Jemaah Islamiyah: Inactivity does not mean it is inactive

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Summary

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is a terrorist organisation with jihadist ambitions for a region-wide caliphate. Successful counter-terrorism and policing methods have limited the frequency of bombings in Indonesia. Its radical pro-bombing faction, however, has shown that despite the loss of leaders it continues to adapt and will remain a regional security threat for the foreseeable future.

Analysis

The structure and size of the terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) continues to change but its objectives remain the same. As it responds to regional counter-terrorism and policing efforts, its goals continue to be the Islamisation of Indonesia and the creation a region-wide caliphate.

JI has been dormant at times over the past decade with some commentators and analysts declaring this was proof that it was a vastly diminished organisation that could at best conduct only ad hoc attacks. Such conclusions proved premature.

These periods of relative inactivity by JI later showed it was not inactive in an operational sense but adapting to changed circumstances and the operational realities of being a pursued terrorist organisation. These periods were also characterised by many of its senior leaders being arrested, killed or in hiding.

The capabilities of JI in areas such as financing, planning and bomb making have been compromised by the loss of its leaders. Members, however, have continued to step into leadership roles and assume control of conducting JI’s violent, extremist brand of salafist jihadism. The most violent terrorist actions continue to be carried out by a small pro-bombing faction within JI, also referred to as the ‘radicals’.

When Mohammad Noordin Top, the militant commander from JI’s pro-bombing faction Tanzim Qaedaat al-Jihad, was killed by authorities on 17 September 2009, the replacement leader was Saifuddin Jaelani. While Jaelani was killed less than a month later on 9 October 2009, along with his deputy and brother, Muhammad Syahrir, this organisation has a dedicated hard-core group of followers to draw on to take the lead in their fight against Western targets.
Australia and other regional states should not be led into thinking that the removal of terrorist leaders means that their organisations will soon fold. Such thinking does not give credit to the strength and appeal of the ideology and teachings of the followers of this particular brand of militant Islam.

**Evolution of a regional terrorist organisation**

Since 27 October 2002, the Australian Government has listed JI as an outlawed terrorist organisation. The most recent re-listing of JI was on August 8, 2008.

The roots of JI though go back several decades to post-colonial Indonesia where its forerunner, *Darul Islam* (DI), was founded in 1948 by Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosuwirjo to create an Islamic State of Indonesia. In 1949, an Islamic state was declared in West Java by rebel Army commander Kartosuwirjo. He waged a campaign of terror throughout the 1950s until his defeat in 1962 by military operations authorised by Indonesian President Sukarno.

Less than a decade later, the formation of JI began to take root. Originally established as a loose confederation of several Islamist groups in 1969, JI's formation came through the efforts of Indonesian Islamic clerics Abu Bakar Ba’asyir (Bashir) and Abdullah Sungkar. Both promoted the teachings of DI to their followers. The 'General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama’ah Al-Islamiyah' is described by the Australian Government as JI’s 'charter and operating guide'.

In 1972, Bashir and Sungkar set up *Pesantren al-Mu’min* in Solo, central Java, but relocated the following year to Ngruki. It is here that the original members of JI first received teachings in the hardline interpretations of Islam. Bashir remains to this day the spiritual adviser of *al-Mukmin*, teaching its school children predominantly in Arabic and promoting radical views.

An Indonesian Government crackdown saw Bashir imprisoned in the late 1970s for attempting to form an Islamic militia group. In 1982, he and his followers escaped from prison and fled to Malaysia and the group soon began to be known as *Jemaah Islamiyah*.

JI is considered to have become a terrorist group in 1993. This is when Bashir and Sungkar sought to establish their Indonesian Islamic insurgent movement, based on the principles of DI, to use violent tactics to achieve an Islamic State of Indonesia. Bashir met Riduan Isamuddin (Hambali). Hambali became the military leader of JI until his arrest on 11 August 2003. Hambali advocated violent military tactics to establish a caliphate that would bring Islamic rule for all Muslims living across South-East Asia, including Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, southern Thailand and the Philippines.

The end of President Suharto’s reign brought democratisation to Indonesia and the lifting of restrictions on Islamic groups. It was also a time when many JI exiles returned to Indonesia. The
Al-Qa‘ida fatwa in February 1998 on the United States and its allies exhorted followers such as JI to violently attack the West.

In 1999, another significant event propelled JI on its path to seek out Western targets. When communal violence broke out in the Indonesian province of Maluku, JI sent members there to fight, including many with military experience from training camps along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Hambali and his fellow jihadists drew inspiration from Al-Qa‘ida ideology, and avenging Muslim deaths in Maluku. Later that same year, when Sungkar died, Bashir became its new leader. According to analyst Sidney Jones, the leadership was now with ‘a man less interested in or capable of controlling rogue elements’.

By the end of 2000, JI had become active in a controversial bombing campaign. Many in JI expressed reservations about the bombings. A mainstream faction in JI is Jama‘ah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) is opposed the bombings. According to Noor Huda Ismail and Carl Ungerer, the JAT leadership are seen as ‘traditionalists’ and encouraged its members not to become involved in indiscriminate bombings, claiming ‘violence is only justified as a way to defend Muslims in conflict areas’. This dominant mainstream faction claimed that the bombing attacks had a negative impact on the Muslim population.

The divergent views on the use of violence, through bombings, become a major factor in the evolution of the different leadership styles within JI. These views also had a hardening on the different factional approaches to achieving an Islamic State of Indonesia and a region-wide caliphate.

Divisions within JI’s leadership structure have been complicated by the release of up to 100 JI members from Indonesia’s gaols in recent years. Many of them are unreformed and remain committed militant Islamists. Some of the released extremists, such as a former commander and military trainer, Abu Thoult, were not welcomed by the traditionalist faction. This saw the unrepentant extremists attracted to the smaller, pro-bombing radical faction.

By mid-2009, some commentators and analysts claimed that a period of inactivity over several years, and a divided leadership structure, made JI an ineffective organisation. It was assessed in some quarters that at best, JI’s radical pro-bombing faction would only ever be able to conduct ad hoc attacks.

The bombings at the Marriott and Ritz Carlton Hotels in Jakarta on 17 July 2009 put paid to that view. While there was almost a five year hiatus between this and earlier attacks in Indonesia by JI, this so-called ‘ad-hoc’ bombing showed this group’s ability to adapt and conduct attacks.

Operational and transnational capabilities

According to a 2008 estimate by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), JI has approximately 900 militants. Regional counter-terrorism and policing efforts have stymied the frequency of bombings and activities of JI, damaged the leadership structure and forced the group to adapt their command structure to become much flatter.

According to ASPI analysts, this has resulted in two regional divisions, or mantiqis, being dismantled: Mantiqi I (Singapore, Malaysia, except Sabah and Southern Thailand) and Mantiqi IV (the fundraising arms in Australia and Papua New Guinea). The remaining two geographical divisions, Mantiqi II (Indonesia, except Sulawesi and Kalimantan) and Mantiqi III (Sabah, Sulawesi, Kalimantan and southern Philippines) have blended into one.
In recent years, JI has also formed into two main factions, the traditionalists and radicals. The latter faction advocates a policy of armed struggle (jihad musallah) that involves bombing Western targets. Fuelled by salafist jihadism, and inspired by the ideology and actions of al-Qaeda, this JI faction is the most dangerous. Despite its smaller size and fringe status, it has conducted high profile bombings in Indonesia. For example, the 2005 bombings in Bali were conducted by three suicide bombers.

One implication of the splintering effect is that there still remains a militant Islamist faction for hardliners. This faction attracts extremist elements from within, and outside, JI’s militant membership base. There is no single profile of a JI militant, neither being recruited from just the rural poor or urban underclass. The ideology behind JI appeals across the entire class spectrum and professional classes.

The JI membership base and its supporters are predominately based within Indonesia but this does not qualify them as an exclusively ‘Indonesian’ terrorist organisation. Both JI’s roots and some of its terrorist acts, including one of its most deadly, are transnational in nature.

Many of JI’s first-generation leaders and senior figures lived in Malaysia until the organisation was ‘discovered’ in 1991. Many of those same members trained with Islamist groups in training camps along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This organisation also receives financial support from across the region.

JI’s transnational capabilities have been demonstrated through its links with other regional militant Islamist terrorist groups. In December 2001, a terrorist plot was uncovered in Singapore which involved a plan by JI and Al-Qa’ida to send suicide bombers against military, political and commercial targets.

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), based predominately in southern Mindanao in the Philippines, is a militant Islamic group which shares close links with JI. On 27 February 2004, it conducted with JI the Philippines single worst act of terrorism when they sank the Superferry 14, which claimed the lives of 116 people. According to the Australian Government, bombings with a ‘JI signature’ were conducted on 10 October 2006 and 10 January 2007.

Also, some JI members are believed to be in Sulu in the southern Philippines. One recent report claims Dulmatin, wanted for his JI involvement in the 2002 Bali bombings and association with the ASG since 2003, is alive and in hiding there. Dulmatin, however, was reportedly killed in early 2008 by Philippines authorities. The Moro Independence Liberation Front also provides assistance to JI fugitives hiding in the southern Philippines.

**Removing JI leaders will not remove the threat**

The most recent JI terrorist attack shows an organisational resilience that has been underestimated on occasion by some analysts. Small cells, some connected through family relationships, can conduct high-profile attacks even if dismissingly considered ‘ad hoc’. Such bombings are relatively cheap and continue to serve the terrorist organisation’s cause, long after being assessed as ineffective.

The Jakarta attack of 17 July 2009 awakened a period of JI inactivity. An earlier period of mass casualty bombings during 2002-2005 had killed hundreds of people in Indonesia. They included the 12 October 2002 bombing of the Sari Club and Paddy’s Bar in Kuta Beach, Bali; the 5 August 2003 attack on the JW Marriot Hotel in Jakarta; the 5 September 2004 bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta; and the 1 October 2005 attacks on Bali’s Kuta Beach and Jimbaran Bay.
These events show JI’s capabilities over time, if somewhat strained, to plan, train, finance, and execute covert terrorist operations.

The period of relative inactivity between the 2005 and 2009 bombings by JI’s radical bombing faction demonstrated counter-terrorism and policing measures had an impact on JI’s operations. However, the strength of JI is its particular brand of militant salafist jihadism and Islamist theological appeal which continues to attract new adherents.

Leadership is sometimes considered as forming ‘the centre of gravity’ of a group. However, groups like JI show that while leadership is important in providing direction, unity and purpose, the removal of leaders does not necessarily remove the threat posed by the remaining members.

The death or arrest of a terrorist leader does not necessarily mean that the organisation’s ‘centre of gravity’ has damaged the group beyond repair and removed the threat. JI is proof of that. If emphasis is placed predominately on the pivotal role a terrorist leader has within their organisation, and policies and strategies are built around that, then the effect will not be long lasting.

There is a large base of militant individuals within JI committed to the cause and willing to assume leadership roles should circumstances provide the opportunity. New leaders display different traits and styles but the ideology that propels JI mean that it only takes a committed few to exact a deadly outcome. Sometimes a replacement leader is more driven, even unorthodox, employing more deadly tactics.

It is likely, therefore, that any period of JI inactivity means that it is adapting to current circumstances but will undoubtedly pursue its objectives through future bombings. Resilience, its ability to evolve, both underpinned by a strong ideological commitment to the Islamist cause, remain key features of JI.

Its presence will remain for the foreseeable future and continue to be a deadly and destabilising influence in the region to the immediate north of Australia.