

PERSPECTIVE

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CURRENT EVENTS

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The Jakarta Terror Attack and its Implications for Indonesian and Regional Security

*By Dirk Tomsa**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The terror attack in Jakarta on 14 January 2016, which killed eight people including the four attackers, transformed the terror threat in Indonesia. Not only was it the first major terror attack in Jakarta since 2009, it was also the first for which ISIS claimed responsibility and the first to involve armed gunmen shooting randomly at civilians.
- The attack demonstrated that ISIS supporters in Indonesia are determined to put the country back on the map of global terrorism, but the relatively low death toll also exposed the limited capabilities of the existing ISIS network in Indonesia.
- The risk of future attacks is high, stemming from three sources in particular: home-grown ISIS supporters keen to show that they can ‘do better’ than the January attackers; Indonesians fighting for ISIS in Syria who may instruct their followers at home to launch an attack; and returnees and deportees who slip back into terrorist networks upon arrival in Indonesia.
- Indonesia’s counterterrorism track record is good, but new measures are needed to tackle the changing dynamics of ISIS support in the country. New anti-terror legislation, reforms to the prison system and innovative de-radicalization programmes, especially for deportees, should be strongly prioritized.
- Regionally, intelligence and police cooperation should be stepped up further to better monitor cross-border movements of suspected terrorists.

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INTRODUCTION

After years of relative calm, Islamist terror returned to Jakarta on 14 January 2016 when four civilians and four terrorists were killed in a brazen attack targeting a police post and a Starbucks café near the Sarinah shopping centre in the heart of the city. Responsibility for the attack was quickly claimed by ISIS. It now seems clear though that it was planned and coordinated in Indonesia, by a group called Partisans of the Caliphate (*Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah*, JAK). The emergence of local ISIS supporters as perpetrators of a terror attack, along with the very nature of the attack, which for the first time in Indonesia included a combination of suicide bombers and gunmen shooting indiscriminately at civilians, signifies both an escalation and a transformation of the terror threat in Southeast Asia.

This paper assesses the changing nature of the security threat posed by ISIS supporters in Indonesia and analyses the implications of the January attack for Indonesia's counter-terrorism strategies. It concludes with a brief outlook for regional security in Southeast Asia in general. The paper also argues that even though the overall number of ISIS supporters in Indonesia and other countries in the region is and looks set to remain small, the threat of terrorism is likely to increase in the near future. Despite a string of arrests both before and after the attacks, Indonesian ISIS supporters seem determined to put the country back on the map of global terrorism. The relatively low number of casualties in the January attack can be expected to serve as extra motivation for those who remain at large to try and prove that they can cause more significant damage than the four jihadists who staged the attack in front of Sarinah. To deal with the new threat, the Indonesian government needs to boost its counterterrorism capacities, but it should also tackle urgently needed reforms to its prison system and devise new de-radicalization programmes for those entwined in ISIS support networks. Regionally, intelligence and police cooperation should be stepped up again to better monitor cross-border movements of suspected terrorists.

THE INDONESIAN ISIS NETWORK

The January attack received worldwide attention from global leaders and the media, but beyond the public condemnation and condolences, opinions about the future implications of the attack seem to be divided. On the one hand, there are those who play down the attacks, describing them as a sign of ISIS' weakness rather than its extended reach into Southeast Asia. Menchik, for example, argues that due to Indonesia's robust democratic foundations, its consistent economic growth and the effectiveness of its security apparatus, the dominant trend among Indonesian Islamists is towards moderation, not radicalism.¹ Others, however, are a bit more concerned. For Sidney Jones of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), for example, Indonesia's democratic achievements and the successful work of its anti-terror unit Detachment 88 may have worked well to contain *Jamaah Islamiyah* (JI) in the last few years, but the emergence of ISIS has created not only new incentives for

¹ Jeremy Menchik, 'Islamic State lessons from Indonesia', *USA Today*, 20 January 2016, available at <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/01/20/islamic-state-lessons-jakarta-indonesia-column/79012170/>>.

radicalization but also new opportunities for radicals to ‘get military training, combat experience, ideological indoctrination and international contacts.’²

Today, the ISIS support network in Indonesia consists of a number of loosely organized groups such as the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), the Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (MIB), Abu Bakar Ba’asyir’s Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) as well as followers of the detained radical cleric Aman Abdurrahman. Efforts to unite these and other smaller extremist networks under one umbrella organization culminated in the formation of the Partisans of the Caliphate in November 2015, though it should be noted that not all ISIS supporters in Indonesia have joined this new grouping.³ Given the fluidity of organizational structures and frequent realignments in the wider ISIS support scene, it remains difficult to ascertain exactly how large the overall contingent of members, supporters and sympathizers of ISIS in Indonesia really is.

A good indication of the general public’s attitude towards ISIS was provided by a public opinion survey conducted in December 2015 which found that only 0.3% of respondents supported the establishment of ISIS in Indonesia and only 0.8% agreed with the objectives of ISIS in general.⁴ The Indonesian government, meanwhile, puts the number of ISIS supporters in Indonesia at around 1,000, including about 50 returnees from the ISIS heartland in Syria and about 200 men, women and children who tried but failed to enter Syria from Turkey or other neighbouring countries. If establishing the size of ISIS’ local support base is difficult, it is even more challenging to determine how many Indonesians are currently fighting for ISIS in Syria. Estimates range from about 250 up to 700.⁵ Despite the difficulties of getting accurate figures, it is clear that the overall numbers of both Indonesians in Syria and ISIS supporters in Indonesia are small in relation to Indonesia’s overall population of around 250 million. It is therefore important not to overstate the threat posed by ISIS. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that, as Jones put it, ‘we could be in for a period of more intensive terrorist activity’⁶.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

First, the attack in front of the Sarinah department store may have been the first major one carried out on Indonesian soil since 2009, but it was not supposed to be the first. Several

² Sidney Jones, ‘Battling ISIS in Indonesia’, *New York Times*, 18 January 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/battling-isis-in-indonesia.html?_r=0>.

³ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), *Disunity among Indonesian ISIS supporters and the risk of more violence*, IPAC Report No. 25, 1 February 2016.

⁴ ‘Survei SMRC: 95,3 persen responden tolak ISIS ada di Indonesia’, *Kompas*, 22 January 2016, available at <<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/01/22/12193721/Survei.SMRC.95.3.Persen.Responden.Tolak.ISIS.Ada.di.Indonesia>>.

⁵ The Soufan Group, *Foreign fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015, p. 18; Sidney Jones, *Understanding the ISIS threat in Southeast Asia*, Paper presented at the Regional Outlook Forum in Singapore, 12 January 2016, p. 2.

⁶ ‘Sidney Jones: Home-grown Terrorism and ISIS Linkages’, *Tempo*, 19 January 2016, available at <<http://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/01/19/241737499/Sidney-Jones-Home-Grown-Terrorism-and-ISIS-Linkages>>.

other bombings had been attempted or planned between 2010 and now, including, most recently, attacks on Shiite communities, Christian churches and security forces around Christmas and New Year's Eve 2015. Police foiled these plots, but as the number of ISIS-inspired attacks in other parts of the world increased in recent months, Indonesian terrorists apparently felt that they had to prove their mettle sooner rather than later, despite lacking extensive preparation and skills. These deficiencies, together with a swift and effective police response, in the end accounted for the relatively low death toll on 14 January. But for committed ISIS supporters, the low number of casualties and the public ridicule addressed at the terrorists in the aftermath of the attack is likely to motivate deadlier attacks in the near future.

Second, the attack adds a new dimension to what appears to be an emerging power struggle between various protagonists in Indonesia's pro-ISIS movement. Prior to the January attack, the two most influential Indonesian terrorists fighting in Syria were Bahrumisyah and Abu Jandal. In mid-2015, the two had fallen out over corruption allegations levelled at Bahrumisyah and both are now leading competing units of Indonesian fighters in Syria.⁷ Significantly, these two are yet to instigate attacks back in Indonesia. But now that home-grown terrorists inspired by Aman Abdurrahman have chosen to make their move, Bahrumisyah and Abu Jandal may feel compelled to try and match this deed. Indeed, Bahrumisyah reportedly asked one of his followers to stage another attack immediately after learning about the Sarinah attack.⁸ To complicate matters further, another Indonesian jihadist based in Syria, Bahrn Naim, who was in fact initially believed to be the mastermind of the January attack, also appears to harbour serious leadership ambitions.⁹ The rivalries between these men have the potential to trigger a dangerous spiral of violence in which ever deadlier attacks are planned for the purpose of underscoring individual leadership claims.¹⁰

A third source of concern is the looming spectre of an emerging network of battle-hardened returnees who can coordinate new attacks on Indonesian soil, either with or without formal instructions from ISIS to do so. Up to now, neither Southeast Asia in general nor Indonesia in particular appears to be an outreach priority for ISIS leaders and very few Indonesians who have gone to Syria have actually returned. Indeed, many of those who make the journey 'are likely to choose to live there permanently.'¹¹ But those who do return, especially those who have been involved in direct combat, may want to prove to the ISIS leadership that Indonesia does deserve more attention. If they manage to link up with existing support networks in Indonesia, home-grown terrorists could at last receive the kind of combat training and bomb-building skills they currently lack. Moreover, returning militants also pose a security risk because they can complement ISIS' online propaganda with first-hand accounts from life in the caliphate, thereby spreading and strengthening the ideological foundations of ISIS in Indonesia.

⁷ IPAC, *Disunity among Indonesian ISIS supporters*, p. 2-3.

⁸ Police prevented this attack by arresting Bahrumisyah's confidant Hendro Fernando on 15 January. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ '8 things to know about Muhammad Bahrn Naim, alleged mastermind of Jakarta attack', *The Straits Times*, 15 January 2016.

¹⁰ IPAC, *Disunity among Indonesian ISIS supporters*.

¹¹ Navhat Nuraniyah, 'More than a fanclub', *Inside Indonesia*, 122, October-December 2015, available at <www.insideindonesia.org/more-than-a-fanclub>.

THE NEED FOR NEW COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES

That said, not all returnees are intent on taking their jihad to Indonesia. Some, in fact, are disillusioned by their experience and may be more interested in reintegration into local communities than alignment with clandestine terror networks.¹² The government should attempt to utilize the life stories of these returnees to craft narratives powerful enough to counteract the guts-and-glory propaganda spread by ISIS. Providing support for these people is therefore just as crucial as assisting the many women and children deported back to Indonesia after failing to enter Syria from Turkey or other neighbouring countries. Since many of these deportees face dire financial circumstances after arriving back in Indonesia, the government needs to monitor their movements and actively support their resettlement in order to prevent these deportees drifting back into their old radical networks. In the words of Sidney Jones, ‘if there ever was a target population for a deradicalization program, this is it.’¹³

While new initiatives are necessary to deal with returnees and deportees, there is an equally pressing need to overhaul existing de-radicalization programmes for home-based extremists, especially those who are currently or have recently spent time in jail for terrorism-related offences. Though Indonesia has run a range of disengagement programmes for convicted extremists in the past, these initiatives have had only limited success in turning violent jihadists away from their radical ideas and networks. Post-release programmes targeted at providing economic aid and at social reintegration, for example, are often inconsistent, ad hoc and poorly managed,¹⁴ whilst programmes offered to extremists inside correction facilities are often ineffective because of the broader pathologies of Indonesia’s prison system such as rampant corruption, overcrowding, lack of properly trained staff and inadequate information management.

Although these problems have been well-documented for years,¹⁵ they persist almost unmitigated, with dire consequences for the fight against terrorism. Left largely unsupervised, many detained jihadists tend to strengthen rather than weaken their resolve during their time in jail. Moreover, failure to segregate unrepentant extremists from other inmates has provided ample opportunities for terrorists to recruit new followers from among these other prisoners. While the quality of control and supervision differs between individual correction facilities, convicted terrorists are far too often allowed to move freely between different parts of high security prison complexes and to communicate freely both with other inmates as well as supporters outside the prison. The manifold deficiencies in prison management are aptly captured in the following statement by Ismail and Sim:

In the prisons where there are sizable numbers of terrorists serving jail time, they answer to no one except themselves, deciding on their own

¹² In April 2015, Ahmad Junaedi became the first returnee to speak openly about what he regarded as a disappointing experience in Syria. See ‘IS not worth joining: returnee’, *The Jakarta Post*, 1 April 2015.

¹³ Sidney Jones, ‘Battling ISIS in Indonesia’. *The New York Times*, 18 January 2016.

¹⁴ Julie Chernov Hwang, Rizal Panggabean and Ihsan Ali Fauzi, ‘The Disengagement of Jihadis in Poso, Indonesia’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 53, no. 4 (July/August 2013), pp. 775.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, “Deradicalisation” and Indonesian Prisons, Asia Report No. 142, 19 November 2007.

routines and complying with prison regulations and participating in so-called de-radicalization workshops only when it suits them. Prison staff, untrained and unprepared, are content to leave them be, for riots invite too much scrutiny, and terrorist inmates have instigated prison riots. Our interviews reveal that for Indonesian jihadists, a spell in prison, rather than being an intervention stage, is seen as a way station to further glory. Many leave prison not only unreformed, but also more influential in local jihadi circles.¹⁶

In light of such findings, it is imperative to not only revamp the prison system, but also to better monitor extremists' post-release activities and movements. More generally, the law enforcement apparatus will need enhanced legal tools to charge those who spread ISIS propaganda or support ISIS through other means. President Jokowi has pledged to amend existing anti-terror legislation – which has no provisions that would make it illegal to join or support ISIS. But drafting new laws always complicating rather than clarifying existing regulations. So far, the anti-terror unit Detachment 88 has proven to be highly effective, so new law enforcement efforts to combat the evolving ISIS threat should probably start by strengthening this experienced institution rather than granting new powers to other actors such as the National Intelligence Agency or the military.¹⁷

OUTLOOK FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

Indonesia has a good track record in fighting terrorism, but the January attack shows that the nature of the terror threat is changing. With the emergence of ISIS supporters as determined suicide bombers and gunmen, Indonesia can no longer rest on the laurels they received for their effective containment of Jemaah Islamiyah.¹⁸ For several months prior to the attacks, security experts had been warning about the spread of ISIS ideology in Indonesia,¹⁹ but they were also adamant that the risk should not be overstated as those most committed to launching attacks were said to lack the necessary skills to do so. The January attack certainly confirmed the assessment that Indonesia's home-grown terrorists are currently unable to emulate the kind of large-scale carnage ISIS supporters in Paris had caused in November 2015. But it also validated the growing concern that inexperience and incompetence no longer stop Indonesian ISIS supporters from at least trying to make a mark.

Though the number of casualties was low, the tragic loss of four innocent lives at the hands of Islamist terrorists must serve as a wake-up call for the Indonesian government to step up

¹⁶ Noor Huda Ismail and Susan Sim, 'From prison to carnage in Jakarta: A tale of two terrorist convicts, their mentor behind bars, and the fighter with ISIS', *Southeast Asia View*, Brookings Institution, 22 January 2016, available at <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2016/01/22-jakarta-shooting-terrorists-ismail-sim>>.

¹⁷ 'Sidney Jones: Home-grown Terrorism and ISIS Linkages'.

¹⁸ It should be noted in this context that there are indications that Jemaah Islamiyah has regrouped in recent years, but so far JI appears to continue its focus on radical proselytization rather than armed attacks.

¹⁹ Sidney Jones, 'No room for complacency as ISIS builds Jakarta network', *Lowy Interpreter*, 23 November 2015, available at <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/11/23/Indonesia-No-room-for-complacency-as-ISIS-builds-Jakarta-network.aspx>>.

their counterterrorism efforts. Among the various challenges that need to be tackled, the reform of the prison system stands out as the most pressing problem. For years now, prisons have been fertile grounds for jihadist recruitment and indoctrination. Without substantive changes to prison organization and management, the good work of Detachment 88 is practically turned on its head as soon as detained terrorists are convicted and transferred from the courtroom to their prison cells.

Improving counterterrorism measures is of course not just a challenge for Indonesia, but for the whole region. Links between militants from Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, are well-documented and although the majority of Southeast Asians fighting in Syria hails from Indonesia, there are also an estimated 100 Malaysians, 100 Filipinos and, according to the Soufan Group, even two Singaporeans and one Cambodian currently with ISIS.²⁰ Looking beyond the immediate neighbourhood, the presence of dozens of Chinese and Australian jihadists in Syria, many of whom travelled through Southeast Asia on their way to the Middle East, further emphasizes the regional dimension of the threat.

Deepening cooperation between intelligence, police and border patrols within ASEAN and its partners will therefore be vital in preventing ISIS supporters from establishing a more deeply interconnected network of regional groupings that can plan, coordinate and conduct attacks across the region. But beyond law enforcement and security cooperation, the biggest challenge may be to develop regional strategies that can counter ISIS' sophisticated online propaganda through a compelling counter-narrative on social media and other messaging networks. Malaysia's recent announcement to set up a Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communications Centre (RDC3) by May 2016 could be a step in that direction,²¹ but doubts remain as to whether Malaysia has the financial means and the political will to equip such a centre with the necessary material and human resources, not to mention the intellectual freedom to develop the kind of positive Islamic narrative needed to counteract ISIS.

²⁰ The Soufan Group, *Foreign fighters*, p. 7-9.

²¹ 'ASEAN anti-terror digital messaging centre to be launched in May: Malaysia DPM Ahmad Zahid, *The Straits Times*, 26 January 2016, available at <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/asean-anti-terror-digital-messaging-centre-to-be-launched-in-may-malaysia-dpm-ahmad>>.

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