Counter-Terrorism Challenges in Indonesia and Beyond:
Sidney Jones

Key Points

- A key challenge for the Indonesian authorities is to craft a programme of activities that attracts people who are in danger of being radicalised, but which channels them into a more constructive direction.

- Jemaah Islamiyah is not likely to be involved in any terrorist attack any time soon, but it has a long-term vision, thinks in twenty-five year timeframes and may change its current calculation that violence is counterproductive to the cause.

- There has been a resumption of the targeting of foreigners by Indonesian jihadist groups but the likelihood of an attack specifically carried out against Australian interests is low.

- A possible long-term future threat might be the emergence among Rohingya refugees stranded along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border of an extremist camp that could attract fighters from across South-East Asia.

Introduction

Relative to its size, Indonesia has a jihadist movement that is very small and, for the most part, quite unsuccessful. Renowned counter-terrorism expert and director of the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Sidney Jones, discusses with FDI some of the potential security challenges confronting Indonesia, both from existing local groups and fighters returning from Syria, and the status of Jemaah Islamiyah, before looking further ahead and highlighting a possible longer-term problem that could evolve on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.
Commentary

FDI: Good morning, Sidney. Welcome to Perth and thank you for speaking with Future Directions International. You have estimated that there may be as many as 250 Indonesians fighting with Islamic State in the Middle East. Obviously, their return would pose a significant problem for the Indonesian security services. How do you suggest that such individuals and their ideologies be contained and/or countered?

SJ: I think that you first have to step back a bit and look at a couple of the different groups in Indonesia. If you look at where and how recruitment takes place, much of it is through face-to-face meetings in mosques, or in schools – but more so mosques, especially in urban areas – and that the people who are being attracted to it fall into many different categories. They are not necessarily who we might expect, either; it’s not really the urban poor, for example. Some are university-educated, but very often those attracted are sidewalk vendors or the like; people who are underemployed and also highly mobile.

So, one thing to do before even beginning to consider about preparing for the return of foreign fighters is to think about how to take known places of recruitment and put together a set of alternative activities that would attract the same kinds of people, but channel them into more constructive directions.

FDI: In that case, what do you see as the primary strengths and weaknesses of the counter- and de-radicalisation efforts currently being employed by the Indonesian authorities?

SJ: Well, I think it’s precisely the fact that they have not actually been built upon a knowledge or an understanding of radicalisation or recruitment. Officials sometimes take ideas off the top of their heads and think that they will be an effective antidote to radicalisation. For example, many of those with a military background believe that the root cause of radicalisation is insufficient nationalism. They then try to beef up training programmes in the state ideology of Pancasila – an approach very much associated with the Soeharto Government. Of course, it’s not a question of insufficient nationalism at all. It is a question of people being indoctrinated by extremist preachers promoting the notion that their hardline interpretation of the religion is the best way to live an “Islamic life” and to incorporate and internalise Islamic values. At some level, therefore, that particular mode of radicalisation has to be challenged.

FDI: Are there any differences between the containment methods that might be applied to returnees from Syria and Iraq and the de-radicalisation and monitoring programmes that might be employed domestically, particularly among current and former prisoners?

SJ: In some cases, former prisoners have played a constructive role. Take the case of Ali Imron, for instance, one of the Bali bombers. He came to change his mind about the value of violence and successfully convinced some other prisoners that violence is, in fact, counterproductive. It is interesting, though, that he doesn’t actually say that it’s illegitimate, just counterproductive. But, as long people are turned away from violence, from a practical perspective, that’s what counts.

FDI: It could be an interesting distinction, though, couldn’t it?
SJ: Yes, it could. Prisoners who have a very strong terrorist or jihadi background who have changed their minds about violence and who believe that it’s no longer the correct path to take can play a very effective role, at least up to a point. They do have a “use-by date” because, once they’ve been out of the networks for a period of time, their impact upon newly-arrested people is likely to be diminished. They have to be well-enough known to the new group that their influence will be felt.

FDI: That makes perfect sense. In the case of Ali Imron, what would you say was the catalyst for his change of mind?

SJ: I’m not entirely sure, but I think that he is quite well-versed in the Qur’an and the Hadith. He is a religious scholar and actually thought about whether or not violence against civilians could be justified. He was also exposed to discussions about jihad in other parts of the world and must have compared that to the situation in Indonesia: the country wasn’t under attack and Muslims were not facing the kind of persecution that they might have been elsewhere. So, while he has not changed his mind about the value of jihad in places like Afghanistan or Palestine, it did not make sense in the context of Indonesia.

FDI: Do you think it continues to be the case – even after instances of apparent competition for followers between the likes of Bahrumsyah, Abu Jandal and Bahrun Naim – that Indonesia-based jihadists are still generally of “low competence”?

SJ: Up until recently, it was very clear that the kinds of people who were being recruited as would-be operatives to conduct terrorist attacks were no longer of the generation that had received international “terrorist training”. In many cases, too, they had also not fought in the two big communal conflicts in Indonesia, in the Moluccas and in Poso, Central Sulawesi province, where some terrorists gained combat experience. This meant that, effectively, people were simply being brought in off the street and recruited into operations without any real training, indoctrination, vetting or even particularly good planning, but that’s beginning to change now, though. In part, it’s because the appearance of Islamic State (ISIS) has reactivated some members of the older generation with the result that it’s possible that we may see some more experienced individuals – including some who may be coming out of prisons – returning to the movement with skills that could boost its capacity for violence. Again, that’s even before we talk about people coming back from Syria.

FDI: Now, applying that to Jemaah Islamiyah, for instance, how would you characterise its current status?

SJ: Jemaah Islamiyah is a problem, but it’s a long-term problem rather than an imminent threat. From about 2007 onwards, JI decided that it wasn’t going to be involved in violence in Indonesia for some of the same reasons that Ali Imron used: that it was counterproductive and that the organisation needed to be re-built. It has now substantially been rebuilt and seemingly with a decision recently that it was time to focus more on military preparations. Consequently, over the last six months or so, we have seen the arrests of people who were engaged in military training or trying to stockpile weapons.
So, Jemaah Islamiyah is not likely to be involved in any terrorist attack any time soon, but
the question is, when is it going to change its calculation that violence is counterproductive?
What would that take? Would JI, on account of its al-Qaeda affiliations, decide, for example,
that the return of fighters from ISIS required it to open an Indonesian front in the fighting
between ISIS and al-Qaeda that has been seen in Syria? That is something that we don’t
know yet. Or, would JI decide at some point that political instability in Indonesia – viewed
through the prism of its own perceptions, at least – had got to the point where it was now
necessary to act? I don’t think that there is any threat at all at the moment to the political
stability of Indonesia, but it’s never clear exactly how the calculations are made in an
organisation like that. At any rate, JI is the only jihadi organisation that thinks in twenty-five
year timeframes, so they’ve got a long-term vision, and therein lies the challenge.

FDI: Do you see any such local groups and/or individuals as posing any direct threats to
Australian interests in Indonesia?

SJ: We have clearly seen a resumption of the targeting of foreigners but I don’t think that
there will be an attack on Australian commercial interests per se. The likelihood of such
groups or individuals choosing some iconic Australian logo or image and making that a target
is, I think, not very high. But, as I say, we have seen a return to the idea that foreigners are
the enemy and we could again see the targeting of soft targets, such as restaurants or
tourist facilities. We might also see attacks on individuals – knife attacks, for instance, of the
kind that has been seen in Bangladesh – being carried out in the name of ISIS.

FDI: Generally speaking, many Australians would seem to have a better awareness of
Indonesian jihadists – Jemaah Islamiyah springs to mind – than they do of those who might
be present elsewhere in South-East Asia. What other groups would you highlight?

SJ: Well, to start with, you would have to include all of the pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia. A
particular concern is that those groups are increasingly developing links with likeminded
groups in Malaysia and the Philippines. Those links are being forged both in Syria, especially
between Malaysian and Indonesian fighters, and in Mindanao, between Indonesians and
fighters from Abu Sayyaf and splinter groups formed out of the Moro Islamic Liberation
Front (MILF).

Another concern is that as it gets harder to go to Syria because of tighter control of the
Turkish border, and as it gets harder for Indonesians to fight in Poso, because there is a
large-scale manhunt underway for the leader of the small insurgent group there, some
Indonesian jihadists will decide that the nearest jihad to join is in Mindanao.

FDI: Finally, are there any emerging terrorist groups or locations that you believe should be
monitored more closely in the years ahead?

SJ: I certainly think that there is a need to stay focussed on the Rohingya issue in Myanmar
because, even though there currently is no discernible extremist group among the Rohingya,
there is a history of an extremist wing of the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation that in the
early 1990s had a few men training around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area where it
had some links with JI and a number of other groups. In both Indonesia and Malaysia,
attempts to carry out retaliatory attacks on Buddhists or others in revenge for violence against Muslims in Myanmar, have been foiled. It is also known from the interviews conducted with some of the suspects arrested for those plots that, if there were an opportunity to fight for Muslims in Myanmar, they would take it.

Looking at Bangladesh, where the political and security situations are deteriorating and which has a very large Rohingya population, I think that it is important to at least consider the possibility that some kind of camp could emerge on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and that such a camp might attract fighters from across South-East Asia. It’s a very long shot and I don’t think that it’s going to happen any time soon, but in terms of a long-term future threat, that is one thing to look at.

FDI: Sidney, thank you for sharing your time and your expertise with FDI.

SJ: Thank you very much.

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About the Interviewee: Sidney Jones is the Director of the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. From 2002 to 2013, Ms Jones worked with the International Crisis Group, first as South-East Asia project director, then from 2007, as senior adviser to the Asia programme. Before joining Crisis Group, she worked for the Ford Foundation in Jakarta and New York (1977-84), Amnesty International in London as the Indonesia-Philippines-Pacific researcher (1985-88), and Human Rights Watch in New York as the Asia director (1989-2002). She holds a BA and MA from the University of Pennsylvania. She lived in Shiraz, Iran for one year as a university student (1971-72), and studied Arabic in Cairo and Tunisia. She received an honorary doctorate in 2006 from the New School in New York.

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