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Will Islamic extremism in Indonesia affect Australia's security in the next ten years?

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Group Captain Guy Wilson graduated from pilot training in 1990. His early postings included RAAF Base Edinburgh to fly DC-3 Dakotas at the Aircraft Research and Development Unit, RAAF Base Richmond to fly C130E Hercules, a staff position at Headquarters No 86 Wing Richmond, and 33 Squadron to fly the Boeing 707 air-to-air refuelling and transport aircraft. From 2000-04, he performed the roles of Tanker Flight Commander and then Executive Officer of 33 Squadron, which included deployment as Executive Officer of the 84WG detachment to Kyrgyzstan to fly air refuelling missions over Afghanistan.

Following completion of the Australian Command and Staff College in 2005, Group Captain Wilson was posted to Headquarters Joint Operations Command. In June 2006, he was appointed Deputy Director of the KC-30A Transition Team. In 2008, he was appointed the Commanding Officer of 33 Squadron, and moved the squadron to its new base at RAAF Base Amberley. In 2011, Group Captain Wilson was appointed Chief of Staff of Headquarters Air Mobility Group. In late 2013, he was appointed Officer Commanding 86 Wing. Group Captain Wilson has a Masters of Management in Defence Studies from the University of Canberra. He is currently attending the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College.

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether Islamic extremism in Indonesia will affect Australia's security in the next ten years. It notes that in the world's most populous Islamic country, there are numerous Islamic extremist groups mutating and splintering at a frenetic rate, with the January 2016 attacks in Jakarta bringing the issue into stark focus.

The paper outlines the prevalence and ideology of extremist groups in Indonesia. It analyses their intent and capability, as well as the measures that the Indonesian and Australian Governments are taking to contain the threat. The paper contends that although extremists are flexible, adaptable and unpredictable, the responses to them are both proportionately increasing and adequate. It concludes that Islamic extremism in Indonesia will not significantly affect Australia's security for the foreseeable future.

Will Islamic extremism in Indonesia affect Australia's security in the next ten years?

Introduction

As the Bali bombings of 2002 fade in the memory of most Australians, Islamic extremism in Indonesia remains ever-present. The January 2016 attacks in Jakarta have brought the issue back into stark focus. In the world's most populous Islamic country, there are numerous Islamic extremist groups that mutate and splinter at a frenetic rate.¹ *Jemaah Islamiya (JI)*, *al Qaeda* and Islamic State may be the most recognisable but new groups are spawned seemingly as fast as security agencies become aware of existing groups.²

The Bali tragedy, claiming 88 Australian lives among a total death toll of 202, shocked both Australia and Indonesia. Within the Australian and Indonesian Governments, as well as within mainstream Indonesian Islamic society, the jolt spurred a significant reaction that continues today.³ For the purpose of this paper, 'Australia's security' refers to the safety of Australian citizens and assets in Australia. Although the security of Australian interests outside Australia will also be discussed, it will not be taken into consideration when assessing the threat to Australia's security.

The paper will argue that Islamic extremism in Indonesia will not significantly affect Australia's security in the next ten years. To support this argument, it will first outline the prevalence and ideology of Islamic extremist groups in Indonesia. It will then analyse the intent and capability of the known extremist groups, using the most notorious and dangerous as examples. Finally, the paper will outline and analyse the measures that the Indonesian and Australian Governments and other organisations are taking to ensure the threat from Islamic extremism is contained. It will conclude that although extremists are flexible, adaptable and unpredictable, the responses to them are proportionately increasing and therefore provide an adequate defence.

Islamic extremist groups in Indonesia

The Muslim population of Indonesia is approximately 230 million—greater than that of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries combined.⁴ Indonesian Islam is generally considered a moderate, tolerant expression of the religion. However, many groups are focused on the imposition of strict Islamic law, without resorting to violence.⁵

On the extreme end of the religious activist spectrum, there are a number of extremist groups that are willing to resort to violence against domestic and international enemies and targets.⁶ It is universally accepted that these groups have grown from the *Darul Islam* movement, whose origins date back to the middle of the 20th century.⁷ *Darul Islam's* goal is the formation of an Islamic state in Indonesia—a goal to which many of its factions and splinter groups have continued to dedicated themselves.

Ji, which claimed responsibility for the 2002 Bali bombing and numerous other attacks since, is perhaps Indonesia's most recognisable extremist group.⁸ Founded in Indonesia in 1993, it is a breakaway faction of the conservative *Darul Islam* movement. Like many other Islamic extremist groups around the world, *Ji* has previously had links with *al Qaeda* and shares the Salafi-jihadist ideology.⁹ However, after the Bali bombings, elements of *Ji* became uneasy with the *al Qaeda* policy of targeting the US and its allies. *Ji's* leadership also preferred not to conduct further attacks against targets in Indonesia.¹⁰ Subsequent similar attacks have largely been attributed to a splinter group, the Noordin Network, led by a former *Ji* commander, Noordin Muhammad Top.

Ji recruitment often occurs in universities and schools, of which some 50 of the latter are affiliated to the group. The selection process begins with religious discussion groups in mosques or schools, and becomes progressively more specialised through a number of stages of indoctrination. Finally, an individual is inducted by swearing allegiance to the *Ji* emir (leader).

Although *JJ* is known to be still recruiting converts eager to prove their piety, its threat appears to be in decline.¹¹

In recent years, potentially more dangerous groups have taken up the fight against international and domestic *kafirs* (infidels). The most extreme and dangerous is Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the January 2016 attacks on a shopping and embassy district in Jakarta.¹² So extreme are its methods that even Osama Bin Laden and his successor Ayman Al-Zawahiri condemned the early actions of Islamic State in Iraq.¹³ Zawahiri claimed that the indiscriminate use of violence undermined efforts to attract broad support for the global Islamist cause. Although the stated aim of Islamic State is the establishment of an Islamic state (or caliphate) in the Middle East, it has also gained influence elsewhere in the world.¹⁴ The dense concentration of Muslims in Southeast Asia provides a clear opportunity for Islamic State to gain a foothold in the region.

It is estimated that more than 2000 Indonesians have pledged their support for Islamic State. Furthermore, many Indonesians are known to have journeyed to Syria and Iraq to support Islamic State in its jihadist mission. Estimates of the number joining the fight vary considerably but could be as many as 500.¹⁵ Whatever the number, it is growing rapidly.¹⁶ It is feared that both domestic Islamic State supporters and veterans returning from Syria will join forces to become a virulent and professional force.

Extremist groups' intent and capability

For a threat to Australia's security to exist, an adversary must possess both the intent and capability to enact it. What is clear is that Australian citizens and assets represent legitimate targets for extremist groups for a number of reasons. First, as a part of the 'West' and an ally of the US, Australia is an enemy of Islam in the minds of many extremists. Second, Australia's significant involvement in Timor Leste's independence from Indonesia was seen as an indication of Australia's intention to take over Muslim territory. Third, Australian collaboration with the Indonesian security forces' crackdown on terrorism after the Bali attacks attracted the rage of extremists.¹⁷

For these reasons, hard-line individuals have called for Australians, along with Americans and their other allies, to be targeted whenever and wherever they are found. However, any intent to target Australians, even in Indonesia, is tempered by the view among some extremists that attacks on foreigners are counter-productive to their cause.¹⁸ This view is confirmed by studies that have shown that attacks on domestic targets and the resultant propensity to kill other Muslims have drawn a negative response from the broader community.¹⁹ This may lead Australians to believe that extremist groups would prefer to attack foreigners outside Indonesia. But is that really their intent?

Perhaps the most important indicator of the intent of extremist groups is in their core ideology. Almost universally, Islamic extremists in Indonesia pursue the *Darul Islam* goal of establishing an Islamic state that adheres to *sharia* law.²⁰ And, although Islamic State is attempting to inspire a broader Islamic war in the 'far abroad', which includes countries outside the region of Syria and Iraq, there is no doubt that its focus is in the Levant, not outside it.²¹ The fact that Southeast Asia is the only region with a significant Muslim population where Islamic State has not established a province is a good indication of its focus.

Furthermore, Sidney Jones argues that most foreign fighters, including Indonesians, who have left their country to join Islamic State have no intention of coming back.²² Rather, they want to be part of the 'final battle', which is prophesied to occur in the Levant.²³ Therefore, there is little evidence that either established extremist groups in Indonesia like *JJ*, or Islamic State-affiliated groups, have a clear intent to target Australia.

The capability of extremist groups to export violence to Australia appears similarly low. Attacking 'soft' targets such as Bali night clubs and Jakarta shopping districts is far simpler than projecting that violence onto the Australian continent. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that since the Bali bombings, the capability of most extremist groups has decreased.²⁴ Many of

the charismatic leaders and their followers are now dead and many others are in prison. In *Jl*, for example, every known emir and many senior commanders are dead or in prison and, since 2007, it has been unclear who is leading the organisation.²⁵

Moreover, its splinter groups have not fared much better. The notorious leader of a *Jl* splinter faction, Noordin Mohammad Top, whose aim was ‘to make Western nations tremble’, was killed in a police raid in 2009.²⁶ *Jl* membership was estimated to be over 900 in 2007 but that number has almost certainly decreased.²⁷ Over the next decade, *Jl* appears to be more of a threat as a recruiting pool for other Islamic extremist groups than a threat to regional security.

Despite the significant loss of leadership, convicted extremists who are currently in prison are virtually free to propagate hate speech and motivation to their followers. The former *Jl* emir and alleged mastermind of the Bali bombings, Abu Bakar Baasyir, currently serving a 15-year sentence, is doing just that. As Jones asserts, ‘the problem is that preaching is almost as easily done from behind bars—everything from lectures by speaker phone to smuggled CDs—as from people who are actually present in the flesh’.²⁸

In addition to the influence of those extremists in prison, there is a fear that many extremists arrested in the last 10 years are being released en masse as their sentences end. However, although the large number of convicted terrorists being released in a short period is causing alarm for security agencies in Indonesia and Australia, the number is only one factor.²⁹ The recidivism rate is only 10 per cent—and only a small proportion of the more militant rejecters of deradicalisation have the capacity to cause a significant impact on security in Indonesia, let alone Australia.³⁰ Perhaps for these reasons, the freedom of ideologues to spread their extremist views does not appear to have enhanced the capability of their followers to conduct large-scale attacks.³¹

Efforts to contain the threat of Islamic extremism

Both the Indonesian and Australian Governments are taking Islamic extremism very seriously and have responded strongly since 2002. On numerous occasions, most recently in December 2015, senior government and security agency leaders from both countries have met to discuss counter-terrorism cooperation.³²

During the most recent meetings, Australia expressed concern that extremists returning from Syria, coupled with the imminent release of numerous convicted terrorists, could allow extremists to establish a beachhead in Indonesia from which to launch attacks on Australia.³³ However, Indonesia has a very strong record of combating Islamic extremists—a point many commentators acknowledge.³⁴ There is no doubt that their efforts to contain extremist organisations, which Australia has supported in some cases, have been largely successful.³⁵

Consecutive Indonesian Governments have implemented a suite of measures to minimise the impact of Islamic extremists. For example, several groups, including Islamic State, have been legally banned and membership is a crime. A number of new counter-terrorism agencies have also been created, including a new anti-terrorism special operations command in the Indonesian military, called *Koopsugab*.³⁶ But by far the most successful element of Indonesia’s counter-terrorism campaign has been the formation and action of its crack police unit known as *Densus 88*, or Detachment 88.

Since 2002, Detachment 88 has arrested more than 1000 suspected terrorists and prosecuted over 700, resulting in almost a 100 per cent conviction rate. The unit has disrupted current and emerging terrorist cells and foiled terrorist plots. The unit is not only responsible for arresting or killing numerous terrorists, including some of the most dangerous group leaders, it also plays a large role in deradicalisation. By building personal relationships with incarcerated extremists, providing positive education from reputable Islamic teachers and supporting extremists’ families financially, Detachment 88 deserves much of the credit for the very low recidivism rate cited earlier.

The Indonesian Government and its counter-terrorism agencies are not the only positive influence on Islamic extremists in Indonesia. Most notably since the emergence of Islamic State, prominent Muslim organisations and figures are promoting tolerant and peaceful Islam.³⁷ A resurgent nationalist Islamic agenda is being broadcast, which repudiates Middle East-style violent Salafism and Wahhabism, and embraces Indonesian Islamic moderation and inclusion.³⁸

As President Widodo declared in June 2015, in distinguishing Indonesia from the Middle East, 'our Islam is *Islam Nusantara*, which is full of respect, courtesy and tolerance'.³⁹ The actions of moderate religious groups therefore provide a positive ideological foundation, which complements the successful but repressive tactics of counter-terrorism agencies.⁴⁰ Both are required to ensure the successful momentum against extremists continues over the next decade.

For its part, Australia has taken measures to prevent Islamic extremists from any country, including Indonesia, from threatening Australia's security. Like the Indonesian Government, the Australian Government has tightened domestic laws pertaining to terrorism, increased the size and capability of counter-terrorism agencies and introduced broader intelligence-gathering powers.⁴¹ To prevent terrorists entering the country, it has also tightened travel and immigration legislation and airport security resourcing and procedures.⁴²

Furthermore, recognising the demographic and geographic significance of Indonesia as a potential source of insecurity and Islamic jihadists, Australia has substantially strengthened security cooperation with Indonesia since 2002. This cooperation has included intelligence sharing, law enforcement collaboration and training, border and transport security, and legal framework development, to name a few.⁴³ The January 2016 terrorist attack in Jakarta, despite being poorly planned and executed, provided impetus for a reinvigoration of the security collaboration of the two nations.⁴⁴ Consequently, both countries' counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts since 2002 have ensured that they are prepared for the extremist threat that Islamic State poses.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that Islamic extremism in Indonesia has been substantially suppressed since the Bali bombings of 2002. However, nobody, least of all the Governments of Indonesia and Australia, considers it a spent force. Despite *Jl* and other established extremist groups being in decline for the last decade, new and more extreme threats are emerging. The rise of Islamic State and its growing number of affiliated groups in Indonesia presents a renascent challenge to the security of that country.

However, the core intent of Islamic State-affiliated extremist groups is to establish a puritanical Islamic caliphate in the Levant, not Indonesia. Moreover, despite the anti-Western motivation of extremist groups, there is little evidence of their intent or capability to target assets or people in Australia, notwithstanding the likely increase in skilled and experienced fighters returning to Indonesia from Syria.

The Indonesian and Australian Governments have established effective counter-terrorism laws, agencies and procedures since 2002, further reducing the threat to Australia from Indonesian Islamic extremists. The rise of Islamic State has not, therefore, caught either country flat-footed. Security agencies were already established and proficient as a result of more than 10 years of counter-terrorism operations—and it is likely that they will continue to improve in the next decade. Furthermore, moderate Indonesian Islamic groups, comprising the vast majority of the Muslim population, have escalated their counter-extremist rhetoric and action.

Although not addressed in this paper, the threat to Australian assets and citizens abroad, particularly in Indonesia, is receiving significant attention. It is also important to remember that a single terrorist laying siege to any establishment in Australia, as occurred at the Lindt café in Sydney in December 2014, can quickly shatter Australia's perception of security. However, the threat to Australia from Islamic extremism in Indonesia is assessed as being low, increasingly mitigated and thus not likely to significantly affect Australia's security for the foreseeable future.

Notes

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- 18 Jane's, 'Non-state armed groups', p. 2.
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- 39 *Islam Nusantara* is specifically 'Archipelagic Islam', a concept being promoted by the largest moderate Islamic organisation in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama: see Njoto-Feillard, 'Ripples from the Middle East', pp. 3-5.
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