for every Muslim.[17]

Jihadist

The most extreme minority in the typology are the jihadists, who believe that establishing an Islamic state is both necessary and obligatory, and consider violence both legitimate and imperative to their ends. They represent an overwhelming minority among Islamists. Jihadist groups may differ significantly in scope and ambition. Localised jihadist groups may forge tactical or logistical alliances with global networks to access training, funding or arms. However, their end goals typically remain rooted in local contexts and specific territorial claims. Other jihadist groups may hope for a global caliphate.[18]

Locating JI on the Islamist Spectrum

An understanding of where JI lies in this spectrum is valuable to inform suitable policy interventions. Post-dissolution, JI may straddle two Islamist typologies—Islamist democrat and deferential active Islamist.

JI as Islamist Democrat

JI was previously considered a violent jihadist Islamist group, belonging in the fifth category in the Islamist typology discussed above. Since the group's dissolution, its stance can be categorised as Islamist democrat, i.e., the third category. Part of JI's ideological shift included renouncing violence and accepting democratic norms, through its agreement to uphold, preserve and defend NKRI, Pancasila and the Constitution of Indonesia.[19]

One key departure from JI's prior ideology following its dissolution is the assertion that democratic mechanisms and institutions are modern applications of *syura* (consultation). *Pemilu* (general elections), *pilpres* (presidential elections), *pilkada* (provincial elections) and the Majlis Perwakilan Rakyat (the People's Representative Council, i.e., the Indonesian equivalent of Parliament), are now accepted as legitimate state institutions. This acceptance of democratic institutions suggests a possible desire for democratic electoral participation.[20]

The current JI ideology asserts that waging armed jihad against the Indonesian government to establish an Islamic state or to correct social vice is no longer permissible. JI provides three core justifications for this. First, the new JI vision recognises NKRI as a valid polity for Indonesian Muslims. Second, since Muslims constitute the majority of the population, Indonesia is considered a Muslim nation, and armed jihad cannot be waged against fellow Muslims. Third, such actions would constitute a forbidden rebellion against the authorities in the Sunni tradition, even against corrupt and unjust rulers. This is because the harms of such a rebellion outweigh the benefits.[21]

It remains unclear whether JI intends to reconstitute itself as a political party or to formally contest elections. Nevertheless, JI has always been ideologically political, seeking state transformation rather than merely pietistic social reform, thus making sustained political disengagement unlikely. Political participation is therefore plausible and consistent with its doctrinal trajectory. If its recent ideological revisions orient it towards the Islamist democrat position on the spectrum, engagement through constitutional and legal channels should be permitted, as exclusion would undermine both pluralism and democratic legitimacy. Moreover, marginalisation could provoke disgruntled members into resuming extreme, violent or illegal actions for political or ideological ends.

JI as Deferential Active Islamists

If JI chooses to refrain from politics and exclusively focuses on *tarbiyah* (education) and *dakwah* (proselytisation), it can be classified as deferential active Islamist. Although JI continues to reject secularism, it advocates a non-confrontational, non-militant and pragmatic approach. It has indicated a prioritisation of effective dakwah and public religious education over forceful change. This approach is closer to the Prophet's way and to the Quranic injunction that prefers dakwah with "wisdom, kind advice, and debate in the best manner".[22] In addressing the perceived shortcomings of Indonesian state policy—whether governmental or societal—JI members are limited to peaceful dakwah and non-violent social activism.

State intervention will not be necessary if JI becomes deferential active Islamist. Continued engagement and support within the civil society landscape would be the appropriate response.

Will This Shift Lead to *Wasatiyah* (Moderation)?

JI's repositioning marks an unprecedented course correction. From the jihadist far right in the Islamist typology, the group has now shifted towards the centre. Viewed alongside other groups in a similar typology, JI is now ideologically closer to contemporary Islamist participants of the democratic process, such as Malaysia's PAS, Indonesia's PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Within the current Indonesian Islamic landscape, it appears remarkable that JI has chosen a more moderate position than Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), another Islamist organisation with a significant following in the country. Despite rejecting violence, HTI remains opposed to the nation-state framework, democratic processes and nationalism. HTI views these as incompatible Western constructs, purposely brought into the Muslim world to lead Muslims astray.[23]

While JI's new direction is commendable, it would be prudent to give JI the benefit of time and support to institutionalise a new organisational behaviour in the socio-political realm. Today, JI's leadership is touring Indonesia to meet with rank-and-file members to disseminate the group's new agenda.[24] This mammoth task of internal self-critique and dialogue includes the correct conception of *iman* (faith), the misapplications of *takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim as an infidel) and the practice of jihad. Intensive doctrinal remediation to return to traditional Sunni frameworks[25] and theological reformation require a great deal of effort—which may span generations.

Conclusion

Omar Ashour's study on collective deradicalisation finds that comprehensive change from radicalisation can only occur when it involves three aspects: 1) ideology; 2) organisation; and 3) social behaviour. Furthermore, to achieve a level of wasatiyah in the social and political spheres, the transformation must involve ideological change, whereby the relevant groups accept the principles of democracy—most importantly, pluralism and peaceful (i.e., non-violent) transfer of power—demonstrated through social and political behaviours via direct participation in the social and electoral political arenas.[26]

In the context of JI, the post-dissolution period is still in its nascency. While JI's ideological shift is encouraging, its actual transformation into a wasatiyah and mainstream actor will depend on its socio-political behaviour in the coming years. This depends on whether JI will lean towards constructive engagement or towards confrontation; whether it will be inclusive and tolerant of diverse orientations or exclusive and self-righteous; whether it will seek cooperation with others or dominance over them; whether it will pursue persuasive dakwah or coercive action, etc. There remains considerable uncertainty for now. The picture may become clearer once the phase of ideological and internal reformation ends, and JI moves on to the social and political action phase.

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The Ideological Transformation of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI): Using Religious Reasoning to Deconstruct Extremism

Mahfuh Haji Halimi, Ahmad Saiful Rijal Hassan and Ahmad Helmi Mohamad Hasbi

This article examines the ideological transformation of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a transnational terrorist organisation in Southeast Asia. JI's disbandment in mid-2024 resulted from a process of internal ijtihad[1] *and theological reflection. Drawing on JI's own doctrinal reassessments—particularly Para Wijayanto's leadership (2009-2019)—the study argues that JI's transformation marks a turning point in the discourse of Islamist militancy. By analysing key documents such as* At Tathorruf, Advice 642 *and* 42 Shar'ia Considerations, *this article highlights how religious reasoning can deconstruct extremism from within. It concludes that JI's case offers valuable lessons for counter terrorism and deradicalisation policies.*

Introduction

The evolution of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) represents a critical shift in the dynamics of militant Islamism in Southeast Asia. The transformation is driven by JI's move away from violent, confrontational jihad in mid-2024, to a *dakwah* (proselytisation)-based approach that emphasises ideological persuasion and social responsibility to maintain relevance.

Historically, JI was deeply involved in transnational jihadist movements, including those in Afghanistan,[2] the Philippines[3] and Syria.[4] However, in a remarkable turn, JI announced its disbandment on June 30, 2024, following a period of introspection grounded in *shariah* (Islamic law) reasoning. This decision to disband is a significant milestone in JI's deradicalisation as both a militant group and a terrorist organisation.[5]

Unlike other extremist group dissolutions which occurred through either state intervention or defeat—as in the cases of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and Darul Islam (DI), respectively—JI's dissolution was internally driven and supported by scriptural arguments.[6] This deliberation made the ideological transformation credible and sustainable. But analysts have noted some lingering concerns. Among these are the potential emergence of dissenting splinter groups,[7] possible strategic deception[8] and the ideological influence of JI-affiliated *pesantrens* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) on the wider community.[9]

By examining JI's arguments for the reinterpretation of its earlier understanding of the *daulah Islamiyah* (Islamic state), Islam *kaffah* (comprehensive Islam), *taghut* (tyrannical Muslim rulers), jihad and other related ideologies, this article demonstrates how religious re-evaluation challenges the ideological foundation of violent Islamist extremism. Understanding this process offers valuable insights into how Islamic scholarship and *ijtihad* (independent, expert reasoning) can benefit deradicalisation, moderation and the reintegration of former militants into national life.

The Split from DI and JI's Formation

The split from DI in the early 1990s marked an important milestone in JI's trajectory towards extremism and violence. It transformed JI from being a part of the DI movement—which went underground and became fragmented after its founder S.M. Kartosuwiryo was executed in 1962[10]—into a consolidated entity with international ties[11] and affiliations with Al-Qaeda.[12]

Notably, in 1985, JI leaders Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir successfully sent the first batch of DI members under their command to Afghanistan for military training at *mujahideen* camps run by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf—a proponent of strict Salafi Islam with extremely close links to Saudi Arabia.[13]

Sungkar and Ba'asyir were staunch Salafis, whereas Ajengan Masduki, DI's interim *imam*, was Sufi.[14] The dispute intensified when Masduki instructed the Afghan-trained members under Sungkar to return to their respective territorial command posts. Sungkar disagreed, and as the conflict shifted to his handling of funds for sending fighters to Afghanistan, he decided to break away from DI in 1993. The incident marked a watershed in JI's formation.[15]

After the split, the Qiyadah Markaziyah (Central Executive Council) was established in the early 1990s. It consisted of several senior leaders who preferred Sungkar to Masduki. The *General Guide for the Struggle of Jemaah Islamiyah* (PUPJI) was formulated and formalised in 1996, outlining JI's plans to pursue its struggle independently of DI.

JI's Worldview in the PUPJI

The PUPJI contains JI's vision and primary mission, and begins with the formation of an Islamic group to establish an Islamic state and caliphate. The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 was cited as the raison d'être for JI's existence. Without the Ottoman Caliphate, modernity and secular governance were culpable for the Muslim community's moral decadence. To correct this, JI strove to re-establish the Islamic caliphate.[16]

The PUPJI highlights that Prophets were sent to establish the religion, or *iqomatid dien*.[17] For JI, this means establishing a way of life grounded in the unity of God (*tawhid*), which relates to establishing Islam in all its aspects, including the *aqidah* (Islamic creed), *ibadah* (acts of worship) and *manhajul-hayah* (way of life)—integrating both the physical and spiritual dimensions of existence in total submission to the worship of God. However, most important for JI was the Muslim *ummah* (community) retaining a separate polity.

This worldview reflects a concretist orientation, characterised by a preference for fixed, solution-oriented frameworks to contend with social and political change.[18] It entails religious fundamentalism, which reduces complex historical and moral challenges to a singular religious solution grounded in an idealised past.

JI's Ideological Building Blocks

Consequently, the *Ushulul-Manhaj Al-Harakiy Li Iqomatid-Dien* (UMALID, or the *Principles for the Methodology to Establish the Religion*) was designated as JI's *ushul* (foundation) principles or roots. The UMALID distinguished itself from the other three components of the PUPJI,[19] because it served as the building blocks of JI's ideology.[20]

Hence, all the other components must be based on the abovementioned principles.[21] The UMALID binds the individual, the family and the *jamaah* (group) into a cohesive entity immersed in JI's desired Islamic values, and entrenches a deep commitment to its struggle to establish an Islamic state and caliphate.

Based on an analysis of the UMALID, JI considered itself as part of the Salafiyah Jihadiyah movement,[22] based on the Sunni faith according to the way of the *salaf*[23]—but deeply entrenched in armed jihad.

Islam, as a universal religion, known to JI members as "Islam kaffah",[24] cannot exist effectively without a potent central leadership in religion, politics and the military. Only the re-establishment of the *daulah Islamiyah* as an ideological state based on holistic Islamic teachings would ensure the unity between religion and state, thereby correcting the polarity caused by the dichotomy between the profane and the sacred in secular ideologies.

The UMALID asserts that Muslims are obligated to be members of a jamaah—like JI—by giving the *al-bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance). The pledge compels JI members to listen to (*al-sam'u*) and obey (*al-ta'ah*) the *emir* as the leader of the group, and other appointed leaders on matters that do not constitute a sin to God.[25]

The milestones towards the establishment of an Islamic state are *iman* (belief), *hijrah* (emigration in the way of Allah), *i'dad* (preparation for armed struggle in the way of Allah) and jihad (armed struggle in the way of Allah). JI believed these stages mirror the Prophet Muhammad's path to establishing Islam.[26]

Central to JI's Islamic creed (aqidah) is the concept of *al-wala' wal-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) as a manifestation of tawhid. It emphasises the disavowal of taghut: any authority that exceeds its limit by claiming powers exclusive to God, such as the absolute right to legislate. This requires active participation in Islamist movements to establish a society governed by divine principles.[27]

Ijtihad and Theological Reflection Leading to JI's Disbandment

The shift from ideological absolutism to pragmatism more recently for JI involves making concessions and accommodations. It entails giving up on the fundamentals outlined in the PUPJI, which is tantamount to rejecting the essence that made JI an Islamist terrorist group.

Among the most significant documents which form the basis for the revisions to JI's ideological absolutism are *At Tathorruf* (*Extremism*), *Nasihat 642* (*Advice 642*) and *42 Shar'ia Considerations*. These texts systematically reassess JI's foundational assumptions about loyalty and disavowal (al-wala' wal-bara'), the obligation of organisational allegiance (bai'ah) and the legitimacy of armed struggle (jihad) within Indonesia's socio-political context. Rather than abandoning religious reasoning, JI's leadership has sought to recalibrate its ideological framework by prioritising broader Islamic legal objectives (*maqāṣid al-shariah*), contextual jurisprudence (*fiqh al-wāqi'*) and the prevention of harm (*daf' al-mafāsid*).

First, JI now embraces NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia), UUD 1945 (Undang-Undang Dasar 1945, or the 1945 Constitution), Pancasila (the national ideology of Indonesia) and Indonesia's national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). For JI, these previously indicated that Indonesia was "un-Islamic" and that the government and its apparatus were taghut. After re-evaluating its earlier view of NKRI as an adversary, JI now accepts that this stance must change, because past Muslim scholars had agreed to the formation of NKRI.[28]

Additionally, JI's *fatwa* committee has found that none of the principles in Pancasila contradict Islamic principles. In fact, all five principles can be integrated within the framework of shariah. For example, the first principle of Pancasila— "Belief in One Supreme God" —corresponds with the concept of *hifz al-din* (preservation of religion), one of the five core objectives of shariah. The principle also affirms monotheism.[29]

Second, JI defined Islam kaffah as establishing a daulah Islamiyah and implementing it through political power. Following re-evaluation, JI acknowledges that NKRI—although not an Islamic state—can maintain Muslims' welfare and uphold Islamic religious values in the context of a modern state. Moreover, justice, security and freedom of religion are enshrined in Pancasila and the Indonesian Constitution. Therefore, applying the shariah concept of *akhaf al-dararayn* (the lesser of two evils), JI accepts the continued existence of NKRI so as to avoid conflict and destruction.[30]

Third, JI's voluntary dissolution automatically unbinds its members from bai'ah. By *siyasah syar'iyyah* (political policy based on shariah), JI's leaders argue that the group's dissolution is a form of *muamalah* (strategic political and social policy) and is therefore permissible. It is distinct from acts of worship or creed, and it allows the ummah to achieve greater benefit and to avoid greater harm, whether in the form of armed conflict or social instability, in Indonesia. Furthermore, the disbandment also serves to achieve *al-maslahah al-mursalah* (unrestricted public interest).[31]

Fourth, JI's milestones of iman, hijrah, i'dad and jihad need to be better understood in the light of today's changing circumstances. In the current Indonesian context, JI cannot find any shariah reason to justify armed jihad, since the government is legitimate and led by a Muslim president. Since Muslims form the majority of the country's population, there is no reason to carry out jihad with the excuse of defending themselves.

Furthermore, according to *Advice 642*, the current socio-political context is inappropriate for jihad. Insisting on carrying out jihad under these circumstances will have broad social and political impacts which would not only relegate jihad to a mere tool of aggression and terror, but also risk causing unnecessary *fitnah* (chaos).[32]

Finally, JI acknowledges that "national stability and security are top priorities that must be safeguarded collectively".[33] As proof, the group has been cooperating with the Indonesian security forces on wanted individuals, weapons and deradicalisation. JI not only wants to disavow its violent and rebellious past, but also seeks to transform itself into a more socially responsible entity.[34]

Deconstructing Extremism and Violence from Within

JI's ideological evolution and dissolution demonstrate that violent extremists should not be understood solely as irrational or purely dogmatic actors. On the contrary, JI's doctrinal reconsideration and disbandment evidence long-standing rationality and show it is capable of adapting its worldview when confronted with theological inconsistencies, strategic failures and changing socio-political realities.[35] This recognition is crucial, as it suggests that countering violent extremism need not rely exclusively on coercive or external measures.

JI's case illustrates that extremist ideology can be deconstructed from within, by interrogating its doctrinal foundations through religious reasoning. Rather than dismissing jihadist narratives outright, this approach assesses the internal logic of extremist interpretations of Islam to expose contradictions, selective readings of scripture and failures to account for broader Islamic legal and ethical principles. JI's doctrinal reassessment—evidenced by its re-evaluation of jihad, bai'ah, Islam kaffah and the concept of an Islamic state—reflects an engagement with fiqh al-wāqiʻ and a growing embrace of the maqāṣid al-shariah. These principles prioritise the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage and property, and advocate pragmatic consideration of context rather than rigid ideological absolutism.

Central to this transformation is JI's shift away from a jihadist ideology grounded in confrontation and violence, towards a dakwah-oriented framework that emphasises engagement, persuasion and social responsibility. This reorientation aligns with the Islamic teaching of Islam as a mercy to all (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*) and underscores the ultimate purpose of religious commitment as humanity's collective

welfare—rather than imposing belief through coercion. From this perspective, jihadist doctrines that rely on blind obedience, coercion and violence are also increasingly recognised as antithetical to Islamic ethics and jurisprudence.

Extremism within jihadist movements is often sustained by interlocking doctrines, particularly *takfir* (excommunication) and absolutist interpretations of al-wala' wal-bara'. Rigid applications of these concepts legitimise exclusion, erode social cohesion and normalise violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims. JI's ideological revision implicitly challenges these doctrines by reorienting loyalty and disavowal towards peaceful coexistence within a pluralistic nation-state, prioritising peace (*al-salam*) and security (*al-amn*) for all members of society. This reorientation is consistent with the Islamic legal concept of al-maṣlaḥah al-mursalah, which allows for adaptive governance and policy choices in the absence of explicit scriptural prohibitions, so long as they serve the common good and prevent harm. Under this principle, JI's leadership has reframed organisational dissolution not as an ideological defeat, but as a legitimate religious decision aimed at preventing greater societal harm.

Importantly, JI's ideological revision and disbandment are not without precedent in the broader jihadist milieu. Similar processes of internal critique and doctrinal reassessment have occurred among prominent jihadist ideologues and movements. One notable example is Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, long regarded as a key ideological influence within global jihadism, who publicly criticised Abu Musʻab al-Zarqawi and later the Islamic State (IS) for their excessive brutality, indiscriminate violence and abuse of takfīr.[36] Although al-Maqdisi did not abandon jihadism, his intervention demonstrated that religious authority and theological reasoning can be mobilised to delegitimise extreme violence from within the same ideological tradition.[37]

Within JI itself, ideological fracture preceded organisational dissolution. Figures such as Nasir Abas— a former senior JI member—have shed their allegiance to the group, citing religious reasons and personal disillusionment.[38] Abas's departure was driven by his perception of internal leadership conflicts, moral inconsistencies and a growing misalignment between JI's stated objectives and its actual practices.[39] His experience underscores how prolonged exposure to internal contradictions can catalyse ideological disengagement, particularly when religious ideals are perceived to be manipulated for organisational or strategic ends.

A parallel can also be drawn with the experience of Egypt's al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah, whose leaders comprehensively refuted their former jihadist doctrines and renounced violence. Unlike a tactical ceasefire, this revision was grounded in detailed theological critiques of their own past positions, including the misuse of jihad, rebellion against the state and legitimisation of violence against civilians.[40]

Beyond renouncing violence, al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah went further to promote moderation actively— improving relations with the government and fostering constructive engagement with people of other faiths.[41] The group later pursued political participation through Hizb al-Bina' wal-Tanmiyah (the Building and Development Party) following the 2011 Arab Spring, signalling a transition from armed struggle to democratic participation.[42]

Taken together, these cases reinforce the argument that religious reasoning—when grounded in credible scholarship, contextual awareness and ethical reflection—can serve as a powerful mechanism for deconstructing violent extremism from within. JI's experience adds to a growing body of evidence that ideological transformation is possible when extremist groups are treated not merely as security threats but as doctrinal communities capable of reflection, revision and reintegration into peaceful social and political life.

Way Forward

JI's ideological transformation highlights the importance of complementing security-led counter terrorism with approaches that recognise the role of religious reasoning and internal doctrinal evolution. It also demonstrates that deradicalisation frameworks can be strengthened by allowing space for internal ijtihad, theological debate and engagement with credible Islamic scholarship, rather than relying exclusively on coercive disruption or legal prohibition. Such an approach enhances the sustainability and legitimacy of disengagement processes, particularly for ideologically motivated groups.

Nevertheless, ideological revision does not render calibrated oversight redundant. The Indonesian authorities can help to consolidate JI's transition through proportionate regulatory measures—including continued surveillance of former JI networks, periodic reporting on membership, activities and assets, and close monitoring of online spaces to prevent youth recruitment and organisational reconstitution. When framed as accountability and confidence-building measures rather than punitive controls, these mechanisms can reinforce state authority while demonstrating JI's commitment to operating within the legal and political framework of NKRI.

Beyond the Indonesian context, JI's transformation offers regional policy lessons for Southeast Asia, where ideologically driven movements often operate transnationally despite being rooted in local grievances. Security agencies and policymakers may recognise the value of engaging former militant networks as sources of insight into ideological evolution, recruitment pathways and narrative shifts within extremist milieus. Carefully managed engagement, without legitimising past violence, can strengthen early warning capabilities and counter-narrative efforts, especially in online and informal religious spaces. Institutionalising channels for post-disengagement monitoring and dialogue may help prevent splintering, reduce the appeal of successor groups, and translate individual or organisational disengagement into broader ecosystem-level impacts. JI's ideological transformation underlines that the challenge of Islamist militancy is not solely a problem of security enforcement, but also one of ideas, interpretations and authority. JI's case demonstrates that when extremist doctrines are subjected to sustained internal scrutiny, their claims to religious inevitability can be meaningfully dismantled. While vigilance remains necessary, JI's disbandment reinforces the strategic value of integrating theological engagement into counter terrorism policy, offering a pathway through which ideological exit, rather than perpetual confrontation, can become a viable and durable outcome.

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Social Relations, Radicalisation, and Disengagement in the Pro-Islamic State Group in Bima

Unaesah Rahmah

This article examines the role of social relations in facilitating the emergence, sustainment and eventual fragmentation of the pro-Islamic State (IS) group in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. While social relations played a strong role in the group's formation and consolidation, they subsequently had a limited capacity to facilitate disengagement, even after the group's key leaders denounced the ideology and left between 2021 and 2024. Although the majority of pro-IS supporters remained ideologically committed, a small number of individuals chose to disengage.

Disengagement was enabled through selective high-trust relations, in which individuals prioritised personal ties over group pressure. At the same time, while social relations created trust and opened space for dialogue, disengagement required additional conditions, including ideological justification, opportunities for sustained discussion, physical separation such as incarceration, and appropriately timed decisions to leave the group. The limited cases of disengagement also demonstrated the continued ideological commitment of many pro-IS supporters, although their influence has declined compared with earlier periods.

Introduction

Social relations play an important role in facilitating individuals' participation in terrorist groups.[1] In this article, social relations refer to interpersonal ties, including kinship, peer networks, discipleship and neighbourhood ties. While scholars differ on how and to what extent social relations influence radicalisation, they broadly operate through several mechanisms: introducing individuals to radical actors and ideas; intensifying beliefs and commitment; providing skills and access for action;[2] and enabling formal membership. These processes are made possible because social ties imply loyalty, purpose and emotional support, while also isolating individuals from alternative ideas once they become embedded in the group.[3]

Aside from the radicalisation process, scholars also argue that new and alternative social relations outside radical groups can function as pull factors in facilitating individuals' exit from the group[4] and, more importantly, in sustaining disengagement and preventing recidivism.[5] However, far less attention has been paid to cases in which pre-existing group ties facilitated an exit despite strong group pressure. Under what conditions did this occur and why did it work? These questions are relevant for counter terrorism policy in contexts characterised by dense, network-based groups, in which individuals often share kinship and long-standing social ties.

Bima was chosen as the case study, having long been associated with terrorist networks. It served as a site of recruitment, safe haven and supplier of manpower in the conflict in Poso,[6] a former radical hotspot in Central Sulawesi. The pro-Islamic State (IS) group in Bima, particularly in the urban village (*kelurahan*) of Penatoi, at its peak resembled a "village" in which seven out of 12 neighbourhood units (*rukun tetangga*, or RT) reportedly supported the group.[7] These factors provide a fitting basis to examine not only group members, but also families and wider social ties who became part of the network.

The data used for this article was collected through in-depth interviews with former leaders, members and supporters of the pro-IS group in Bima. These were conducted in January and March 2025. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents; however, their names are presented

under pseudonyms to protect their privacy, even though some are available online or have been published elsewhere.

Social Relations and Pro-IS Group Formation

While this article focuses on social relations in facilitating individuals' participation in radical groups, it does not dismiss other factors that also explain the group's emergence, such as grievances, limited economic access and the historical presence of Darul Islam (DI) in Bima.[8]

A distinctive feature of the pro-IS group in Penatoi was its members' ability to stay close to one another and live in the same neighbourhood. They also built a school—Abu Bakar As-Shiddiq School—to educate their children, with some members serving as teachers. The group was further able to take over a public mosque, Istiqomah Mosque, which later became the centre of their activities. These three elements played a key role in normalising radical ideas and practices through everyday interactions, effectively preventing members from encountering alternative perspectives. The network also developed structured activities for its cadres to gain knowledge and skills to sustain the network in the face of challenges, including the arrest of its key leaders.

Additionally, while the exact number of individuals belonging to the pro-IS group as members, supporters or sympathisers is unclear and varies across sources, the group was able to attract a significant number of individuals over time. Interviews suggest that the group comprised around 25 to 30 percent of the total population in Penatoi,[9] while other reports have recorded between 50 and 60 families and stated the group covered seven out of 12 RT in Penatoi.[10]

A key development was the return of AQ (pseudonym), a former leader of the group, to Bima in 2004. He was a disciple of Aman Abdurrahman—an ideologue of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)—and had a family history linked to jihadist movements through his father, who had been involved in DI and had fled to Malaysia with Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir.[11] Upon his return, AQ began teaching in Kampung Nae, Bima City, where he attracted a number of followers, including Sofyan (pseudonym), who later became one of his loyal disciples. Beyond the teacher-student relationship, AQ assisted Sofyan in finding a job and a marriage partner. Sofyan subsequently married a woman whose parents were also AQ's followers, further extending his relationship from a teacher-student one to one based on kinship. Before his marriage, Sofyan also studied at the Umar bin Khattab (UBK)[12] School to deepen his knowledge, where he met several individuals who later also joined AQ in Penatoi.

After his marriage, Sofyan moved to Penatoi, where he became active as a teacher in the school and mosque.[13] AQ's entry into Penatoi had been facilitated by his brother-in-law, who was originally from the area[14] and was already active as a preacher at Istiqomah Mosque. This venue later became the base of the pro-IS group. Through this connection, AQ was invited to preach alongside his brother-in-law and AA, a local preacher with a Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) background. However, after speaking with AQ, AA decided to leave JI and join AQ's group, which at the time did not have a name.[15] Together, these three individuals became important figures in expanding the pro-IS group in Penatoi across three key periods leading up to 2021.

Before 2009, support for Aman's teachings was evident in the warm reception he received that year from some residents in Penatoi.[16] Aman even spent several months there preaching.[17] In 2014, despite AQ's first arrest in 2013, the group were still able to mobilise people at Istiqomah Mosque for the declaration of allegiance to IS, which reportedly attracted around 200 attendees.[18] Prior to 2021, even after the arrest of its key leaders, the group remained strong until AQ denounced its *takfir* (excommunication) ideology and decided to leave in 2021, after which fragmentation ensued.

The expansion of the network was also closely linked to kinship and peer networks. AQ's first marriage had been facilitated through a JI religious discussion group, where female members introduced him to his future wife. His wife, who had initially not been inclined towards Aman's

teachings, ultimately agreed to follow her husband's path, and later became an important figure in organising and teaching religious discussions for female followers and children.[19]

Other examples of marriage ties linked to AQ include the widow of Bachtiar—a man who was shot by the police in Dompu, Sumbawa, in 2013[20] —who then moved to Penatoi through her second marriage. AA also married his daughter to a man who later became involved in plotting an attack on a local election in Bima City.[21] Peer networks were also important, as exemplified by the case of Putra (pseudonym), who later became one of the perpetrators of a school shooting targeting the police in Bima City. Putra had been introduced to the group through his childhood friend, who persistently encouraged him to attend religious discussions at Istiqomah Mosque.[22]

The group sustained itself through several structured activities. First, it established a school for children's education, allowing members' children to be socialised from an early age into shared values and ideology. Second, routine activities, such as religious discussions and preaching at the mosque, reinforced commitment among members.[23] Third, physical training, including swimming, hiking and martial arts, was organised to build physical strength.[24] Fourth, the group operated a *hisbah* team, a patrol unit tasked with monitoring behaviours deemed deviant, such as alcohol consumption and premarital sex. The hisbah team actively recruited individuals from troubled backgrounds, including drug users, habitual drinkers and those from broken homes. These recruits were then guided through ideological and physical training, with some later sent to Poso to join the terrorist group, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), led by Santoso.[25] These Poso connections further reinforced the network, particularly when some MIT members later moved to Penatoi during the arrest of key leaders to fill leadership gaps.

Apart from these regular activities, a splinter group also emerged under the leadership of Budi (pseudonym) and held separate religious discussions led by Ali (pseudonym), a former Santoso connection who later joined the group as a teacher. This splinter group consisted of 11 or 12 individuals.[26] From this group, four individuals took part in a terrorist attack in Bima in 2017 targeting the police.[27] In addition, another cell from this splinter group was involved in plotting an attack during the 2019 regional elections in Bima, targeting a polling station using Molotov bombs. However, the individuals involved in the plot, including AA's son-in-law, were arrested before the attack could be carried out.[28]

Social Relations and Exit from Pro-IS Group

As the community expanded from 2009 to 2021, social relations functioned not only as facilitators of expansion, but also as mechanisms that reinforced conformity and limited exposure to alternative ideas outside the group. Once individuals become part of an insider network, social relations function as mechanisms of control and punishment, in which opposing voices are framed as betrayal.[29] This dynamic helps explain why only about 15 to 20 percent of members later decided to disengage from the group, while 80 percent remained.[30] Interviews indicate that those who chose to stay did so because of pride (*gengsi*), fear of ostracism and economic dependence on the group.

Those who remained also exercised various measures to prevent other members from taking the disengagement path. These included dismissing individuals from the school, barring them from teaching or preaching at Istiqomah Mosque, and pressuring female members to divorce their husbands.[31] In some cases, women remarried without formally finalising their divorces.[32] After individuals who pledged allegiance to the state (*Ikhwan* NKRI) were released from prison, group members refused to greet them in public, and physical altercations even occurred between Ikhwan NKRI and those who remained loyal to the ideology (*Ikhwan Merah*).[33] Those who pledged allegiance to the state (Ikhwan NKRI) were quickly labelled apostates (*murtad*) and infidels (*kafir*).

A small number of individuals, however, followed AQ's path to denounce the ideology and leave the group. Based on the interviews, these individuals shared similar factors: they had personal relations with those who influenced their disengagement, marked by specific high-trust ties. As with any social relation, individuals within the group did not experience the same intensity of ties with

every fellow member, having a mix of strong and weak ties. Stronger ties tended to have greater motivational force and were more likely to serve as sources of support in uncertain times.[34]

Trust is an important disengagement factor, as it precludes another individual from acting in ways that are beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to them.[35] In the cases of AQ's wife and Sofyan, both chose to follow AQ's path of disengagement despite being immediately ostracised by the group while he was in prison. During the interview, both said that, despite feeling anxious, they had chosen to trust AQ.[36] Both shared strong relations due to marriage and children, while Sofyan's relationship with AQ extended beyond the teacher-student relationship, as explained in the previous section.

Equally important was the timing of the announcement of an individual's decision to leave the group. Some individuals were given time to contact their wives or close family members before taking an oath of allegiance to the state. This occurred in the cases of AQ and Ali. Ali informed his wife of his decision, which she accepted despite opposition from his in-laws. He also contacted his brother, Galih (pseudonym), and encouraged him to follow the same path. The latter had also been part of Santoso's connection and had moved to Penatoi to join the group.[37] By informing trusted relations before formally denouncing the ideology, the individuals who left created space for understanding and reduced the perception of betrayal that often arose when such decisions were learned indirectly from others.

In other cases, disengagement was facilitated when individuals were physically separated from the group, particularly during incarceration. Physical separation allowed individuals to engage in dialogues and to listen to different views. However, such dialogues needed to involve people they trusted and with whom they shared bonds. This is illustrated by AQ's discussions with Ali and Putra while they were in prison. These one-to-one dialogues were facilitated by prison management and Detachment 88, the Indonesian counter terrorism task force. The dialogues were also accompanied by religious justifications through authoritative religious sources, which gave them stronger reasoning to leave the group. Some of the books mentioned by interviewees as particularly influential include *Qawa'id fi al-Takfir, Buku Mudah Mengkafirkan*, Salafi *fatwas* by Saudi scholars, *Shahih Fiqh as-Sunnah* by Abu Malik Kamal bin as-Sayyid Salim and classical *tafsir* (exegesis of the Quran) works, such as *al-Tabari* and *Ibn Kathir*.

Continued Commitment After Leadership Disengagement

While the disengagement of the key leaders of the pro-IS group in Penatoi marked a phase of decline and fragmentation, many pro-IS supporters still chose to remain committed to their ideology. Their continued commitment was exercised not only through social sanction mechanisms to prevent others from leaving the group, but also through several observable indicators.

First, they re-established religious learning spaces. Although the Abu Bakar As-Shiddiq School was taken over by the Indonesian government in 2024, they shifted their children's education and religious discussions by establishing *rumah Quran* (Quranic study houses) in their own homes. Similarly, some pro-IS supporters continued their association with Istiqomah Mosque, including preaching activities, despite the mosque gradually coming under greater government supervision. The latter suggests that some members of the mosque's committee remained accommodating towards them.

Second, the group still has figures who could potentially rise to leadership positions or at least become senior figures to whom others turn for direction, such as AQ's brother-in-law, who is currently in prison. Similar to AQ, he is known for his ideological commitment and is respected in the community. In addition, the potential for resurgence remains, particularly because individuals released from prison often gain social status in Penatoi and are seen as figures who have "sacrificed" for their beliefs.[38] There is concern that once imprisoned members are released, the movement could regain some momentum. Former members also note that those who adhere to the takfir ideology rarely shift perspective, given their fixed and literalist interpretations of religious texts.[39] Although their capacity for organised action has declined, the continued presence of

committed families and sympathisers indicates that the ideological commitment has not entirely diminished.

Lastly, disengagement pathways within the group have been highly individualised and largely limited to those who share strong personal bonds with trusted figures. While those who have disengaged appear to be on a promising path by building a new community, re-enrolling in school, reinterpreting doctrine and maintaining religious gatherings, disengagement remains localised and individualised, shaped by close and high-trust relations.

Conclusion

Ikhwan Merah, despite diminished visibility and fractured leadership, continue to adhere to their radical ideological stance and sustain their presence through quiet yet cohesive networks. Thus, while the emergence of Ikhwan NKRI offers hope for change, this trajectory cannot be assumed to extend across the wider community. In contexts characterised by dense and overlapping social ties, disengagement is unlikely to diffuse organically. Without broader structural reforms and sustained community reintegration efforts, disengagement will remain the exception rather than the norm.

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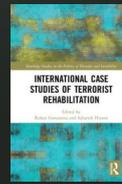
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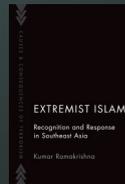
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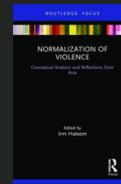
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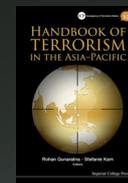
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