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Indonesia's (Uneasy) Battle with Terrorism

Saman Ayesha Kidwai *

Abstract

The disbanding of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), responsible for the Bali bombings of 2002, is one of the most critical milestones in Indonesia's counterterrorism journey. It adds to Jakarta's accolades of preventing any terror activity over the last two years and moving from 28th to the 30th most affected country by terrorism as per the Global Terrorism Index Report (2025). Its success is owed to a collaborative effort across various civil society and state stakeholders. However, the fragile peace it has attained over the years faces several challenges ranging from the historical baggage of Islamist extremism, radicalisation via digital sphere, decentralised extremist cells and lone-wolves, proliferation of extremist narratives, and gaps within the financial systems and deradicalisation programme. By leveraging the ideas proposed by the post-organisational terrorism framework, this research article underlines how the Indonesian terror networks have become decentralised (lone wolves and micro cells) and reliant on digital radicalisation in the face of sustained counter-terror pressures by the state.

Keywords: Deradicalisation, Terrorism, Jammah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), Online radicalisation, Jemaah Islamiyah, ISIS, Recidivism.

Introduction

Indonesia, the largest Muslim democratic country globally, has been hailed as a critical case study of counterterrorism after successfully dismantling Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the deadliest terror group in the region responsible for the Bali Bombings (2002), last year. Its deradicalisation programme, the National Counter-terrorism Agency (BNPT), and Densus 88 (a counter-terrorism unit within the Indonesian police) have been accredited as key to acheiving such a feat. Even though Indonesia has not witnessed any such violent incidents for the past two years, the radicalisation and violent extremist undercurrents continue to persist. This is evidenced by the

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arrest of a member of Jammah Ansharut Daulah (JUD), an ISIS affiliate, as recent as May 2025 by Densus 88 (Detasemen Khusus 88, Indonesia's Elite counter-terrorism group, operating under Indonesian National Police formed in 2003 after Bali Bombing). Moreover, the internationalisation of pan-Islamist ideas and violent jihad, even among former detainees (putting the success of the deradicalisation programme in doubt), raises the question whether the extremist beliefs might re-ignite the violent militancy, albeit on a relatively lower scale.

This study explores why Indonesia remains entangled in an evolving fight against violent extremism despite its qualitative successes in neutralising terror and operational activities of ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates. Arguably, the continuous mutation of violent extremist networks into decentralised, lone wolves, and hybrid (at the intersection of terrorism and philanthropy work) structures, especially at the grassroots level, has brought to the fore the limits of counterterrorism campaigns. Within the post-organisational terrorism framework[1], it uses a qualitative approach through a case study analysis to deconstruct how terror outfits, despite organisational degradation and leadership decapitation, sustain their organisational legacy (in the absence of a central command-and-control structure). The study relies on open-source data, media reports, and expert commentaries, which collectively help connect the historical and contemporary contours of the security challenge posed by terrorism and radical belief systems, espoused by Darul Islam, JI, and ISIS, to the transformed nature of digital and decentralised violent extremism.

Contextualising the Indonesian Terror Landscape

Indonesia's terrorist landscape has undergone a significant transformation due to sustained counter-terrorism pressure. While major terrorist affiliates have suffered organisational defeat, the violent extremist ideologies they espoused have proven far more resilient. These ideas have increasingly found shelter under the guise of philanthropic networks and non-governmental organisations, reflecting a growing overlap between terrorism and some segments of civil society organisations. In addition, social media platforms (e.g., Telegram, TikTok, WhatsApp), as well as irregular "micro-cells" or "lone

wolves," as demonstrated by the 2018 Surabaya bombings, have played a role in sustaining and reinforcing violent extremist beliefs independent of the formal organisational structures. As such, a new understanding of terrorism needs to be developed in the form of a post-organisation terrorism framework that could accurately depict the continuous evolution of Indonesia's terrorism landscape in the absence of any recognised hierarchical terrorist organisations, which acknowledges the different dynamics of digital ecosystems and non-hierarchical networks that generate ongoing momentum for violent extremist beliefs.

Historical Roots of a Modern Threat: Indonesia's Fight Against Darul Islam, Afghan Jihad returnees, JI, and ISIS

Darul Islam & the Onset of Islamist Insurgency

Darul Islam is one of the oldest militant organisations in Indonesia with roots in mid-20th-century Islamist activism. Established in 1942, it was led by Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo (a politician), whose insurgency coincided with Indonesia's independence from Dutch rule in 1949 and its subsequent establishment of a secular republican political system based on Pancasila (five principles). Though the group managed to establish brief control over parts of West Java, Aceh, and South Sulawesi, it ceased its operations following Kartosoewirjo's death in 1962. While leaving an inspiring legacy for the next generation of Islamist leaders, the movement has since largely run in the shadows of other militant Islamist groups, with the National Counter Terrorism Agency, the country's inter-ministerial anti-terrorism agency, arresting nearly two dozen of its adherents as recent as 2022.

Jemaah Islamiyah

When Islamist jihadist theologian Abdullah Yusuf Azam of Palestinian-Jordanian origin issued an Islamic decree *(fatwa)* for *jihad* against the Soviet communist invasion of Afghanistan in 1979,[2] which was seconded by Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz, several Indonesians heeded the call and travelled to Pakistan to train and fight alongside Afghan mujahideen. Many indoctrinated and trained fighters returned to Indonesia and became inspirational for the early Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leadership, which aimed to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Yet, the organisation's

origins lay in President Suharto's anti-extremist campaign of the late 1970s, during which two Islamist leaders, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, were imprisoned, and subsequently forced to relocate to Malaysia in 1982. Inspired by Kartosoewirjo's *Darul Islam* and Abdullah Azam's transnational jihad doctrine, JI was formally established in 1993 in Malaysia to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Apart from Malaysia and Indonesia, it also operated in the Philippines and Singapore.

Among JI's first-generation leaders, Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin alias Hambali emerged as a critical linchpin.[3] As a former member of Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda (AQ), Hambali functioned as the principal conduit to foster JI's relationship with AQ and facilitated the training of its cadre at the latter's terror training camps while also enabling AQ operatives, including those involved in the 9/11 attacks, to transit through Malaysia. The organisation carried out dozens of attacks across several Southeast Asian countries, including the Jakarta Stock Exchange car bombing in September 2000, the Manila Metro bombing in December 2000, JW Marriott car bombing (Jakarta) in 2003. However, it was the Bali bombing of 12 October 2002, which killed over 202 people, that forced the Indonesian government to strengthen the country's counterterrorism set-up, including legislation, and launch a crackdown against the group. And yet, despite sustained crackdowns in the 2000s, JI demonstrated organisational resilience and continued to raise funds, procure arms, deploy fighters to Syria, and expand its *dawah* activities while evading arrests. This endurance stemmed from a pre-emptive security culture, strict internal discipline, punitive enforcement mechanisms, and a clearly articulated leadership and succession framework.[4]

Nevertheless, after the government's intensified pressure against the terrorism networks operating in the country that resulted in the arrest of senior JI leaders, the organisation was forced to announce its decision to disband in June 2024. Within six months of the decision, over 1,300 JI members pledged their loyalty to the state and committed to re-engaging with society through *dawah* only. Its success even prompted discussions about state amnesty for senior leaders such as Abu Rusdan (JI head during Bali bombings) and Para Waijayanto (JI head from 2009-19), even though their concrete reintegration remains unsubstantiated.[5]

Islamic State

Like elsewhere, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or simply Islamic State (IS) , which established its "Islamic Caliphate" by seizing large swathes of land across Iraq and Syria in 2014, reinvigorated militant Islamist discourse in Indonesia. Over a thousand Indonesians are reported to have travelled to Syria to join ISIS, catalysing the formation of pro-ISIS networks at home, most notably Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). It was established by a hardline section of Jemaah Islamiyah, who accused the parent group of abandoning armed jihad in favour of accommodation with Indonesia's democratic order. Although state crackdowns significantly degraded JAD's operational capacity, it continues to pose a persistent threat due to its high degree of decentralisation, reliance on unpredictable tactics, and accommodation of lone-actor violence, as demonstrated by the 2019 Sibolga bombing.

As the so called "caliphate" of ISIS was defeated by a broad international coalition of countries by 2019, over 670 Indonesians who had joined the group were subsequently deported from Syria, whose presence thereby constitutes a persistent ideological threat in the country.[6] This is underscored by the arrests of ISIS-linked operatives in recent years, highlighting how decentralised cells and lone-actor networks continue to function independently of any central command structure. This threat has been compounded by the conditional release of at least 180 former ISIS fighters, who are yet to pledge allegiance to the Indonesian state formally by January 2025. It raises serious concerns about ideological persistence, recidivism, and the effectiveness of prison-based deradicalisation initiatives.[7]

These concerns are reinforced by adverse precedents. For instance, in 2019, an Indonesian couple who had undergone prison deradicalisation travelled to the Philippines and carried out the Jolo Cathedral bombing in coordination with the now-defunct Abu Sayyaf Group, killing at least 20 people and injuring over 100. While such cases heightened official scepticism regarding the reintegration of male ISIS returnees, international pressure has prompted Indonesia to repatriate women and children from Syrian detention camps.

Moreover, what has further complicated counterterrorism efforts is the decentralisation of terrorism over the years through the lone wolf

phenomenon. For instance, in 2024, over 40 per cent of arrests involving pro-ISIS extremists revealed individuals with no formal organisational affiliation and were yet actively engaged in bomb-making, clandestine training, and religious indoctrination.[8] Such a shift is demonstrated by the Surabaya family bombings in 2018, wherein six members of a single family, including parents and their four children, carried out coordinated suicide attacks following highly localised intra-family radicalisation.[9] Similar incidents since then suggest that ISIS's Salafi-jihadi ideology has penetrated grassroots communities, normalising the use of women and children as operatives who often evade security scrutiny.

Such a decentralised model by pro-ISIS groups has allowed umbrella networks such as JAD to remain ideologically cohesive and inflict deadly attacks, while reducing risks associated with hierarchical command structures. What unites these post-ISIS actors is a fusion of messianic and conspiratorial beliefs that distinguishes them from JI operational ideology.[10] As a result, it has cultivated a new landscape of terrorism in a country that adheres to a democratic electoral system and Pancasila.

The Role of Digital Landscape

Social media and the dissemination of terror propaganda (especially following the outbreak of COVID-19) via digital platforms have played an essential role in the radicalisation, as highlighted by cases like the Surabaya bombings and the Makassar Cathedral bombing (2021).[11] The adoption of digital technologies by radicals and violent extremists, such as encrypted chat forums like Telegram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, has become central to the evolution of terrorism worldwide, as it facilitates coordination, recruitment, terror financing, and dissemination of propaganda while evading monitoring and surveillance.

Arguably, ISIS-associated terror activities and their evolution represent a critical example of the post-organisational framework of terrorism, localised to fit the Indonesian landscape. It is especially true today as the persistence of its extremist ideology can be largely attributed to decentralised and digital networks, particularly at the grassroots level.

Taken together, these developments highlight how the structural and ideological diversity of Indonesia's Islamist extremism since

its independence has repeatedly transformed and has never converged around a singular or cohesive brand of extremism. Rather, it has been shaped by heterogeneous actors, shifting strategies, and evolving organisational forms within the broader spectrum of Islamist militancy.

Current Threat Landscape

Indonesian policymakers must recognise that the potency of digital radicalisation, the transnationalisation of extremist narratives, and the evolving terrorist financing ecosystem, as underlined below, remain central to counterterrorism priorities. While the kinetic capabilities of such groups may have been degraded, their ideological and enabling infrastructures continue to adapt and persist.

Online Radicalisation and Underlying Threats

On the back of strengthened counterterrorism legislation, intensified arrests, and sustained crackdown on terror networks by Densus 88, recent developments suggest that the organisational operational capacities of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), ISIS, and their affiliated cells appear to have gradually diminished. However, the implications of digital radicalisation should not be arbitrarily underestimated. With the proliferation of invite-only digital communities facilitated by end-to-end encrypted platforms, reports suggest that extremist actors have increasingly migrated online to leverage algorithm-driven ecosystems that function as echo chambers to reinforce their ideologies. These platforms have become easy conduits for extremists to indoctrinate, recruit, raise funds and coordinate attacks, while enabling them to circumvent surveillance and monitoring efforts. And, even as Indonesia has witnessed intense multi-agency monitoring of online spaces to map and disrupt radicalisation by Densus 88, the National Counterterrorism Agency, the Ministry of Communications and Digital Affairs, and the National Police, the available data suggests that the threat has not dissipated but rather mutated into a latent and omnipresent digital form. For instance, in 2024 alone, over 180,000 posts linked primarily to the Islamic State and its affiliates – promoting terrorism, intolerance, or radicalisation – were removed or blocked by the state security agencies.[12] It underscores both the scale and persistence of the extremism challenge.

Disbanding and Reintegration of JI Members

The prevalence of JI's extremist Islamist discourse in online spaces

raises critical questions about its renouncement of armed struggle and organisational disbanding in June 2024. Although a mass withdrawal of its membership may indicate a genuine strategic retreat, it could also represent a deflection tactic intended to preserve the group's ideological capital and buy time to reconstitute, particularly within online spaces, and then reemerge as a more potent threat once counterterror pressure subsides. It is worth noting that such groups have a history of employing wait-and-see tactics amid state scrutiny. Therefore, such uncertainty heightens the risk that disillusioned former members may gravitate toward more radical entities, including Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) or future splinter formations.

The lack of an explicit state policy framework for rehabilitation and reintegration of surrendered Islamist militants within the broader society given the continued ambiguity around timelines, conditions, and safeguards risks has compounded this risk. What is equally concerning is that while proposals were announced to overhaul curricula across 42 JI-affiliated pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) to align with mainstream Islamic schools and JI leaders undertook nationwide outreach efforts, scepticism persists regarding consistent implementation by these schools. These concerns have been echoed not only by counterterrorism agencies but also by figures such as Imtihan Syafi'i, principal of the Magetan pesantren and former head of JI's Fatwa Council.[13] Equally troubling is the potential emergence of lone-actor violence from former JI members as ideological indoctrination and weapons training acquired over years of membership may continue to shape individual trajectories, even in the absence of organisational direction.

Transnationalisation of Terror

It is also necessary to recall that Indonesia's extremist currents have historically been shaped by global developments, from the Afghan jihad to ISIS, with the Israeli war on Gaza (2023-2025) representing another catalyst, given how it has rallied Muslims worldwide. Such a dynamic cannot be discounted, particularly when organisations like the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) endorse *fatwas* by major international Muslim organisations, such as the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars' April 2025 decree, calling for jihad against Israel and boycotts of the United States and Israel. Reports stated that over 92.5 per cent of the population endorsed this call for a boycott against

enterprises linked to Israel.[14] These declarations risk being instrumentalised by extremist groups to fuel propaganda, protests, or violence, particularly as Jakarta balances its pro-Palestinian stance with broader diplomatic considerations. The MUI had previously referred to the 7 October terror attacks by Hamas as a "reckoning for Israel (which) will have to bear the consequences on its own."[15]

Financial Misuse and Funds for Terror

Finally, Indonesia's overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian public sentiment presents vulnerabilities in the financial domain. Funds raised through zakat and charitable donations risk diversion toward extremist causes, a tactic historically employed by both JI and ISIS.[16] In addition, ISIS has increasingly exploited virtual wallets to raise funds for terror activities via inconspicuous means like donations. Despite its delisting from the FATF Grey List in 2015, concerns remain about the activities of the terror groups in Indonesia, with the U.S. State Department describing it as a 'primary concern', whereas the Basil AML Index rates it as a medium-risk country.[17] Notably, shortly before JI's June 2024 decision to renounce violence and disband the group, Indonesia's Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center (PPATK) flagged several NGOs, many of whom remain unregistered, including those linked to Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia,[18] for terrorism-related sanctions, underscoring the enduring nexus between charity, ideology, and extremist financing.

Counterterrorism Milestones & Challenges

As with any public policy, Indonesia's counterterrorism legislation and deradicalisation initiatives have demonstrated tangible successes while simultaneously revealing persistent challenges and structural loopholes. The evolving threat environment, which is characterised by digitalisation, decentralisation, and financial innovation, demands continual reassessment rather than policy complacency.

Regulating Crypto Market

Firstly, as individuals and NGOs in Indonesia increasingly adopt cryptocurrency-driven virtual payment modes, the state has taken proactive measures to curb illicit transactions. These include mandatory identification for transactions exceeding USD1000 deploying blockchain analytics to trace suspicious transfers, and

establishing a centralised database called SIPENDER to enable real-time communication and coordination between various state agencies and financial enterprises.[19] While these safeguards mark important progress, the transaction threshold of USD1000 itself presents a vulnerability that extremist actors could exploit by dispersing funds through lower amounts to evade detection. This makes it imperative for the government to periodically review the regulatory threshold and recalibrate in line with the emerging financing tactics adopted by these non-state actors, ensuring that advanced technologies required for such purposes are readily made available to law enforcement agencies.

Philanthropy and Potential for Misuse of Funds

Charitable donations, funding campaigns, or zakat remain central fundraising mechanisms for both registered and informal NGOs. It necessitates stringent regulatory and monitoring mechanisms, particularly for unregistered or low-visibility organisations operating beyond formal oversight. While it would be improbable to bring each unregistered entity under compliance, policy efforts should aim to bring as many organisations as possible under regulatory supervision. In this context, measures such as legislation governing donations collected through charity boxes, which have long evaded financial scrutiny, need to be strengthened to take into account technological advancements, including cryptocurrency-based donations. Moreover, these efforts need to be duly complemented by the criminalisation of grassroots-level misuse of funds for terrorist purposes. Importantly, effective implementation requires the involvement of local political and religious leaders aligned with Pancasila to reinforce legitimacy and community buy-in. The urgency of these measures was underscored in October 2022, when Densus 88 seized approximately USD 70 million from charity boxes linked to Baitul Maal Abdurrahman Bin Auf Zakat Institution, an NGO affiliated with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).[20]

Beyond domestic reforms, Indonesia would benefit from enhanced regional and bilateral cooperation, particularly through ASEAN, to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. This would require joint working groups, regular law enforcement exercises, and improved interoperability to strengthen collective resilience. Equally essential is increased investment in financial

and digital literacy campaigns to ensure citizens can identify legitimate donation platforms and virtual wallets of legitimate charitable organisations, thereby reducing inadvertent support for extremist causes.

Another emerging concern lies in the proliferation of extremist propaganda platforms in the digital landscape, such as Ala Nahjen Qaweem Foundation[21] (a pro-ISIS media outlet available on the encrypted chat forum, *Element*), which warrants close monitoring. Although there is no evidence of its significant penetration into Indonesian extremist networks thus far, its potential to amplify the violent ideology of ISIS and radicalise youth, particularly teenagers immersed in algorithm-driven digital echo chambers, cannot be discounted. It, therefore, warrants nationwide awareness campaigns, simulation exercises, and counter-narrative initiatives to inoculate vulnerable demographics against online radicalisation and disseminate counter-narratives.

Deradicalisation Success and Recidivism Loopholes

Indonesia's counterterrorism approach has undoubtedly been a major success story so far. It has yielded significant dividends for its national security, with the government taking efforts to foster public awareness through initiatives like the opening of the Adhi Pradana National Counterterrorism Museum (July 2024) to commemorate the Bali bombings. One policy measure has been its prison-based deradicalisation programmes, led by the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), Indonesia's official anti-terror body, to incorporate religious re-education through state-sanctioned clerics, engagement with victims' families, vocational training, and post-release reintegration support.

Measures like these have contributed to relatively low rates of violent recidivism (specifically, physical acts of violence). Former convicts are also encouraged to participate in BNPT's mentorship initiatives, fostering trust and cooperation between detainees and state institutions, including government-affiliated religious clerics. One of the successful cases of this deradicalisation programme is the rehabilitation of Umar Patek, alias Hisyam bin Ali Zein, who was responsible for creating bombs for the 2002 Bali attack.[22] Through a collaborative effort between BNPT and private sector partners (David Andreasmito, the owner of an upscale Hedon Estate Kitchen & Lounge restaurant), Patek was able to establish a sustainable coffee shop

business in Surabaya following his release, highlighting the importance of economic reintegration.

However, such initiatives alone may be insufficient to counter youth radicalisation; systemic gaps remain, as indicated by recidivism, albeit limited to specific individuals professing extremist beliefs. According to a survey by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) at UIN Jakarta, the youth tolerance toward radical ideas has shifted from passive to active, with support rising from 2.4 per cent in 2016 to 5 per cent in 2023.[23] While former detainees are required to renounce extremist ideologies and pledge allegiance to the Indonesian state under the deradicalisation policy, mechanisms to assess the sincerity and durability of such commitments remain underdeveloped. For instance, following the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021 after the withdrawal of American forces, there were reports of purported celebrations among some former JI members,[24] prompting concerns that the Taliban's success could result in their ideological relapse and potential foreign fighter mobilisation. This assumption is significant given that there is currently no comprehensive framework to identify individuals resistant to deradicalisation or at high risk of recidivism.

Moreover, despite tangible successes, BNPT's efforts have also faced criticism for insufficient coordination with civil society actors and limited incentives for their sustained engagement with imprisoned extremists.[25] These challenges may be exacerbated by fiscal constraints, as President Prabowo Subianto's administration reduced BNPT's deradicalisation budget from 631 billion to 433 billion rupiah in 2025.[26] Such reductions risk undermining inter-agency coordination and the scalability of rehabilitation initiatives.

As a result, the Indonesian case study accurately represents how security reforms and deradicalisation successes are evenly matched by the enduring legacy of violent extremism, and vulnerabilities created from the misappropriation of funds, the mismatch between regulatory mechanisms and technological advancements, and the digitalisation of terror. These gaps in the national security framework can potentially be further exploited by violent extremist actors in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's Islamist extremism is not

a recent phenomenon but one with deep historical roots extending back to its independence from Dutch colonial rule in the mid-20th century. Its contemporary manifestations have remained closely intertwined with global political developments, transnational conflicts, and shifting ideological currents. Notwithstanding the significant gains by successive Indonesian governments in degrading terrorist networks and curbing radicalisation, the analysis highlights how several critical systemic gaps persist in the country's fight against terrorism and how these create a fertile ground for recidivism, money laundering, terror financing, and reinforcement of extremist ideologies. Beyond mapping the evolution of terrorism and counter-terrorism, this study raises several fundamental questions that demand sustained attention from the Indonesian government. Firstly, can Indonesia credibly claim victory in its war on terrorism, or has the threat merely mutated into a more covert, psychological, and low-intensity form, and resultantly rendered harder to detect and disrupt by the rise of social media ecosystems and artificial intelligence (AI)? And secondly, will Jemaah Islamiyah's ideological legacy of violent extremism dissipate following its decision to renounce violence and re-engage with mainstream Indonesian society? Or will it instead reconstitute itself in more malignant forms, driven by hardline factions and lone actors unwilling to abandon the call to violent jihad? The answers to these questions will shape the trajectory of Indonesia's security landscape in the years ahead. ■

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