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Jemaah Islamiyah: Still a Latent Threat

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

While the self-proclaimed Islamic State has spread its wings in Southeast Asia, the danger posed by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cannot be ignored. It has been in a state of preparation to strike when the moment is ripe.

Commentary

WHILE NATIONAL, regional and international attention has been focussed on the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the dormant Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has found the environment conducive for its own growth and expansion. By 2010 and 2011, there was some satisfaction in Southeast Asia that JI had not only been crippled but was also largely defeated. Its key military and ideological leaders were either dead or detained. They included Abu Bakar Bashyir, Aman Abdurrahman, Abu Rusydan, Al Aqaeda operatives Hambali, Dulmatin, Umar Patek, Abu Dujana as well as Malaysian fighters such as Nordin M Top and Dr Azahari Husin.

However, even though the last JI bombing in Indonesia was in 2009, it did not mean that the group had renounced terrorism. On the contrary, it had adopted a strategic decision to lie low in line with the concept of *l'dad* that advocated in-depth preparation to participate in a future jihad. This partly explains the intermittent reports of JI members being arrested or detained ever since, including the four that were detained in Indonesia in December 2016.

Post-2009 JI: 'No-bomb' Policy - for Time Being

A major factor for the change in strategy of the first Southeast Asia-wide terrorist organisation was due to the robust counter-terrorism policies adopted by

governments in the region. By 2016, in Indonesia alone, more than 110 JI leaders and members had been killed in operations. About 1,200 were languishing in prisons. The JI organisation was also fragmented.

Jl's 'pro-bomb' policy was also a consequence of divisions within the organisation between the 'pro-bomb' and 'bomb-now' group versus the pro-dakwah and 'bomb-later' faction. The division also had the effect of weakening JI, especially as most of the 'pro-bomb' leaders and members were either killed or detained.

Partly due to the weakening of the 'pro-bomb' faction and the negative reactions of the public at large to JI bomb attacks, which killed many innocent Muslims, by end 2010 and the beginning of 2011, the decision was made to adopt a 'no-bomb policy for the time being'. This was also in line with the strategic concept of *l'dad*, of rebuilding one's strength in time of weakness and striking when it was ripe to do so.

This was made explicit by Chep Hermawan, the leader of GARIS, the Indonesian Reform Movement. At a congress of leading jihadists and radical ideologues in Cipanas district, West Java, in December 2010, it agreed to adopt a non-violent approach to campaign for Sharia Law and an Islamic state. Hermawan also argued that bombings that mostly killed innocent Muslims were counter-productive as these had lost the organisation much public support and sympathy.

Strategic Resilience of JI

In the author's recent interview with the former Emir of JI, Abu Rusydan, and the former leader of JI Mantiqi-3, Nasir Abbas, it is clear that the organisation remains alive and intact. Terrorism expert Sidney Jones even argued that its membership may have expanded to more than 2,000.

For Rusydan, four factors accounted for JI resurgence and continued resilience. These were its ideology, organisational structure, the role of history and the sense of belonging among its members. Rusydan argued that only one factor had changed since October 1999, when the group's founding Emir, Abdullah Sungkar, died.

Since then, there had not been an instance when the Emir was elected according to Syariat Islam or the organisation's constitution, the PUPJI. This was despite the fact that JI continued to organise various military operations from 2000 to 2009.

There were also other Emirs who succeeded Sungkar, such as Abu Bakar Bashyir, Abu Rusydan and Zarkasih. Some have even argued that the current Emir is Abu Rusydan. However, Rusydan argued that Sungkar's successors were elected by elements (*anasir*) within JI and not by all its members through consensus as was enshrined in the PUPJI.

Neo-JI?

Still, other factors have ensured JI's continued survival today. Rusydan argued that the group is as relevant today as it was in the past and he was definitely one of its members. However, his focus today is on *dakwah* and not violence. JI is

concentrating on Indonesia and not the region. However, he warned that his group would only be peaceful 'up to a point'.

He hoped that the Indonesian authorities would not create a situation that would force him and his group to resort to violence, as was undertaken in the past between 2000 and 2009. He also dismissed the notion of 'neo-Jemaah Islamiyah' as the work of 'fertile minds' in branding the organisation.

Nasir Abbas also argued that JI has been adroitly staying below the security radar, expanding and developing organisationally. This was evident from its membership expansion, collection of funds, knowledge building (studying tactics and strategies), regular gatherings and planning sessions to decide on what needs to be done to ensure its future success. For JI, this has been an opportune moment as it has a pool of experts experienced in combat and where the security apparatus is focussed on the ISIS threat.

Factors Behind a Resurgent JI

Apart from its expanding membership, various other factors have facilitated the steady resurgence of the organisation. First is the existence of Al Qaeda Central, which continues to inspire JI and its members. This is especially since Al Qaeda has been expanding in the last few years. Second, JI leaders continue to be active in proselytising activities in Indonesia, including ideologues such as Abu Rusydan, Abu Jibril and Abu Tholut.

The JI networks have remained intact, including mosques, madrasahs and publishing houses. The mission to create an Islamic State has remained a key driving force of its members. The restraint shown by JI members and leaders shows they have learnt from their past mistakes and failures.

Finally, while the group remains peaceful in Indonesia, some members have supported violent jihad abroad. Abu Jibril and Imam Samudra's sons died fighting in Syria for the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra in 2015.

Whether it is the low-key competition with Abu Bakr Baghdadi's so-called Islamic State or the mission to set up an Islamic State in Indonesia, ignoring the JI would be premature and a grave error. Having weathered various security challenges and with many of its members expected to be released from detention in the coming year or so, JI is poised to play a major role in challenging the security architecture of Indonesia which is bound to have serious consequences for the Southeast Asian region.

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