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Indonesia's Counterterrorism Successes Highlights Lessons for U.S. Partners

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Indonesia's creation in 2003 of an elite counterterrorism unit, Detachment 88 (Densus 88), which received financial and training support from the United States and Australia, was a key factor in neutralizing Jemaah Islamiya (JI) and its offshoots.
- The dual-track approach of combining Densus 88 counterterrorism operations with the National Counterterrorism Agency's (BNPT) deradicalization program, which reformed several high-level terrorists, has proven remarkably successful.
- Threats from terrorism, including the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ)–affiliated groups, have not been eliminated in Indonesia. However, terrorism is at its lowest levels since before Densus 88's founding and JI modules are increasingly dismantling themselves and accepting the legitimacy of the state. U.S. partners could learn from aspects of Indonesia's experience in countering their own terrorism threats.

INTRODUCTION

In the months before 9/11, and in the first decade after the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States, Indonesia was a country uniformly recognized as facing serious terrorism threats.[1] This fear was warranted by the frequent, large-scale, and high-profile attacks that JI, an al-Qaeda–allied jihadist group, carried out in the country from 2000 to 2011. Al-Qaeda, and by extension JI, primarily attacked international targets, including tourist hot spots, hotels, and embassies, as part of their global war against the United States and its allies, including Indonesia.

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JI fighters who had trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan united with other Indonesian Islamists inspired by al-Qaeda to devastating effect for more than a decade. At present, however, Indonesia rarely suffers from terrorist attacks on its territory and dozens of JI's remaining leaders have even announced their abandonment of terrorist attacks and dissolution of their branches, while also pledging allegiance to the Indonesian state.[2] This was once unfathomable for JI and places Indonesia among the rare cases where a country has seen its main jihadist rival essentially surrender. Current threats from other militant actors in Indonesia exist, but are in no way as pervasive as or comparable in terms of lethality to JI in the post-9/11 era.

Further, the IS's impact in Indonesia in the mid-2010s was short-lived and not particularly lethal in Indonesia, compared to the country's neighbors, such as the Philippines. The IS's lack of any sustained offensive in Indonesia was attributed to the already demoralized and depleted JI ranks in the country by the time of the IS's onset, which limited its potential recruiting pool. Additionally, JI and its successors lacked a territorial base. Furthermore, the deradicalization programs in Indonesia enabled JI defectors to work with vulnerable youths to prevent their radicalization and possible recruitment to the IS.

Although terrorist threats in Indonesia and the Southeast Asia region still exist and have not—and may never be—fully eradicated, Indonesia serves as a "success story" in countering terrorism compared to trendlines elsewhere in the world. U.S. partners around the world accordingly can learn from aspects of Indonesia's counterterrorism experience, which can be employed in the future where the U.S. engages national partners in foreign internal defense or combats other non-state militant actors. The priority of current U.S. military posture on large-scale combat operations and great power competition with Russia and China—and decreasing emphasis on the War on Terror—should not preclude learning lessons from the post-9/11 era.

UNDERSTANDING COUNTERTERRORISM IN INDONESIA

Indonesia's counterterrorism strategy is not formally delineated in any single document. However, the most successful components of its strategy have been two-fold:

- First, in 2003, the establishment of a specialized counterterrorism unit, Densus 88, which primarily focused on unraveling JI and its violent offshoots' networks.
- Second, the establishment of the BNPT in 2010 to oversee the deradicalization of JI members after the tides had been turned against JI. The IS's influence on Indonesians, such as former JI loyalists, in the mid-2010s prompted the implementation of additional preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives, including under the BNPT's supervision.

More than two decades after 9/11 and the launch of the War on Terror, Indonesia has demonstrated it is possible to defeat, or at least to manage and curtail, terrorism and even cause once wholly committed jihadist groups to renounce violence and surrender, as has occurred with JI. One key aspect of this success was Densus 88's near-exclusive focus on high-level members of JI from 2001 to 2010, as opposed to security more generally, such as separatism or banditry, which could have spread Densus 88's resources thin and diverted its attention from the country's main asymmetric threat, JI.

In addition, the significant level of support from the United States and Australia ensured

Densus 88 would be sustainable from the outset and would maintain a high level of training and expertise to counter and reduce JI's threat. Densus 88 benefited from being formed before JI had the opportunity to expand its recruitment enough to acquire a critical mass of foot soldiers. This meant JI could not easily rebound once it faced significant pressure from Densus 88.

One potential limitation to Indonesia's Densus 88 counterterrorism model is that it has only been tested against an organization in its infancy, less resilient to disruption. It may not have been as successful against an established organization, such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. Abu Sayyaf began developing a grassroots base in the mid-1990s and had decades-long militant origins through other autonomy-seeking Muslim militant organizations from which it split. A terrorist organization like Abu Sayyaf that was already well-established and had conducted widespread recruiting for a sustained period of time would have been harder for a newly minted counterterrorism detachment like Densus 88 to unravel. Therefore, if Indonesia had not formed Densus 88 just as JI was launching its first series of large-scale attacks and had instead had waited several more years before forming it, then Densus 88 may not have been as successful as it was in undermining JI during the first decade of its counterterrorism operations.

Nevertheless, taking stock of where Indonesia was and where it is now in counterterrorism allows for highlighting Indonesia's experience as a model for other partners of the U.S. military in regions that, in contrast, are still struggling in combating terrorist groups. It is imperative to not only focus on troubled regions but also positive examples like Indonesia, where the United States works with partners globally to respond to terrorism threats and develop countermeasures. The study and replication of counterterrorism detachments like Densus 88, which focus on specific terrorist group threats rather than national security in a broader sense, target high-level leaders, and receive ample financial support from the United States and allied countries, is crucial to undermining other al-Qaeda and IS branches globally.

INDONESIA'S DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION

From independence until 1998—only three years before 9/11—Indonesia, under its two authoritarian rulers, Sukarno (1945-67) and Suharto (1968-98), employed the military primarily to crack down on political opponents. These usually were Communist and, to a lesser extent, Islamist groups.[3] Both of these leaders thrived in the Cold War geopolitical climate where they could command the military's loyalty and justify their continued rule in the name of combating Communists. However, once the Cold War ended, the Indonesian people's clamoring for democracy resulted in street protests that led to Suharto's stepping down from power.

The pro-democracy movement's growing political openness enabled Islamists, suppressed under the previous two authoritarian regimes, to push for an Islamic state. Although the public still did not support them in the polls, some Islamist movements engaged in violence with Christians in regions such as the Malukus or Sulawesi, where Muslim and Christian populations have been heavily mixed for decades (the rest of Indonesia is more than 90 percent Muslim).[4] These inter-religious conflicts often forced Muslims in the Malukus and Sulawesi to gravitate towards Islamist movements for the sake of protection. Nonetheless, the Indonesian state was more focused on separatist insurgencies than terrorist attacks or jihadism in the years before 9/11.

As the world's fifteenth largest country with a land mass of 735,400 square miles and currently

as the world's fourth most populated country with 280 million people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, Indonesia has inevitably faced struggles since independence in 1945 to withstand challenges from separatist movements to the national borders it inherited from Dutch colonial rule. This has caused successive Indonesian governments from the eras of Sukarno and Suharto to the present to promote the national ideology of "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity)" while also attempting to quash separatist groups in various regions, including Aceh, Papua (Irian Jaya), and Timor-Leste. For example, when Indonesia transitioned from authoritarian to civilian rule in 1999, it withdrew its troops from Aceh only to return them to the peninsula months later due to the deteriorating security situation. However, in 2005, the Acehnese separatists negotiated "special autonomy" with the government leading to the region's governance under sharia law. [5] In contrast, a separatist insurgency has smoldered in Papua for decades and is still ongoing, while Timor-Leste successfully seceded from Indonesia in 2002 after decades of insurgencies. [6]

Notwithstanding Indonesia's experience—albeit with mixed success—in dealing with separatism, the country did not initially have any organization tasked with countering terrorism and specifically asymmetric threats from small cells inspired by, in JI's case, the jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda. The Indonesian unit ostensibly responsible for countering terrorism was the Mobile Brigade Corps' Gegana Unit, which possessed the closest required experience for that mission. The unit, formed in 1976, focused on responding to airplane hijackings and did not consider on-ground counterterrorism operations within its scope until 2002. At that time, JI's bombings of Bali, a popular tourist destination, which killed 202 people, forced it to respond. However, the unit's inability to handle the massive task led to the establishment of the more specialized Densus 88.[7]

TERRORISM IN INDONESIA BEFORE DENSUS 88

Al-Qaeda never had a formal affiliate in Indonesia like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in North Arica and Yemen, respectively. However, once Indonesia's Densus 88 and the intelligence services of neighboring countries, such as Singapore, began arresting JI members in the years after 9/11, it became clear that some of them had trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1990s.[8] The veterans returning from the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan comprised the "core of JI's leadership."[9] Afghan jihad veteran and JI founder Abubakar Baasyir's disciples recruited locally from Indonesia's domestic Muslim-Christian violent hotspots, such as Poso, Sulawesi, or from Islamist movements and schools, and remained loyal to al-Qaeda after 9/11.[10]

Prior to 9/11, JI, despite having primarily Indonesian high-level members, also focused on the Philippines. Three of the group's main attacks in 2000 were a luggage bomb in Manila, an attempted bombing assassination of the Philippine ambassador to Indonesia, which missed and killed two other people, and the bombing of the Metro Manila, which killed 22 people. The other two major attacks that year were in Indonesia. These included the Jakarta Stock Exchange bombing and Christmas Eve church bombings, which killed 15 and 18 people, respectively.

However, after 9/11, JI ally Abu Sayyaf oversaw Philippines operations, while JI shifted to concentrate almost exclusively on Indonesia, which went from near pariah in the West before 9/11 because of its authoritarian government and human rights abuses, especially in Timor-Leste, to ally of the United States in the new War on Terror. Following 9/11, JI targeted a U.S. Embassy worker in Jakarta with a grenade and

executed the devastating Bali bombings in 2002. One year later, in August 2003, JI then bombed the JW Marriott hotel in Jakarta, which killed 12 people. This attack reaffirmed JI's position as a lethal asymmetric terrorist group in Southeast Asia whose targets and capabilities resembled—and even exceeded—other aspiring al-Qaeda affiliates around the world at that time. In addition, the attack highlighted the need for a counterterrorism detachment like Densus 88 to undermine the then-growing JI operational network.

The 2002 Bali bombings proved to be a turning point in Indonesia's counterterrorism history. In the attacks, two bombs exploded at a beachside night party and one other bomb exploded at the U.S. Consulate in Bali's capital of Denpasar, killing 202 people altogether, including 88 Australians, 33 Indonesians, 23 Britons, and more than 50 people from 20 other nationalities. Financing for the attack came from al-Qaeda, and the motivation behind it was retaliation against the United States and the West, including Australia, for the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan.[11] The lead bombers and masterminds were JI members, some of whom were also disciples of JI founder, Abubakar Baasyir, who explicitly supported Osama bin Laden.[12]

THE EMERGENCE OF DENSUS 88

This first Bali attack, known locally as "Bom Bali," in 2002, amid the other attacks surrounding it, woke Indonesia and the world—and especially the most affected foreign country, Australia—to terrorism threats emanating from Indonesia that they had either been unaware of or unprepared for previously. Following the Bali bombings, Indonesia immediately enacted the Anti-Terrorism Law, 2002, a counterterrorism law which resembled others that had been implemented in the United States and, regionally, in Singapore. The Indonesian law allowed for, among other activities, enhanced surveillance, evidentiary standards, and pretrial detention of suspected terrorists.[13]

The results of the law were immediately seen when it was used to convict not only the masterminds of the 2002 Bali bombings but also the major bombings in Indonesia after the law was passed, including the JW Marriott Hotel in August 2003, the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in September 2004, and the second Bali bombings in October 2005. Coinciding with the law's promulgation was also the establishment in 2003 of Densus 88, which supplemented the law on the operational side. Like the anti-aircraft hijacking Gegana Unit, which it replaced, Densus 88 operated under the National Police, but Densus 88's focus was countering terrorism, and most specifically JI.[14]

Australia initially funded Densus 88 on a greater scale than the Gegana Unit, committing $16 million annually and in 2004 an additional $35 million over the subsequent five years to build a Densus 88 center in Jakarta for the Australian Federal Police and U.S. forces to hold professional education seminars and train Densus 88 operatives.[15] During its initial years, Densus 88 quickly grew to nearly 500 personnel. This enabled the detachment to begin carrying out counterterrorism operations against JI terrorist suspects, including raids of their homes.[16] Within weeks of the JW Marriott hotel bombing in August 2003, Densus 88 arrested three high-level JI members: Ali Imron, who built the Bali car bomb, Amrozi, who was a mechanic and assisted in building the car bomb, and Ali Gufron, who authorized the bombings.

These key arrests and their prosecutions, along with increasing counterterrorism cooperation with neighboring countries, contributed to a downturn in terrorism in Indonesia from August 2003 until September 2004. Not only did Densus 88 put a dent in JI operations, but a court also convicted Abubakar Baasyir of treason for his attempt to

overthrow the Indonesian government, and in 2003 Thailand arrested (and subsequently extradited to Guantanamo) key JI bombmaker Hambali. In 2003, authorities also arrested a Britain-born Australian who had joined JI and had been plotting to bomb the Israeli embassy in Australia.[17] This would have been the group's first and only ever attack outside of Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, JI returned in force in 2004 with a bombing outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta, which killed 11 Indonesians, and then two bombings again in Bali at beach resorts in October 2005, which killed 20 people. Densus 88, however, continued targeting key JI operatives and, in November 2005, killed JI bombmaking expert, Azahari Husin, after locating him in a residential home.[18] The Densus 88 arrests following the second set of Bali bombings in 2005 proved to be one of the final nails in the coffin of JI.

UNDERMINING JI'S TERRITORIAL REDOUBT AND REVIVAL

On the strategic level, Densus 88 was successful in counterterrorism for two main reasons. First, it primarily targeted top JI members, and especially bombmakers and ideologues, such as Abubakar Baasyir and his disciples. The detachment pursued foot soldiers on a large scale, such as in Tanah Runtuh, only after the high-level JI members were eliminated or arrested. The detachment, therefore, did not expend significant resources on low-level or peripheral JI operatives. Second, the detachment consistently removed any JI territorial footholds in the country, including in Tanah Runtuh in 2007 and later in Aceh in 2010, and then again denied pro-IS fighters a foothold in Poso in mid-2010. This meant neither JI nor any successors could ever reconstitute itself as an insurgency.

Targeting Top JI Members

Military forces have long employed the strategy of targeting leaders of adversarial terrorist groups, or even conventional armies.[19] The effectiveness of this strategy hinges on the adversary's inability to effectively replace the hierarchy and specialization of the lost top leaders. In the case of JI, the organization was still relatively new at the time of Densus 88's founding and lacked a "deep bench" beyond the Afghanistan-trained Indonesians and their disciples and expert bombmakers.

In Aceh, JI splinter groups, which disagreed with the main JI network's turn to preaching instead of jihad, sought to establish a base where recruits could train in the mountains to launch major bombings.[20] Densus 88 killed Noordin Top and Dulmatin, the leaders of this network, respectively, in central Java and Jakarta in late 2009 and early 2010. Further, intelligence gleaned from the raid of the base in Aceh assisted Densus 88 in arresting more than 100 other JI members over the next year, which further depleted the ranks of JI and its splinter groups.[21]

Thus, after Densus 88 eliminated top JI bombmakers and trainers and arrested key JI leaders and Abubakar Baasyir in 2003, and then again after the base in Aceh was uncovered in 2010, there was neither sufficient personnel to continue launching major attacks nor inspirational religious figures to replace Baasyir and allow JI to regroup. It should, therefore, also not have been surprising that after the JI attacks in 2009, the group conducted virtually no more attacks. In sum, the group became operationally and spiritually defunct by the 2010s.

Finally, Santoso, who had received an extremist education at an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) and originally idolized al-Qaeda's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, led members of the now operationally defunct JI in the mid-2010s. He then pledged

allegiance to the IS and began carrying out attacks.[22] These attacks included beheadings of Christians in the countryside around Poso, emulating the violence of the 1990s Muslim-Christian communal fighting in Poso and the violence committed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi against Christians and other Muslim minorities. However, in 2016, Densus 88 arrested logisticians who were supplying Santoso in the mountains. The detachment soon after located and killed Santoso along with his deputies to end their campaign of attacks in Poso.[23]

Denying a Territorial Foothold

The reason for Densus 88's second strategic success was its denial of JI's attempts to expand from being a network of cells led by several ideologues and key bombmakers to an "insurgency." The latter refers to a group seeking to "create an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country" and involves "small, lightly armed bands practicing guerrilla warfare from rural base areas."[24] If JI were to have become an insurgency, then Densus 88 would have needed to not only target JI's top operatives one hideout at a time, but also to combat conventional tactics from JI, such as roadside ambushes, fighting from trenches, or embedding in and seizing towns like the Indonesian Armed Forces and auxiliaries had faced from separatist rebels in Timor-Leste.

JI desired to transition into an insurgent movement but was prevented by the Indonesian security forces. First, JI began establishing a base in a longstanding hub of support in Tanah Runtuh, Poso, where Muslim-Christian clashes had occurred since the late 1990s. The mountainous base around Poso would have allowed JI to gather weapons that it could send to other parts of Indonesia. However, its remoteness made access to recruits and logistics supply lines connected to the rest of Indonesia a challenge. Densus 88 raided and destroyed the base in 2007.[25] After losing the base, JI's interim amir, JI military commander, and dozens of fighters to arrests during the Densus 88 raids, the group could no longer plan sophisticated attacks or coordinate weapons distribution across the country.[26] This thwarted JI's attempts to shift from having multiple cells scattered throughout Indonesia to a more localized group based around Poso, Sulawesi.

Densus 88's disruption three years later in 2010 of a training base in Aceh became JI's second failed attempt to become an insurgent movement. Under the spiritual leadership of Abubakar Baasyir, more than 100 JI members now using the name of "al-Qaeda in Aceh" were training for attacks in Indonesia that would replicate the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008 that killed 175 people.[27] However, that training base was broken up, and Baasyir was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Once again, Densus 88 prevented the group from establishing a base where it could have planned operations exceeding the lethality of the asymmetric bombings that characterized JI in the early 2000s.

Densus 88's elimination of JI's top leaders, and particularly its expert bombmakers, as well as its efforts to undermine JI's attempts to establish a base in Tanah Runtuh, ultimately led JI's "second generation" members to go further than Abu Dujana, who had halted attack plots before his arrest. They reconsidered engaging in violence altogether. Not only was Densus 88's unraveling of the group a factor in JI's reconsideration of violence, but also the remaining leaders realized that JI violence and the mass civilian casualties its attacks caused had turned Indonesian Muslims against the group's goal of an Islamic state. Rather, the remaining JI members opted instead to "socialize" Muslims about an Islamic state through preaching and demonstrating in the streets in favor of other Islamist groups and, eventually, promoting jihad in Syria.[28] This was the only way

this faction of still-active JI members believed the group could survive Densus 88 pressure.

TERRORISM IN INDONESIA AFTER THE ELIMINATION OF SANTOSO

Santoso's demise signaled the end of the era of organized terrorism in Indonesia. Indeed, subsequent attacks since 2016 have mostly been by "lone actors" or "lone families." These attacks have been plotted without any broader support network. Despite the attacks' lethality, none of them have resembled the Bali bombings, JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotel bombings, or Australian embassy bombings in terms of the number of victims killed, the impact of the bombs, the psychological trauma on the broader Indonesian population, or their representation of an international-level terrorism threat.

In contrast to the Indonesian case, Abu Sayyaf and its allies in the Islamist criminal underworld in the southern Philippines had more than a decade to develop before post-9/11 counterinsurgency began to pressure them. Abu Sayyaf could recruit disaffected members well into the 2010s from several decades-old pre-existing Muslim militant organizations, which sought autonomy and some level of sharia law implementation. Abu Sayyaf and these Islamist criminal networks united around loyalty to the IS in 2016 and then, according to the IS's playbook, took the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)by surprise and conquered Marawi in 2017, demonstrating how having a wide level of grassroots members was necessary to reboot an insurgency.[29]

Although the AFP eventually recaptured Marawi after a several month standoff and urban warfare counterinsurgency operations, more than 100,000 civilians were displaced, and their homes were destroyed. Some long-term consequences of these counterinsurgency operations include the recruitment of the next iteration of Abu Sayyaf from the alienated Marawi residents, who have become homeless due to the conflict and have seen only lackluster government reconstruction efforts.[30] By not allowing JI to create a territorial base like Abu Sayyaf did in Marawi, Indonesia avoided some of the inevitable pitfalls of counterinsurgency operations, which often lead to civilian displacement and trauma, as well as the potential for the rise of a new generation of insurgents.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO DERADICALIZATION

A decade after Densus 88's formation, the most skilled JI operatives were captured or on the run, demonstrating the benefits of an approach that prioritized the targeting of high-level JI operatives. By not allowing JI to become an insurgency and avoiding large-scale operations that disturb or alienate local communities—including those susceptible to JI recruitment, such as in Poso, where Muslim-Christian clashes in the 1990s had created grievances among the local population—Densus 88 operations did not backfire and cause expanded JI recruitment.

Despite Densus 88's formation, JI managed to conduct major bombings, including the Australian embassy in Jakarta in 2004, Bali again in 2005, and the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta in 2009.[31] However, from 2009 onward, the organization failed to conduct any major attacks and has become operationally defunct and on the verge of complete defeat. However, the rise of the IS in the mid-2010s resulted in a new threat in Indonesia, which was not from an organized terrorist network like JI but rather IS sympathizers and those who spread the IS ideology, including Jamaah Ansharut Daulah ("Group of Supporters of the [Islamic] State", JAD) members, whose leadership was loyal to

the IS. Densus 88 was not well-suited to deal with attacks by Indonesians who ascribed to the IS ideology or JAD and carried out attacks on their behalf but who, unlike JI members, did not belong to or coordinate with a militant network. This compelled Indonesia to implement fresh counterterrorism measures that extended beyond the original objectives of Densus 88.

As a result, Indonesia passed an updated Anti-Terrorism Law (Law No. 5/2018) in 2018, which granted Densus 88 greater powers to conduct preventive detention of terrorist suspects for up to 200 days before a trial instead of the previous 120 days, as well as arrest suspects who were only indirectly involved in terrorist attacks. This included anyone who was a member of JAD or who spread propaganda about a group that conducted an attack. Densus 88 took advantage of this new law by arresting 123 JI and JAD members or supporters between 2019 and 2021 and 370 terrorism suspects altogether.[32] Despite the criticism of Densus 88 for overreaching its powers, the results were still positive, as there was no recurrence of the JI violence of the 2000s in the years following the rise of IS in the mid-2010s.

The IS threat in Indonesia was evidenced by several attacks in the mid-2010s, but the organization was not able to direct these attacks in Indonesia. The attackers in Indonesia emerged from a broader pro-IS milieu, including "lone actor" IS followers and their families in Indonesia who heeded the IS's calls for attacks in the country and plotted them independent of the IS's leaderships. Other attackers were members of JAD or similar extremist groups who put their ideology into action without explicit IS direction. However, in all these cases, including those involving Indonesian returnees from Syria and Iraq, the attackers or their cells utilized rudimentary tactics . Such unsophisticated techniques—a machete, homemade explosives, drive-by shootings—meant they were not as lethal as JI's attacks during its heyday but that they could occur virtually anywhere and evade preemptive detection. The Anti-Terrorism Law in 2018 disrupted JI's broader networks but could not prevent all attacks. However, by forcing attackers to operate without a broad coordinating network, it may have prevented the large-scale sophisticated attacks as seen in the 2000s.

- In January 2016, four "IS-linked" Indonesians attacked a Burger King and Starbucks in Jakarta, which led to the deaths of four civilians with their own deaths in suicide bombings. The IS's media apparatus took pride in the attack and for the first time claimed an attack in Indonesia.[33]
- In May 2017, two suicide bombers in Jakarta detonated explosives at a bus terminal, killing three other people and themselves while injuring 11 others, five of whom were police officers. The IS claimed the attackers were IS "soldiers" shortly after the attack, and Indonesian security officials alleged the attackers were members of IS-loyal JAD.[34]
- In June 2017, two attackers in Medan, including one who had previously traveled to Syria to fight with the IS, stabbed to death a police officer.[35]
- In May 2018, the IS claimed its "soldiers" launched a prison break attempt in West Java, which led to six police officers' deaths. The prisoners also demanded a meeting with the highest-ranked Indonesian IS loyalist and JAD leader, Aman Abdurrahman, who received a death sentence in Indonesia in 2018.
- On May 13-14, 2018, following the prison break attempt, 13 total suicide bombers, coming from three different IS-loyal

families and including at least one woman and two children bombed three churches in Surabaya. The IS did not claim the attacks, possibly because it did not want to be seen as endorsing child suicide bombers.[36]

- From 2019 to 2021, JAD conducted two other stabbings and two other suicide bombings, which injured several victims, but only the bombers died.
- From 2021 to 2023, there was only one lethal attack, which was a suicide bombing at a church in March 2021 in Makassar that killed one worshipper.[37]

THE ERA OF DERADICALIZATION

As Densus 88 was unraveling JI networks, the rise of the IS with Abubakar al-Baghdadi's declaration of a caliphate in 2014 made the detachment's work more difficult. According to the United Nations Development Program, somewhere between 800 and 1,400 Indonesians traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the IS. While many of them had no prior link with JI, there were others who had followed ideologically aligned groups, such as JAD, which does not explicitly advocate violence but saw individual members radicalize and conduct attacks.[38]

Most Indonesian foreign fighters with the IS were individually radicalized on social media or by preachers, including some aligned with JAD. This meant their radicalization process and the detection of their impending travel were beyond the scope of Densus 88's kinetic counterterrorism operations. When the IS declared its caliphate, neither Densus 88 nor any other Indonesian institution had the expertise to respond to ideological radicalization or foreign fighter travel that did not directly involve plotting to conduct attacks in Indonesia.

Indonesia anticipated these new ideological-based threats as early as 2013, which was one year before the IS announced the "caliphate," by releasing the "Deradicalisation Blueprint," which focused on the countering of narratives and terrorist ideologies through "dialogue."[39] In 2014, the country's new National Terrorism Prevention Program institutionalized this blueprint, focusing on prisons, mosques, schools, and media as the key areas for such P/CVE work.[40] Over the ensuing decade, Indonesia recorded a number of key deradicalization successes.

Most notable was the deradicalization of Ali Fauzi, who was the younger brother of a 2002 Bali bombing mastermind and later a supplier of bombmaking materials for a JI attack on a police station in 2006, and Umar Patek, who was a mastermind in the 2002 Bali bombing and was arrested in Pakistan in 2011 and then deported to Indonesia. Fauzi had also been a top JI operative in Mindanao, the southern Philippines, and Malaysia throughout the 1990s, where he trained an estimated 3,000 fighters until his capture at a newly established Abu Sayyaf training camp in Mindanao in 2005.[41] After his release from prison in 2009, Fauzi, he returned to his hometown to teach at his wealthy family's Islamic school (*pesantren*) before starting to assist the BNPT at CVE workshops across the country. He eventually completed a PhD in Islamic studies at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang in January 2023, and, like Patek, he pledged his loyalty to Indonesia.

As for Patek, he spent eight years of a reduced 10-year sentence in prison from 2013 to 2021. Patek received the reduced sentence because he met the BNPT leniency qualifications, which include cooperating with law enforcement to dismantle terrorist networks, completing deradicalization programs offered by prisons and the BNPT, and pledging loyalty to Indonesia, including accepting the national *Pancasila* ideology.[42]

Beyond this, Patek apologized to the victims of the 2002 Bali bombing and acknowledged that his "unforgivable" role in making the bombs, although he denied knowing his bombs would be used to kill hundreds of innocent foreign tourists.[43]

In the first several years of the deradicalization program, approximately 10% of program "graduates" returned to terrorism.[44] Nevertheless, while Fauzi and Patek's cases of successful deradicalization are perhaps the most notable and publicized, they are not outliers. A few other high profile former JI members have also given up on the jihadist mission and embraced peaceful coexistence with the state, including Abubakar Baasyir, who has followed the mainstream Islamic scholars and has tacitly accepted *Pancasila* principles of belief in one God; civilized humanity; Indonesian unity; democracy; and social justice for all peoples of Indonesia. Further, even the individuals who resorted to recidivism have not conducted major attacks but have tended to kill few individuals or only themselves, which can be attributed to Densus 88's ability to break up larger terrorist networks before they become operational.[45] In sum, terrorism is not and may never be fully eliminated in Indonesia, but threats are now manageable, whether coming from lingering former JI or pro-IS networks or recidivists.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND U.S.-INDONESIA SOUTHEAST ASIAN MILITARY COLLABORATION

In 2015, the United States and Indonesia elevated their Comprehensive Partnership, established in 2010, to a Strategic Partnership. This upgraded partnership increased the two countries' bilateral cooperation with a focus on promoting a "rules-based international order" in Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea (SCS), and in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly. Combatting al-Qaeda and then the IS and their offshoots was a primary U.S. Army objective, with TRADOC developing the counterinsurgency doctrine that undergirded that effort.[46] Indonesia's success against JI and its offshoots contributed to the U.S. Army mission of debilitating both al-Qaeda and the IS and reducing threats to U.S. and allied interests and personnel abroad.

An Indonesia now largely unburdened by major terrorist threats domestically will be able to avail resources to confront other emerging threats in the coming decades. The War on Terror is becoming lower in U.S. Army prioritization compared to great power competition and geopolitical concerns, which often center on Chinese military influence, including in the SCS. TRADOC publications assert that "China has either surpassed, or will soon surpass, Russia" as the dominant threat to the United States, and highlights China is "increasing its reach" in the SCS.[47]

Often overlooked in assessments on the SCS region is that Indonesia's Army is the most powerful among all states besides China. If Indonesia continues its transformation into a stronger maritime power, the country will not only be able to secure its maritime interests in the SCS, including against China's encroachment into its EEZ in the North Natuna Sea, but also the

interests of U.S. and allies in deterring Chinese aggression in the SCS and elsewhere. The trust gained between the United States and Indonesia in successfully countering terrorism can be leveraged in improving bilateral cooperation and countering Chinese grey zone activities in the SCS.

Indeed, the reduction in threats from JI and other terrorist networks as well as the ongoing democratic consolidation in Indonesia has allowed for the police to increasingly take over problems of internal security and the Indonesian military to transition from a focus on internal to external issues. While the U.S. support to Densus 88 was significant and second only to that of Australia, especially at the onset of the War on Terror, the U.S. military relationship with Indonesia has historically lagged the narrower counterterrorism partnership.[48] Nevertheless, maritime security was identified as the "first important area of focus" for U.S.-Indonesia military re-engagement by Senior Defense Officer to Jakarta, U.S. Colonel Richards.[49] Moreover, although Indonesia is an "outlier" in Southeast Asia in not being aligned with either China or the United States, it has been interested a "strategic partnership" with the United States. Building off their counterterrorism "victory", the United States and Indonesia can now turn towards cooperation in the greater priority of this new era—maritime security.

CONCLUSION

The historical review reveals that Densus 88 played a crucial role in reversing the trend of terrorism in Indonesia, more than two decades after 9/11 and JI's initial terrorist attacks. What stands out about Densus 88 is that it was founded just as JI attacks first commenced, not waiting until JI terrorist networks had metastasized and would have become extremely difficult to roll back. The U.S. and Australian backing and conducive legal framework to facilitate Densus 88 operations also contributed to the detachment's success.

While JI proved able to conduct major bombings in the 2000s, Densus 88's focus on targeting its high-level operatives resulted in JI's inability to continue such attacks in the subsequent decade. The targeted operations to eliminate JI bombmakers, as opposed to wide-scale counterinsurgency operations, also reduce collateral damage and potential alienation to civilians. By not allowing "counterterrorism" to become "counterinsurgency," Densus 88 avoided the conflict with JI from becoming akin to that which the Philippines faced against Abu Sayyaf and its allies.

A key lesson learned is to stress the importance of immediate and large-scale action to disrupt incipient terrorist networks in a country. To prevent new generations of youths from joining JI-like militant groups, Indonesia must continue to emphasize deradicalization as a key component of its multipronged counterterrorism strategy. This will involve continued targeting of any remaining JI or pro-IS militant hideouts, preventing their holding of any territory, disrupting financial networks, combating ideology, and deradicalizing former recruits.

More broadly, the reduction, if not near-elimination, of the JI and other jihadist threats in Indonesia serves as a template for future cooperation between the U.S. and Indonesian military on other matters of mutual strategic interest, such as responding to Chinese aggression in the SCS. Densus 88 will remain focused on rooting out any lingering jihadist threats.[50] However, with Indonesia's security apparatus now more able to draw attention away from terrorism and towards geopolitics—and with a template for success already set through the experience of Densus 88—the next era of U.S.-Indonesian military cooperation is primed for addressing threats in the SCS.

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