

Islamic Extremism and Terrorism in Indonesia

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Background

General (Retd) Ryamizard Ryacudu, Indonesian Minister of Defense, Indonesia, while speaking at the IISS Shangri-La conference on June 4, 2016, stated that extremism and terrorism pose one of the biggest challenges to internal security in Indonesia. He referred in particular to the rise of ISIS in the Indonesian terrorism landscape and urged all countries in the world to jointly carry out military operations to destroy its logistics infrastructure and to stop financing to ISIS units¹.

As is well known, Indonesia has had a long history of religious extremism, starting from the days of its freedom struggle against the Netherlands during the period 1945 to 1949. During the 1950s and early 1960s an organization called *Darul Islam* condemned the Indonesian state as an apostate and pledged to establish an "Islamic state" through a series of armed rebellions against it. However, with the passage of time, the movement subsided, and was split into several groups - the *Laskar Jihad*, which carried out an anti-Christian campaign in Indonesia, the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, which executed the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, the 2003 JW Marriot bombing, the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing and the 2009 JW Marriot and Ritz Carlton Hotel bombings amongst others¹. Indonesian jihadists of the Cold War days did not just function within the borders of their home country; many even went as *mujahideen* to Afghanistan (after the Soviet invasion) and received sophisticated training in carrying out armed attacks.

However, a coordinated attack on January 14, 2016 by four Indonesian militants (owing allegiance to the Islamic State and calling themselves *junud khilafah* or soldiers of the caliphate) in the Thamrin area of Jakarta, caused fresh alarm in the Indonesian establishment about the ISIS terrorists groups' rising presence in the archipelago. It has been observed that since the Islamic State (IS) proclaimed itself to be working for a worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014, the group and its ideology (of applying Islamic law in entirety and in its purest form) has been rapidly gaining ground among Islamic extremists in Indonesia.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
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President Joko Widodo (third from left) accompanied by a number of ministers and Indonesian security officials reviewing the location of terrorist acts in the area of Sarinah, MH Thamrin Boulevard, Jakarta, on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Source: Antara News Agency

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population of more than 250 million people who, the Indonesian security agencies fear, are at a high risk of getting radicalized by the ISIS ideology. A survey conducted in December 2015 indicated that 96% of Indonesians are strongly opposed to the ISIS ideology³. This indicates that the majority of the Indonesian population despise such radical thinking as represented by the ISIS, however, a tiny minority may still fall prey to its sinister designs⁴.

As per recent records released by the Indonesia's National Anti-Terrorism Agency (BNPT⁵), more than 500 Indonesians have left the country to join the ISIS⁶. At the same time, research shows an increasing number of foreign terrorists entering Indonesia from nearby areas and taking refuge in Poso in central Sulawesi, a suspected ISIS training ground.

So, on one hand, *Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyyah*, or Malay Archipelago unit for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, under the leadership of former Jemaah Islamiyah leader Bahrum Syah (leading the sub-division in Aleppo) and Salim Mubarak Attamimi aka Abu Jandal (leading the group in Homs), is evolving as an important arm of ISIS, waging war in Syria and intensifying its recruitment drive for fighters and supporters through online videos and publications in the Malay language. On the other hand, other Indonesian extremists like Muhammad Bahrun Naim Anggih Tamtomo and Abu Aisyah al-Indunisy Hafidzullah, based in Syria, have been actively facilitating the operations of ISIS in Indonesia.⁷

Shifting Structure of the Terrorist Organizations

Scholars observe that Indonesia is witnessing the evolution of a new, ISIS-inspired coalition of terrorist bodies with both external and internal participation. Within Indonesia, they highlight the presence of a possible alliance of a loose network of ISIS operatives - organized in cellular clusters, receiving instructions from its headquarters in Syria, through Syria-based

Indonesian operatives like Bahrun Naim, who aspire to expand IS Central's goal for a wilayat (province) in Southeast Asia.⁸ Operating in cellular clusters around the Sulu Sea, this coalition involves insurgent groups from the Southern Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Uighurs from China and even from the Middle East⁹. The Jakarta attacks of 2016, the bombing of the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok in August, 2015, and the spate of arrests in August and December 2015, all reveal existence of such small networks of both external, internal operatives in Indonesia.¹⁰

Unlike the hierarchical nature of the groups that had so far dominated the Indonesian terrorism landscape in the past, such as the Al Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the present diffused arrangement facilitates a balance between control and influence of the central organization and tactical autonomy of the operational cells¹¹. The organizational strategy employed by the network is that the conduit (believed to be Bahrun Naim in this case) identifies selected individuals of competence, and builds operational cells around them. This enables the creation of the trend of self-radicalized individuals, lone wolves and sleeper cells, who are in a better tactical position to remain camouflaged within society.

The ambition of these radicalized operatives is not just restricted to damaging physical attacks on lives and property, but includes mass ideological propaganda attacks, with the aim of influencing the way Indonesians think and form public opinions. The key concern of the Indonesian Ministry of Defense is how to overcome this ideological warfare, replete with violence, enmity, incitement and invitation to join these terrorist groups, which they feel, is ultimately directed at the destruction of the country's unity and integrity¹².

Why is Terrorism Gaining Ground in Indonesia?

The increase in the number of Indonesian citizens committing themselves to the ISIS cause can be attributed to many reasons. First, the allure of the extensive ISIS propaganda material available freely on the internet. The ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, is easily accessible to a wider audience through internet. Secondly, the ISIS operators have been successfully using local languages and narrated propaganda material to target South East Asian audiences¹³. However, the biggest reason is the social and political milieu existing in Indonesia and its neighborhood, particularly Malaysia, which is abetting extreme sentiments among common masses.

For instance, in Malaysia, the long-ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) government has utilized Islamist politics to garner support and to counter the political threat from the rival Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Scholars argue that this 'Islamisation race' between UMNO and PAS, has led to a broader country-wide Islamisation process conducive to the emergence and propagation of a radical fringe in Malaysia¹⁴.

On the other hand, since Indonesia is a democratic country, some Islamist groups such as the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur/MIT) based in Poso, Central Sulawesi and Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) have misused the freedoms under its democratic set-up to 'peacefully' propagate a more radical interpretation of Islam amongst Indonesian Muslims for more than a decade now. As a result, some Indonesians are believed to be embracing the Islamist groups' ideology without joining the organizations formally¹⁵.

In such a socio-political scenario, the conflict in Syria is fast capturing the imagination of Indonesian extremists in a way no foreign war has before. A sizable number within the socio-economically disadvantaged Sunni Muslim community in the archipelago are increasingly finding solace in the prospect of restoring an Islamic caliphate and giving in to the Islamic predictions that "the final battle at the end of time will take place in Sham, the region sometimes called Greater Syria or the Levant, encompassing Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel."

Comparatively Lower Rate of Participation

While one view is that Islamic radicalization is on the rise in the archipelago, another view is that in comparison to other countries the numbers of radicalized jihadists in Indonesia is relatively less. In France around 1,700 people have travelled to Syria, in Russia the number has crossed the 2,400 mark and in the case of Tunisia it is a staggering 6,000. However, for Indonesia the number is still a mere 500. That is if in France, 18 people per million Muslim citizens are believed to be fighting in Syria and Iraq, and in Tunisia, 280, in Indonesia, it's just over one person per million¹⁶.

One factor behind the comparatively ‘muted’ response to ISIS in Indonesia is the existence of moderate yet hugely popular Islamic bodies like the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah or Brotherhood Forum of the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars that publicly reject ISIS’s ideology. Directly challenging the idea of ISIS, which wants Islam to be uniform, these organizations preach an Islam of inclusion and tolerance, thereby playing an important role in minimizing ISIS’s appeal to the Indonesians. In fact, the ISIS did not receive the warmest of welcomes even from Indonesia’s jihadist communities. Rather the likes of Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia has declared ISIS a “deviant” movement.¹⁷

Also, scholars note that the countries that form the key source of foreign fighters for Syria and Iraq, are either politically repressive (Saudi Arabia, 2,500 fighters), politically unstable (Tunisia, 6,000 fighters) or discriminatory towards a Muslim minority (Russia, 2,400 fighters), or a combination of all the above¹⁸. But Indonesia is a country which doesn’t have a repressive government, neither is it under occupation nor politically unstable. It also does not have significant social unrest or conflict¹⁹, and the Muslims in Indonesia are not a persecuted minority. Considering all of these factors, there is distinctly a lack of a significant local driver for radicalization to take deep roots in Indonesia’s young democracy. In fact, scholars argue that Indonesia’s democracy and provision for freedom of expression creates enough space where the radical communities can place their demands (of Islamic law or an Islamic state) without resorting to violent means. While acknowledging that certain groups have taken advantage of that democratic space to further their agenda, scholars opine that Indonesian democracy “does keep the numbers of violent extremists to a manageable level”²⁰.



Troops belonging to Densus 88, a special forces unit dedicated to anti terrorist operations in Indonesia. Source: Antara News Agency

Jakarta’s Response

After the Bali bombing of 2002, Indonesia moved to strengthen the capacity of its law enforcement forces to deal with terrorist groups. A Counterterrorism squad – The Special Detachment 88 was set up in June 2003, funded and equipped by the United

States and Australia. The unit has worked with considerable success against Jihadi terrorist cells linked to the JI in Indonesia. Additionally, the Jakarta Law Enforcement Center (JCLEC) was set up in 2004 with Australian assistance, which functions as a regional resource on counterterrorism in Southeast Asia.

Although much has been done to strengthen the country's legal framework to overcome the terrorism threat since 2002, post-the January 2016 Jakarta attack, there has emerged a major consensus among Indonesians that the existing laws are weak and needed strengthening. Although the Indonesian police did a commendable job in arresting and sentencing more than 1200 terrorists in the past 12 years, with more than 100 of them being killed in counter-terrorist operations²¹, Indonesians argue that several pre-emptive and preventive measures are needed to strengthen the capacity to deal with the terrorism crisis.

Scholars observe that Indonesia took a three-pronged approach to counter terrorist threats to the nation. Within days of the Jakarta attack, the government of President Jokowi took important steps to reform the 2003 anti-terror law by giving it effective preventive powers. Secondly, closer coordination has been established between three domestic intelligence bodies²² and a fourth body– National Cyber Agency²³– has been created. Thirdly, Indonesia is forging closer cooperation and coordination with regional intelligence agencies, it has secured the support of the US, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines, to collaborate on terrorism issues.²⁴

In addition to these measures, Jokowi has added a personalized touch to Indonesia's counter-terrorism measures. He is advocating combining military might with a "soft approach" to Islamic extremism that leverages religious and cultural forces²⁵. This involves working with moderate Islamic organizations in Indonesia on educational and public-awareness campaigns about Islam and the ways it can be perverted, and addressing socioeconomic sources of terrorism. Jokowi has been quoted saying that "to deal with radicalism and extremism, we need to deal with economic inequality... I will look to balance the prevention side with the law-enforcement side of counterterrorism. We have more than 20 years' experience with this problem". Therefore, Jokowi has been proposing the idea of contextualizing the terrorism threat alongside various other threats facing the country and also striking a balance between societal resilience and military resolve, as a solution to the challenges posed by extremism and terrorism²⁶.

Collaboration with India on Terrorism

India and Indonesia established a Strategic Partnership in 2005, which received a big push during the visit of President Yudhoyono of Indonesia to India in January 2011, when both sides adopted a Joint Statement for defining the 'Vision for the India-Indonesia New Strategic Partnership over the Coming Decade'²⁷. In October 2013, during the visit of the Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh to Indonesia, the ties between both countries were further strengthened when both sides adopted a 'Five-Pronged Initiative'²⁸ for strengthening the Strategic Partnership²⁹.

In addition to issues like maritime security, economic development, food security, the topic of terrorism has found consistent mention in the joint communiqués between India and Indonesia over the past few years. For instance, in 2011 and again in 2013, India's then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Indonesia's former president Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono unequivocally condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and termed all terrorist activities as unjustifiable. Recognizing the common threats to national security from transnational crimes, including international terrorism, they resolved "to significantly enhance bilateral cooperation in combating terrorism....to commit their countries in improving sharing of intelligence, the development of more effective counter terrorism policies, enhancing liaison between law enforcement agencies, providing assistance in the areas of border and immigration control to stem the flow of terrorism related material, money and people and specific measures against transnational crimes, including international terrorism through the already existing mechanism between Indonesia and India"³⁰. In November 2015, during the visit of Vice President Hamid Ansari to Indonesia the two sides reiterated the commitment of both countries to cooperate in combatting terrorism. The existing mechanism for bilateral cooperation in this area is the Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism which has met four times since 2005, with the fifth round scheduled to be held in India at a mutually convenient date³¹.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after taking office in 2014, has been particularly vocal about issue of terrorism. From several international platforms, be it the address to the Joint Session of the U.S. Congress, the Nuclear Security Summit or during his official visits to Brussels, Dubai and Nairobi, PM Modi has urged the global community to rise above the “anti-humanity” menace of terrorism. Taking into account the recent spate of terror attacks across the globe, India, under PM Modi, has also revived its decade old proposal for the adoption of Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism at the UN General Assembly¹. He has also expressed the hope to collaborate with ASEAN countries on the issue of terrorism. “Terrorism has emerged as a major global challenge that affects us all... [we have] excellent bilateral cooperation with ASEAN members...we should see how we can enhance our cooperation at the regional and international level, including through support for adoption of Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism,” PM Modi said in his opening remarks at the ASEAN-India Summit, 2015¹. It is in this context, more effective collaboration between India and Indonesia on the issues of terrorism and extremism is expected in the future.

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