Recent analysis sheds critical light on the current state of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an al Qaeda-linked organization responsible for a series of historical attacks across Southeast Asia. The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) notes that Jemaah Islamiyah is not an “immediate threat,” but rather one with a “25-year-time frame for achieving an Islamic State.” Expert Bilvheer Singh of the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) acknowledges that JI has “adopted a strategic decision to lie low in line with the concept of I’dad,” which advocates for “in-depth preparation to participate in a future jihad.”

The analysis correctly notes that regional governments must not mistake Jemaah Islamiyah’s inactivity for organizational or ideological decay. Despite a series of splinters and internal divisions, JI is gaining strength by remaining strategically dormant to avoid security forces, marketing a more moderate face to gain local support, and expanding its operational capabilities to eventually return to its jihadist roots. However, more important to consider is that this “lying low” strategy is not unique to JI. Since around 2009, al Qaeda’s core (AQC) leadership has made a concerted effort to export this strategy to its affiliates and proxies in Syria, Mali, Tunisia, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen.

Regional governments would be well-served to consider the Jemaah Islamiyah’s new approach in the context of al Qaeda’s global strategy rather than in a vacuum. A confluence of factors suggests the ties are stronger than previously suggested, and that AQC may have had a hand in JI’s strategic pivot.

There are two main factors that, when put together, may suggest that JI retains close ties with its mother organization and that JI’s current approach is an unrecognized manifestation of AQC’s broader global strategy:

1. The continued significance and actions of a core cadre of leaders that were present when JI originally cultivated its relationship with al Qaeda’s core leadership, including Abu Rusdan, Abu Fatih, and Umar Patek.

2. The almost identical timing and nature of Jemaah Islamiyah’s strategic shift when compared to al Qaeda Core’s. Although
open-source confirmation of this is scant, the coincidental timing suggests that AQC may have had a part in guiding JI’s strategic pivot.

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As Zachary Abuza of the National War College, notes Jemaah Islamiyah has historically “always turned outward to develop its own capabilities.”10 Two factors suggest that the role JI plays within al Qaeda’s larger strategy, and the connection between Jemaah Islamiyah and al Qaeda’s core leadership, may be much more significant than previously noted.

Leadership Ties

Though set back by a series of arrests and killing, Jemaah Islamiyah’s leadership still retains a core cadre of individuals that were present when the group original cultivated its relationship with AQC. One of these figures is Abu Rusdan, a former emir of Jemaah Islamiyah and “JI’s public face for the last decade.”11 Rusdan has played a main role in shifting the organization’s strategy, as he publicly announced the organization’s decision to engage in I’dad.12 As someone who fought13 with the mujahedeen in Pakistan alongside members that would go on to form al Qaeda’s core, Rusdan is described as a “key pro-al Qaeda leader” in Indonesia by some experts.14

Additionally, Abdullah Anshori (Abu Fatih), one of JI’s original members who fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan and previously ran JI operations in Indonesia, still plays a large role within the organization.15 The U.S. Treasury Department describes Anshori as “one of the most senior JI leaders still at large.”16 These active members that were involved in originally cultivating its relationship with al Qaeda still constitute a significant portion of JI’s spine, which may signify that their relationship with AQC is still intact.

Furthermore, in 2011, Pakistani authorities arrested Umar Patek in Abbottabad, Pakistan, four months before U.S Navy SEALs killed Osama
bin Laden in the same town. Umar Patek was a leading member of Jemaah Islamiyah since its inception and played a major role in the 2002 Bali bombings. In the 1990s, Patek received training at al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan and played a key role in training Abu Sayyaf militants in improvised explosive device (IED) construction in the southern Philippines. Patek left the southern Philippines in May of 2010 and traveled to Abbottabad, Pakistan, in what Indonesian Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro called an attempt to “meet Osama Bin Laden.” As Zachary Abuza notes, Patek was the “natural person for this task as he has experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan and has been in charge of JI’s training in the past.” Police detected and arrested Patek after following Tahir Shezad, an al Qaeda operative, to Abbottabad. Though the U.S. government at the time said it appeared to “have been a pure coincidence,” the presence of a high-level JI operative in unusual proximity to Osama bin Laden may signify a greater level of ties between AQC and JI than some previously suggest.

**Simultaneous Shift in Strategy**

The almost identical nature and timing of JI’s strategy implementation compared to AQC warrants further consideration, as both organizations began stressing the importance of cultivating local support and “lying low” around a very similar time. Following Abu Mus’ab al Zarqawi’s refusal to listen to AQC’s advice advising him to reduce excessive violence against Iraqi Shia, AQC considered “the idea of shifting their brand away from AQI” around 2008–2009 to market a more indigenous face, better cultivate local support, and avoid international attention. These reforms were later institutionalized in al Qaeda head Ayman Zawahiri’s “General Guidelines for Jihad” in 2013.

JI’s strategic shift happened within the same timeframe. IPAC notes that after the organization chose its new leader in 2008, it began to “focus on dakwhah rather than operations (amaliyah).” In 2009, JI created an “above-ground dakwhah organization” called Majelis Dakwhah Umat Islam (MDUI), set on appealing to a wider range of Muslims of all levels of conservatism. In an interview with Reuters, leader Abu Rusdan stated, “We must be peaceful up to a certain point, otherwise how will we win public support?” Rusydan also lives openly in Java and frequently leads prayers at a mosque in his neighborhood.

Both Abu Rusdan’s superficial moderation and the creation of MDUI allow Jemaah Islamiyah to market a moderate face to better sympathize with local grievances and gain the support of a wider range of Muslims. However, it is important to consider that at the same time, JI is secretly amassing weapons and ammunition. Jemaah Islamiyah has also sent members to fight alongside al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, now Hay’at Tahrir al Sham, “for short,
“intensive training courses” that allowed them to build “skills that could eventually be used at home.” This two-pronged approach is likely an attempt to market a moderate face of JI while remaining committed to its principles of jihadism. This half-open, half-clandestine strategy is consistent with that of al Qaeda core leadership’s, and directly coincides with the timing of AQC’s implementation of it in other parts of the globe.

Conclusion

Recent analyses regarding Jemaah Islamiyah are right to point out the strategic dormancy of Jemaah Islamiyah and its implications for regional security. However, regional governments must also consider the extent to which JI is playing a role, if any, in AQC’s global strategy and the level of current ties between the two organizations. JI’s strategic shift must not be considered in a vacuum, but rather in the context of al Qaeda’s global strategy, as it may well be an unrecognized manifestation of AQC’s long-term approach. AQC’s global strategy is well reported on in other parts of the world, but policymakers, analysts, and military practitioners must consider its relevance in Southeast Asia. As al Qaeda proxies in Syria, Yemen, the Sahel, North Africa, and Somalia garner attention, we must not rule out the potential that Zawahiri views JI as an equally important puzzle piece in AQC’s global strategy.

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Endnotes

6 Ibid.
9 Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “The Re-Emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah.”
11 Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “The Re-Emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah.”
18 Abuza, “JI Operative Umar Patek Arrested in Pakistan.”
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