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Jl: Resilient & Growing, Despite Arrests

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Jl is a resilient clandestine organisation with far greater numbers than estimated, including by most security analysts. Its growth is partly because Jl does not invent its Islamist narrative but modifies from existing ones. How does Jl rejuvenate itself? Will its influence wane with time?

COMMENTARY

INDONESIA's counter-terrorism police squad Detachment 88 swooped down and arrested many Jl members across the country ahead of Christmas and New Year celebrations to usher in 2022. The continuous arrests attest to the clandestine organisation's ability to replenish its rank-and-file as well as leaders despite a ceaseless crackdown by the authorities.

It further demonstrates that Jl is a resilient clandestine organisation with far greater numbers than even security analysts estimated. This raises two questions: how does Jl rejuvenate itself? Can its influence be contained?

Blending in With Society

The first thing to remember is that people do not gravitate to Jl due to some individual pathology. On the contrary, most recruits look, dress, and behave like ordinary individuals, at least until they are given a deadly mission or are deeply engaged with the Jl ideology and group. In other words, the choice to engage in terrorist activities for Jl members is a gradual process with many routes and levels of engagement.

The use of Jl's Islamic school network to recruit new members and maintain the loyalty of existing ones is still ongoing. The number of Jl-affiliated schools almost tripled after

the first Bali bombing in 2002. Not only that, the age of entry to the school is getting lower with some as young as five years old. They study at JI home-based schools across Indonesia.

To entice members of the public to send their children to JI schools, they typically market themselves on social media platforms offering Arabic and Quran memorisation classes. Once in their school, JI will instill the organisation's values, such as advocating Islamic law to replace Indonesia's constitution and rejecting democracy and other forms of political systems that do not recognise Sharia law.

Another traditional yet effective JI venue for recruitment is kinship. It helps JI to maintain relations of trust and confidence for its survival. For example, the jailed JI leader, Para Wijayanto, sent his son, Asykari Sibghotul Haq, to Syria to lead JI's 'humanitarian' mission and military training.

Meanwhile, friendships and small Islamic groups consisting of six-to-ten people are still used by JI to advance its cause. The groups meet regularly for various social activities, such as book discussions or members' weddings, which circumvent regulations by authorities due to their harmless nature.

Ustadz Zakaria, the director of an Islamic boarding school in East Java that hosted the first Bali bombers, said in a recent interview that JI is self-contained as its members trade amongst themselves through various means of business, such as multi-level marketing in herbal products for health and other commodities such as rice and honey. Through this type of business activity, JI has expanded its network while blending in with society.

Follow the Money

In this context, following JI's money trail is critical because it is the lifeblood of its operational and support activities ranging from attacks, military training, recruitment, communication, transportation, and providing safe havens and education. Understanding how, where, when, from/to whom money has been transferred will be a reliable data point to map out and identify terrorist activities and affiliates at the local and global levels.

While the actual cost of a terrorist attack can be in the range of thousands of dollars, maintaining and sustaining its network require a lot more. The arrest of hundreds of JI members for fundraising for JI has supported this argument. Detachment 88 revealed that JI has deployed charity boxes at minimarkets in several regions throughout Indonesia to lure unsuspecting shoppers into donating money to JI.

Based on financial reports, police said two Islamic charity foundations were used as fronts for JI to carry out fund-raising — netting in an estimated 2 million dollars, although the actual figure could be higher.

The arrests also confirmed that by adopting the new doctrine of '*Tamkin*' — an Arabic word to mean 'preparing the community to support JI's political cause' — JI is now moving into mainstream politics such as establishing a political party called PDRI, Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia (Da'wa Party of the People of Indonesia).

‘Defending the Oppressed Ummah’

Speaking to police investigators, Para Wijayanto said: “JI must work closely with the ‘ummah’ or ‘community’, especially on issues relating to defending the interest of Islam.” In this regard, Para’s confession can be understood to mean that there are specific types of political events that are vulnerable to JI’s infiltration.

To name a few, JI encourages its members to join public rallies, the prominent one being the “212 movements” which seek to pressure the government to implement aspects of Islamic law, such as the blasphemy law used against Jakarta’s former Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (‘Ahok’) over a speech. JI’s new-found interest and participation in politics was once considered un-Islamic by the group.

JI’s successful infiltration is partly because JI does not invent its Islamist narrative. Instead, JI modifies from existing narrative within specific Islamic traditions and history to fit into their narrow purpose of recruitment for their cause.

For example, the narrative of “defending the oppressed ummah” in global and regional conflicts such as the ones in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Southern Philippines, Myanmar and Xinjiang has proven to be a powerful tool. JI leverage on this to recruit new members and raise funds.

Way Forward

Going forward, Indonesian policymakers need to understand the dynamics of JI’s narratives both online and offline to identify what sort of influence these narratives have. This will help them focus on generating more targeted engagement rather than wasting resources on creating general awareness programmes.

One possibility is promoting books written by reformed senior leaders in JI, such as Abu Fida, who fought in Afghanistan and met Osama bin Laden in the 1980s. After serving twice in prison for terrorism, he explicitly renounced violence based on a revised understanding of religious edicts.

JI schools should also be moderated by supervising the school curriculum and teaching activities closely. To do that, the education authorities should introduce these books to JI school teachers and students.

Abu Fida, a graduate of Ummul Qurra University in Mecca, Saudi Arabia will be able to come up with “revisions” of some of JI’s skewed views on its understanding Islam. These “revisions” are not intended to innovate Islamic thoughts; they are merely ideas that reaffirm the mainstream position of Islam on acts of violence.

Take the example of the literal interpretation of jihad to mean “to struggle” or “to resist”. Abu Fida said: “This kind of struggle should be, first and foremost, against the enemies of your *nafs* (self) or lust, desire and the devil. Violent jihad is a secondary type and relates to self-defence against the enemy of Islam.”

To complement the above programme, Indonesia needs to expand its counter-extremism narrative to include strengthening national identity as a response to the

rising tide of religious exclusivism, as seen in the discrimination against religious minorities and attacks on their places of worship.

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