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The Lone Wolf Threat Posed by Former JI Members

By Irfan Idris and Kusumasari Ayuningtyas

SYNOPSIS

The ideological influence of Jemaah Islamiyah continues to be a threat to security even after its disbandment in June 2024. Some of its former members may align with other extremist groups, while others may seek to operate as lone-wolf terrorists. The possibility of JI's former members transitioning into lone wolf actors stems from the enduring power of its ideology and indoctrination process.

COMMENTARY

While the disbandment of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) on June 30, 2024, marked a significant milestone, its intensive indoctrination process has left a legacy. Recruitment into JI was methodical, beginning with religious gatherings in public before narrowing down to smaller, select groups. The process was a rigorous 3-4 year programme ending with the recruits pledging allegiance to the group.

Although these activities largely ceased following the arrest of JI leader Para Wijayanto in 2019, the organisation's ideological reach remains extensive. According to the Counterterrorism Special Detachment (Densus 88), approximately 8,000 individuals across Indonesia were indoctrinated through its programmes.

The disbandment declaration by the 16 leaders of JI seemingly eliminated the group and its organisational structure, but not its influence. Beyond the deeply ingrained principle of *sami'na wa atho'na* (we hear, and we obey) among its members, questions remain about the long-term impact of JI despite its disbandment.

Years of indoctrination and ideological conditioning have imbued JI members with a deep loyalty that cannot be undone by declarations. Therefore, the focus must shift toward countering the narratives that sustain these ideologies and fostering community resilience.

As for JI's former members, some may align with other extremist groups, while others may operate as lone wolves.

The Rise of Lone Wolves

Former JI members may see the lone wolf path as an alternative to organised violence, offering a means to continue their ideological struggle. However, lone wolves embody one of the most insidious and unpredictable threats in modern terrorism. Acting independently outside traditional networks, these individuals evade the surveillance and intelligence measures designed to monitor groups.

The actions of lone wolves are unencumbered by the need for coordination, allowing them to plan and execute attacks swiftly with minimal warning. Unlike organised cells, they do not require sophisticated resources. An ordinary knife, a vehicle, or a rudimentary explosive device can serve as their tools of destruction. Their acts of violence are often sudden, unanticipated, and executed in public spaces, instilling fear and a pervasive sense of vulnerability in communities.

In Indonesia, lone wolf attacks have primarily been linked to groups affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rather than JI. ISIS' decentralised model and emphasis on individual jihad make the terrorist group a more compelling choice for lone wolves to identify with.

For instance, the bombing of the police headquarters in Medan, North Sumatra, on November 13, 2019, and the attack on a cathedral in Makassar, South Sulawesi, on March 28, 2021, were carried out by individuals influenced by ISIS propaganda. Likewise, the attack on the police station in Ulu Tiram, Malaysia, on May 17, 2024, by a lone wolf initially suspected as a JI member but later confirmed to be a terrorist inspired by ISIS.

JI's intensive indoctrination process, with its emphasis on loyalty and obedience, planted extremism with deep roots among its followers. The fact that a centralised body no longer exists may also spark them to adopt an individual approach. These lone wolves often view themselves as torchbearers of a larger cause, motivated by a sense of duty to uphold the group's ideology despite its formal dissolution.

Counterterrorism Strategies

The disbandment of a large organisation like JI represented a tactical victory but also signalled the need for a strategic pivot in counterterrorism efforts. Addressing the lone wolf threat requires a holistic strategy, encompassing preventive measures from "upstream to downstream". Indonesia's 2018 Law No. 5 on Combating Terrorism underscores the importance of preparedness, counter-radicalisation, and de-radicalisation. To deal with the lone wolf threat, counter-radicalisation emerges as a critical tool to prevent individuals from being drawn to extremist ideologies.

Counter-radicalisation involves creating robust counter-narratives, counter-ideologies, and counter-propaganda. These efforts must dominate digital platforms to challenge the extremist content that influences lone wolves. Additionally, reformed terrorists can play an essential role in educating and warning communities about the dangers of

radicalisation. For instance, a former militant who once advocated violence but now promotes peace can serve as a compelling counterexample. By sharing their journeys, they humanise the consequences of extremism while offering a path toward redemption and reintegration.

Digital platforms play a dual role in the lone wolf phenomenon. On the one hand, they provide fertile ground for self-radicalisation as lone wolves often consume extremist content, engage in echo chambers, and adopt ideologies that validate their actions. On the other hand, these platforms can be harnessed to disseminate counter-narratives and highlight positive interventions that discourage lone-wolf actions.

Social media companies and governments must collaborate to regulate extremist content while promoting constructive narratives. Algorithms prioritising sensationalism can be recalibrated to highlight stories of hope, resilience, and community impact. Educational campaigns targeting digital literacy can equip users with the tools to critically evaluate online content and resist radicalisation.

Counter-narratives are not merely theoretical; they require practical implementation. One effective approach is leveraging the stories of former extremists who have turned away from violence. These individuals offer powerful testimonies that can deter potential lone wolves by exposing the false promises of extremist ideologies.

The fight against lone-wolf terrorism demands collaboration across sectors. Governments, civil society organisations, religious institutions, and tech companies must work together to address the root causes of radicalisation. This includes addressing social isolation, economic disparities, and the erosion of trust in institutions, factors that often drive individuals toward extremism.

Community engagement programmes can foster a sense of belonging and purpose, countering the alienation that fuels radicalisation. Religious leaders can play a pivotal role in debunking extremist interpretations of faith, offering alternative narratives grounded in compassion and inclusivity.

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