



Conflict Among Terrorist Groups in South-East Asia A Case Study of Jemaah Islamiyah and ISIS

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Over the last two decades, the security landscape in South-East Asia has attracted significant global interest, particularly with regard to terrorist groups. Following the first wave of violent terrorist attacks by terrorist groups calling themselves «the Islamic Group» (Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)), dozens of terrorists were apprehended. This extremist group thrived in the southern Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Indonesian Mujahideen Council, the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) in Thailand (also known as the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement), and the Abu Sayyaf group and al-Qaeda in the Philippines were all part of the group's networks.

ISIS in Asia

In the first decade of the new millennium, ISIS carried out a series of major attacks, including the Bali bombings in 2002 and the concurrent bombings of the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta in 2009. Since then, no major attacks have occurred. ISIS, on the other hand, triggered a new wave of violent terrorist events in the summer of 2014, when the perished Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in June 28. The declaration quickly spread beyond the MENA region, prompting extremist groups and individuals all over the world to respond .

By the end of 2014, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, JI's spiritual leader and co-founder in Indonesia, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. By September, Katibah Nusantara (also known as Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit) had become a familiar name among South-East Asian extremists. Terrorist ISIS was associated with several members of Filipino groups, primarily Abu Sayyaf group's leader Isnilon Hapilon, who was designated by the US as a terrorist. ISIS produced a lot of propaganda footage featuring its fighters coming from Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Dozens of

ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks there have made headlines, prominently the Marawi siege in May 2017.

Inevitable Dispute

Members of the so-called Jemaah Islamiyah and ISIS hold similar ideologies and commit terrorist acts against both Muslims and non-Muslims. However, these commonalities did not prevent disputes and conflicts from occurring for a variety of reasons, including:

1) Lack of Trust

This is a major source of prolonged conflict between the two groups. JI justifies this lack of trust by citing ISIS' unprecedented brutality against civilians and others, claiming that their crimes do nothing to improve the world's perception of jihad, a world which is rather repulsed by jihad and all jihadist movements. According to some researchers, many JI members believe that ISIS is the West's extended arm that seeks to misrepresent jihadist practices, prompting all parties to join the fight against it. Furthermore, al-Qaeda's perished leader Ayman al-Zawahiri denied any affiliation to ISIS. Given the strong ties between al-Qaeda and JI, the latter took an aggressive stance against the former.

2) Different Objectives

JI Singaporean members were arrested for the first time in 2001 by local authorities. The investigation concluded that JI's main goal was to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state, or a «Muslim Archipelago» comprised of Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, and Mindanao (Southern Philippines). The «General Guide for the Struggle of Jemaah Islamiyah» (PUPJI), JI's charter and operating manual, outlines its jihadist agendas in detail, focusing on operations that should facilitate the establishment of an Islamic state, including the Malay Archipelago. JI is still working towards this goal. It believes that the fame gained by ISIS supporters and affiliated groups in the region can only help the local authority fight violent extremism.

ISIS, on the other hand, has never recognized the established concept of a nation state or state borders. This was evident in its motto «Remaining and Expanding,» which explains ISIS's expansion beyond the Levant to Khorasan Province, as well as the Central Africa Province and the West Africa Province. In South-East Asia, however, pro-

ISIS armed factions in the Southern Philippines are attempting to exhaust national security forces in ongoing armed clashes .

Another group, Ansar Khalifa Philippines, is also known for its clashes with Philippine government security forces in 2017. It committed brutal executions identical to those carried out by ISIS and, based on reports, it took part in the Marawi siege in 2017. In Indonesia, it was observed that Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), allied with ISIS, was actively plotting terrorist attacks and carried out some of them. Last year, ISIS posted a 36-minute audio message calling upon Muslims in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and the rest of East Asia to join them. The possibility that ISIS's returning, battle-hardened foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) may further its ambitions of global expansion in their home countries heightens the threat posed by the group's territorial expansion in the area.

3) Different Preparations

The differences between JI and ISIS can be identified by studying their members' portfolios. JI included war veterans, who had been trained militarily and physically for months or even years and were prepared ideologically and educationally in Afghanistan or Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan War. Each member was committed to attend a regular family meeting headed by JI's "operational chief", where they receive ideological, pedagogical, and practical guidance. JI members neither claim their affiliation to another jihadist struggle nor celebrate it. Due to this strict intellectual education, they absorbed the concept of the Greatest Jihad according to JI's perspective and interpretation, which entails eradicating the enemies of Islam and establishing an Islamic state governed by Islamic Sharia.

Conversely, pro-ISIS individuals and groups lack real-life recognition since they are mostly young people who often chose to take the fastest shortcuts to attain status or the title of "jihadist advocate". In addition, ISIS enhances its image among its supporters on social media through speeches and statements .

JI veterans believe that ISIS's young supporters got involved in the "so-called" jihadist cause without proper preparation. They received recognition only on social media rather than bloodshed on the battlefield. They are merely figures on social media rather than actual jihadists .

4) Different Jihadist Vision

There has always been a JI faction that prioritizes advocacy, education, and rebuilding human and economic resources over armed jihad. Nonetheless, a smaller, more powerful group was determined to use violence to precipitate the establishment of an Islamic state, and perpetrated terrorist attacks. Since 2001, East Asian governments have prosecuted JI members, crippled its networks, and violently dismantled its camps. To date, Indonesian security forces have consistently maintained their confrontation-and-arrest approach.

In 2021, JI's Emir, Para Wijayanto, acknowledged that JI had been facing major challenges since the last terrorist attack, the Bali bombings, against which Indonesian security forces retaliated. This prompted JI to develop a new standard operating system known as 'TASTOS', Total Amniah Sistem dan Total Solution (total security system and total solution), to promote flexibility among members by following specific methods to secure confidentiality and evade arrest. Under Wijayanto's leadership, JI recruited and trained Indonesian fighters on the use of arms and installation of bombs in twelve training sites in Indonesia, and collected funds for fighters coming from Syria to fight for al-Nusra Front against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces. Thus, JI was involved in inciting violence abroad.

This demonstrates how JI tends to adopt the approach of "advocacy before jihad"; i.e., it is unlikely to launch a violent attack in the near future. Such a development drove some JI members to lose their patience and feel dissatisfied; consequently, they decided to ally with the pro-violence faction of the group. Ultimately, a small number defected to pro-ISIS groups.

Yet, pro-ISIS militants seek to spread terror in South-East Asia, and Southern Philippines remains their battlefield against state forces. However, the Marawi siege, also known as the 2017 Battle of Marawi, was the most prominent armed conflict in which militants allying with ISIS in that region were involved. ISIS-affiliated Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) is believed to have been responsible for the latest suicide bombing that targeted a police station in West Java, Indonesia, as well as Makassar Cathedral bombing in 2021. Malaysia also experienced security breaches by ISIS in June 2016, when ISIS claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack on a pub in Selangor, using explosives.

5) Different Political Vision

The Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) revealed that despite the arrest of dozens of civilian personnel, police officers, and military officers affiliated with JI since 2021, terrorist JI infiltrated religious and civil institutes all over the country to spread its deviant beliefs and extremist ideology. JI also stealthily infiltrated Indonesian politics and was only discovered by the end of 2021 after the arrest of Farid Ahmad Okbah, a member of the group's advisory council and president of the Indonesian People's Da'wah Party (PDRI) (Indonesian: Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia) in early 2021 .

The Indonesian court documents on some convicted JI leaders revealed that JI had created a political entity known as "political empowerment" in 1916 as a strategy to evoke the sympathy and gain the trust of Indonesian Muslims after winning their hearts and minds .

Some researchers believe that entering politics is a sign that a given terrorist movement is coming to an end. Nonetheless, some suggest that JI has temporarily postponed its operations until it gains enough popular support. Despite banning JI members from participating in elections and voting, the idea of a political union emerged in 2015. JI's statement encouraged Muslims to vote for a certain Parliament candidate in the 2019 elections, one who was supposed to serve their interests .

This undoubtedly reveals how JI is willing to forsake some key principles, such as rejecting democracy and participating in politics, as long as this would serve its interests and ensure its survival.

ISIS, on the other hand, showed no signs of willingness to get involved in politics. This demonstrates that the caliphate is the only legitimate form of Islamic rule that cannot be associated with government members who accuse ISIS of blasphemy and regard it as their arch enemy. ISIS refused to establish ties or communicate with non-Islamic entities in August 2022. To conclude, we assert that the ideologies promoted by JI and ISIS may seem similar. However, they do not necessarily produce coherent viewpoints, common goals, or unified operating methods. Those who adopt a peaceful, temporary, and covert political approach shall give serious consideration to siding with JI. ISIS would make a perfect choice for those seeking forced, rapid change through violence and terrorism.