

RSIS TALK NOTES

RSIS Talk on

“New Developments in Indonesian Jihadism”

Speaker: Ms Sidney Jones*

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Venue: Seminar Room, RSIS

Introduction

Ms Jones examined several recent developments to analyze the state of militant jihadism in Indonesia. These included the launching in September 2008 of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's new organization, Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid; the emergence of more rifts and fissures in the jihadi movement; and new information about schools affiliated to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). She also touched on the possible impact on Indonesian jihadis of the renewed violence in Mindanao. All indicators suggested weakness, but there were also a few danger signs.

Updates on Jemaah Islamiyah and New Groups

Ms Jones started her talk with the observation that although the threat in Indonesia was continuing to decline but it was not going away anytime soon. She shared that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) as a political organization was weakening but as a social network it continued to strengthen. While local jihad is declining in Indonesia it was increasing elsewhere in the region. She cited the collapse of peace talks in Mindanao as an example.

Ms Jones said that JI was going to endure to the next several generations because members and supporters inter-marry. The near term threat would come from small splinters and new group that may include some JI members. Interestingly, members cross organizational lines, which would show a strong fusion between and among organizations. But according to Ms Jones the biggest danger would come from the “nothing-to-lose” group. Members of this group were fugitives from justice and if they were arrested they would be given extremely heavy sentences. Noordin Mohamed Top and Mas Selamat Kastari would be high on the list.

Ms Jones commented that the weakening of JI could be attributed to several factors. The number of arrests conducted by Indonesian authorities had actually depleted the ranks for the terrorist group. There were major internal divisions within the organization and disagreements about the direction of the group. Another major factor was the lack of community support for the radical fringe. More importantly, Indonesian democracy had opened more options for JI members to join above-ground organizations.

Ms Jones shared the old and new fissures that had affected the JI organization. First, the old division in JI was between the people who were focusing on the Al Qaeda style of Western target and people who were more focused on areas of conflict inside Indonesia and the local jihad. Second, there was also a difference of views within JI leadership on whether it was

important to take actions now to keep the jihad spirit alive or whether it would be better to make long term planning that would involve rebuilding the organization and consolidating everything before making any further moves. Third, there was a big division between whether JI should remain a clandestine organization or whether it was permissible to be both a member of JI and be a member of another organization. This had become particularly apparent with the creation of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's new organization. Fourth, there was a difference of opinion on whether those who had been arrested had been exposed and therefore would endanger the organization. They should not be allowed to return to any major role within the organization. The danger of this approach was that a lot of the disgruntled ex-prisoners who were not given any could become potential recruits for other organizations. Fifth, there was a division between the "purists" and "collaborationists." Purists were people who did not and would not take up police assistance, while collaborationists were people who were willing to work with authorities in order to get additional assistance for their families. Finally, there was a division in the leadership between people who believed that it was sufficient that a JI leader should be someone with religious experience or religious knowledge only and people who believed that military training and experience would be needed as well.

Developments on the Radical Fringe

Ms Jones remarked that there were a number of developments on the radical fringe partly as a result because of the weakening within the organization. More JI members were joining above-ground groups but not political parties, making the lines between clandestine organizations and above-ground groups blurry. Similarly, some members of above-ground radical organizations moved to jihadi organizations but not really into JI. One of the reasons for this was that JI had always insisted on long-term religious indoctrination. In groups like Darul Islam and KOMPAK (Action Committee for Crisis Response in Indonesia), one got a quick-fix in terms of membership training.

A classic example of an organization that was blurring the lines between clandestine and above-ground was Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's new organization. The official name is Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid (Wal Jihad), however, the Wal Jihad part was not discussed publicly. Ms Jones noted that the executive council had an interesting mixture of members. It was composed of people who were members of JI, Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) and Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia. Some were hardliners arrested once because of their involvement in bombings. In particular, the presence of Aman Abdurrahman in the council was highlighted by the speaker. Abdurrahman had no JI or MMI background but he was the most influential salafi-jihadi ideologue in Indonesia. He had gained respect within the salafi-jihadi community because he was a very skilled Arab linguist having done a number of translations of the teachings of Middle East leading radical *ulama*. Recently, he had been preaching on purifying the Islamic faith first before moving on to jihad.

Hizbut Tahrir and Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid

Ms Jones said that the Hizbut Tahrir (HT) was an organization that formerly rejected violence while working on establishing a caliphate. HT was an international organization that looked to leadership based in the Middle East and London. Mohamed Khatthath, HT General Secretary, was present during the formal launching of Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in Bekasi. He, however, did not join the organization because of the existing love-hate relationship between HT and JI. Traditionally, JI had always looked on to HT with contempt because HT wanted to wait until the caliphate is established before engaging in jihad. Lately, there had been an

increase participation of HT and JI members in joint events including discussion in the launching of books produced by JI publishers.

Ms Jones noted that another organization to watch is Al Muhajirun, whose members were involved in the London underground bombing. The local group in Indonesia was led by Abu Yahya, who splintered from HT. Al Muhajirun was said to be almost a subsidiary of JI because of its publications. The magazines it published use the same designers, lay-out artists, and editors that JI magazines use. The group had a very close relationship with some of the JI members in Solo and it was likely that some of its members were also in file to the new organization.

FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) and JAT

Ms Jones remarked that FPI never had any institutional relationship with JI. According to the expert, members of this group were urban thugs with an Islamic veneer. Its leader, Habib Rizieq, was currently on trial for masterminding the assault against the marchers and supporters of religious tolerance movement. Like HT, FPI members showed up during the launching of JAT.

Other Potentially Violent Groups

Ms Jones mentioned that several groups posed a huge threat in regional security. These were the groups of Noordin Mohamed Top, Al Muhajirun, Laskar Ababil, and Kemayoran Group. Furthermore, the “nothing-to-lose” individuals who were Noordin Mohamed Top and Mas Selamat Kastari among others posed a bigger danger. Top was Southeast Asia’s most wanted terror suspect and the alleged mastermind of the two Bali bombings. Kastari was the JI leader who escaped from Singapore’s Whitley Road detention centre in February 2008.

Local Drivers for Jihad

Ms Jones touched on what drove jihad in the region. While anger over the conflict in Iraq was not enough to push for jihad locally, communal conflict would. She cited the Mindanao issue between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as an example. Peace talks between the two parties collapsed in August 2008. She reported that there were around 50 Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans operating in Mindanao and some of these jihadists might feel obliged to help rogue elements of the MILF. Therefore there was a stronger need to strengthen security and focus on these individuals.

Ms Jones concluded that the threat in Indonesia was ongoing but the overall capacity for groups to undertake violent action against foreign targets had steadily declined.

Q & A Session

In response to the execution of the three Bali bombers, Ms Jones said that there was mob reaction in areas where the bombers lived and where the burials took place. She believed that the retaliation actions by radical groups would be more against the institution that carried out the execution.

On seeing Indonesia as mediator after the peace talks between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Philippine government collapsed, Ms Jones said that the MILF would not want Indonesia to mediate because of the good relationship built by the two countries. The MILF is eyeing the European Union to mediate because of its neutral stand.

On the role of women in the activities of JI, Ms Jones said that women acted as financiers and couriers except for Umar Patek who wanted to use his wife to bomb areas in Mindanao. It was interesting to note that Patek's wife was a convert. Ms Jones also advised that authorities must conduct strict surveillance on the families of the 50 individuals hiding in Mindanao. In addition, debrief newly arrested jihadists about their connections with Southern Philippines and the region.

As a final message, Ms Jones said that to deal with "nothing-to-lose" type and preventing their influence was to arrest them. These individuals were relatively few and the networks they moved in were fairly widespread. Moreover, since schools or madrasahs were places with high radical recruitment, non-government organizations must initiate programs that would engage creative thinking among the youth.

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* **Sidney Jones** is senior adviser to the International Crisis Group's Asia program and a recognized authority on Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Since 2002, she has authored or co-authored Crisis Group reports on terrorist groups and radical Islam in Indonesia, and has also written extensively on conflicts elsewhere in the region. She previously was a Ford Foundation program officer (1977-84) in Jakarta and New York; Amnesty International researcher on Indonesia, the Philippines and the Pacific (1985-1988) and Asia director of Human Rights Watch (1989-2002). She holds degrees from the University of Pennsylvania in Oriental Studies and International Relations and in 2006 received an honorary doctorate from the New School in New York.