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Jihadist Disengagement from Violence: Understanding Contributing Factors

By Julie Chernov Hwang

Synopsis

Members of Indonesian jihadist groups are disengaging from violence. Understanding the factors that facilitate disengagement can enable governments and NGOs working in the field of terrorist rehabilitation to tailor programmes accordingly.

Commentary

MEMBERS OF Indonesian jihadist groups have been disengaging from violence in various regions of the archipelago. Among them are Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Mujahidin KOMPAK in Java, and Tanah Runtuh in Poso. They provide interesting case studies of why the terrorist groups disengage.

Jihadists disengaging from violence offer different motivations for their changed positions. Four significant factors help to facilitate disengagement. A terrorist disengages when he decides to cease participation in acts of violence. A handful may actually leave the group. More go inactive or shift from a violent to a non-violent role within the group. Disengagement is a gradual process, occurring over months and even years. The entire process combines rational, emotional, relational, and psychological factors.

Understanding Disengagement: The Factors

The four factors that drive the disengagement process forward tend to work together. The first factor is disillusionment with the targets and timing of attacks, with leaders, and even remorse for one's own role. This was often the start of the reflective process that preceded disengagement. It was rarely a decisive factor, however,

because loyalty to one's seniors often trumped feelings of unease and disappointment.

The second factor - cost benefit analysis - played a key role in disengagement, often in an interactive relationship with disillusionment. This tended to be operationalised in two ways: change of context and actions viewed as counter-productive. Tanah Runtuh members who disengaged cited changing context as proximate to their decision. Since Poso was peaceful and had been so for over a decade, there was no longer a need for violence.

JI and Mujahidin KOMPAK members tended to utilise cost-benefit logic with several lines of reasoning. First, most interviewees pointed to general public revulsion with the bombings and expressed the general sentiment that ongoing bombings would be "counterproductive" to the interests of JI and Muslims in general. Alongside this view, it was often mentioned that bombings against civilian targets was a violation of the Quran's rules governing the conduct of war. Thus, there were religious "costs" involved with taking such a step.

Alternative Social Networks

The third and perhaps the most important factor in facilitating successful disengagement was the establishment of an alternative social network of friends, family members, business associates and mentors. New relationships and friendships can offer new narratives for perceiving the enemy, highlight instances where the rhetoric of seniors was at odds with their actions, challenge prior-held views, and refocus priorities from jihad and/or revenge killing toward family.

Pressure from parents or a spouse can be a key supporting factor facilitating the disengagement. This was especially true among the Tanah Runtuh jihadists in Poso. However, the converse was also true. In those cases where parents professed support for terrorism, individuals remained hard line and unrepentant.

Finally, shifts in priorities from jihad and clandestine activities toward marriage, family, and gainful employment also facilitated disengagement. Priority shifts followed. In the cases of Tanah Runtuh members who had been released from prison, the need to earn a living, to "*cari makanan*" for one's family, led to prioritising finding and keeping a job over their prior jihad activities. Likewise, among members of JI, Mujahidin KOMPAK, and the Subur cell, the most successful instances of disengagement and reintegration were those young men who had the opportunity to go for either further education or professional development training and had become teachers or businessmen in their own right.

Implications for Policy

It is important to note that these factors also hold if we look at a broader range of cases outside Indonesia. Studies such as those by Peter Neumann on defections from Islamic State show that ISIS defectors have cited disillusionment with ISIS' brutality, corruption, sectarianism, and unIslamic behaviour as well as the general lack of a quality of life as key to their decision to return home.

Members of Scandinavian skinhead gangs cited a desire to get married and start a family as well as a general sense of burnout and disillusionment as key to their decision to disengage. ETA members raised issues of changing context and a desire to become fathers. Finally, IRA members cited disillusionment with tactics as well as the role of a supportive family network in facilitating disengagement.

These generalisations are instructive in the development of disengagement programmes both by governments and by civil society organisations. Indonesia would benefit from well-targeted, well-resourced disengagement programmes, built on a foundation of knowledge about the Indonesian jihadist community. This has historically been lacking.

Early Densus 88 programmes championed first by Brigadier General Suryadharma and then by General Tito Karnavian drew on substantial knowledge of the target population but were ad hoc and poorly funded. Later BNPT programmes were well funded but were built without sufficient understanding of the jihadist community. With Tito Karnavian taking the reins at BNPT, this provides an opportunity for equal emphasis of these goals. To date, BNPT and Densus programmes have not focused on life skills training and professional development.

However, this is the area where they could have the most sustainable impact. By focusing on the priority shift element, they could move disengagement forward at a very tenuous time. If someone cannot find a way to earn a living outside the jihadi network, they may very well return to it. Likewise, providing space for those conversations around disillusionment and cost-benefit to take place, especially within prisons, can also embolden those who are “thinking” disengagement to “do” disengagement and ultimately reintegration post-release.

Julie Chernov Hwang is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Her forthcoming book, “Reconsidering Violence: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists” is under review at Cornell University Press. She contributed this article to RSIS Commentary.
