

Aman Abdurrahman: Ideologue and 'Commander' of IS Supporters in Indonesia*

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Abstract:

On 10 January 2017 the United States designated Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) as a terrorist group and imposed sanctions on its leader Aman Abdurrahman, the leading ideologue and 'commander' of supporters of the 'Islamic State' (IS) terrorist group in Indonesia. Aman provided ideological and spiritual leadership for IS followers in Indonesia even before the group declared its so-called caliphate in June 2014. Many of his students joined IS ranks, conducted attacks in Indonesia or worked to unite various pro-IS groups under one umbrella. Imprisoned for the second time since 2010, Aman has been implicated in the January 2016 Jakarta attack. Despite his present incarceration and isolation, his sermons still resonate among IS followers in Indonesia.

Key Words : Aman Abdurrahman, Ideologue, Commander, IS Supporters

Background

Aman Abdurrahman, whose original name is Oman Rochman, was born in Sumedang (West Java) in January 1972. Married and father of four (Qutaibah 2013), Aman graduated with honours in Islamic law from a salafi university in Jakarta, LIPIA (a Saudi Arabian-funded institution linked to the Islamic university in Riyadh). Subsequently, he became a teacher and taught in several salafi mosques and pesantren in Jakarta and West Java before becoming a jihadi scholar. He is proficient in Arabic and has reportedly memorised the Qur'an and almost

1,500 hadiths (sayings of Prophet Muhammad). With these "religious credentials", he has been able to garner a large number of followers (Qutaibah 2013, ICG 2004, DetikX 2016).

Aman is also a prolific author, translator and editor of extremist texts and videos, including that of the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS). He translated and articulated the writings of Al Qaeda's Middle Eastern ideologues, and subsequently IS, and applied them in the context of Indonesia. Currently, Aman is incarcerated in Nusa Kambangan Penitentiary, off Central Java south coast for funding and sending his students for the 2010 jihadi training camp in Aceh. He was reportedly placed in isolation after his alleged involvement in orchestrating the January 2016 attack in Jakarta (Tempo 2010, IPAC 2016a).

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Rise of Aman as an Ideological Leader

Aman's involvement in terrorism began in 2004 when he organised a bomb-making class for his students in Cimanggis, West Java (ICG 2004). He was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment and was released in 2008 because of remissions (reduction of sentences) [Liputan6 2015 and ICG 2010]. Using the pen name Abu Sulaiman, his influence within Indonesian jihadi circles grew in 2007 after he translated the writings of an influential salafi-jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, widely recognised as the 'father' of IS) (ICG 2010, Patterson 2016, Harrison 2016, Hassan 2016). Aman provided the ideological base for the 2010 cross organisational (*lintas tanzim*) jihadi training camp in Aceh on the importance of *qital tamkin*, which is based on Al-Maqdisi's work. *Qital tamkin* defines the importance of securing a base while waging jihad and conducting *dakwah* (religious outreach) simultaneously (ICG 2010).

Aman is also an avid proponent of *takfiri mu'ayyan*, which is the most extreme thought within jihadi-Salafism. The concept labels Muslims as *kafir* (non-believers) if they are associated with *thaghut* entities (those who do not implement God's law) and do not agree with the *takfiri mu'ayyan* camp; they are also liable to be killed and have their assets confiscated (IPAC 2014a, Sulaiman 2010a, 2010b, Abdurrahman 2012a).

Despite being incarcerated, Aman remained influential within the jihadi community as he continued to write, translate, and edit from prison. His followers disseminated his writings, translations and edited works, including IS material, through various platforms such as MP3 audios, books, e-books, and articles. Aman's profile as an ideologue increased following the decline of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah

(JI), the arrests of its leaders Abu Dujana and Zarkasih, and the dismantlement of JI second headquarters in Poso in 2007. Following these setbacks, JI began to focus on *dakwah*, rather than waging jihad (ICG 2010 and IPAC 2014b). It was further weakened after the death of Noordin M. Top in 2009. (Noordin was the leader of a JI splinter group that masterminded several suicide bombings in Indonesia).

Aman provided the ideological justification for jihad in Indonesia by targeting the "near" enemy (ICG 2010, ICG 2011, Abdurrahman 2012b). This partly contributed to the shift of primary targets from foreign to local, which includes mainly the police and top government leaders and parliament buildings. This was a departure from Noordin's targets of the "far enemy", which included the interests of the U.S. and its Western allies. In late 2013, Aman chose to oppose Al Qaeda and sided with IS, well before IS declared its caliphate in June 2014 (IPAC 2014a, Sulaiman 2009).

"Unification" of Pro IS Groups

Aman's students maintained a cohesive network, albeit without a rigid organisational structure. The students created a study group, Tauhid wal jihad, after their mentor was imprisoned in 2004 (ICG 2010). During his time in prison, Aman recruited both criminal and terrorist inmates; he even successfully influenced Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the former JI leader and a prominent jihadi ideologue to support IS. This resulted in the split of Ba'asyir's movement, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), and the formation of the splinter group Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS), in August 2014, led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's son, Abdul Rochim Ba'asyir (VoA-Islam 2016, JAS 2014/16). Aman managed to "annex" the remaining JAT structure, including the administrators and members loyal to Ba'asyir.

Aman's students also infiltrated and recruited members of various radical Islamist groups, such as Gerakan Reformis Islam (GARIS) and the now dismantled Front Pembela Islam (FPI) Lamongan. They managed to create Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam (FAKSI), Forum Komunikasi Dunia Islam (FKDI), and Umat Islam Nusantara (UIN) [IPAC 2014a/2015, M. Fachry 2014/2015]. The three major Indonesian IS fighters who have allegedly ordered attacks in Indonesia – Bahrumisyah, Bahrin Naim, and Salim Mubarak Attatmimi alias Abu Jandal – are all former students of Aman Abdurrahman (IPAC 2014a and Setyawan 2016).

In spearheading the unification of pro-IS groups, Aman was probably inspired by IS propaganda magazine *Dabiq* (November 2014), which spelled out the requirements of establishing a *wilayat* (governorate). It stated that for a *wilayat* to be declared, groups that had pledged allegiance to IS must unite under a single leadership, which has to be acknowledged by the "caliph". The existing groups were to be abolished in order to become part of IS *wilayat*. An effort to unite pro-IS groups under one organisation was detected in March 2015 with the formation of Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD); it reportedly comprised members of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (MIB), JI splinter groups and Al-Muhajirun (Tribun News 2015). Students of Aman Abdurrahman were also members of JAD. (IPAC 2014a, Tempo 2016). However, by the time JAD was declared, it had yet to form an organisational structure (Aditya 2015).

More serious efforts by Aman Abdurrahman to unite pro-IS groups in Indonesia were seen when JAD expanded and used the name Ansharud Daulah Islamiyah (ADI), Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK), and finally Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah Islamiyah (JAKI). Up to 100 pro-IS individuals from across the country met at a JAKI meeting in a hotel in Malang in

November 2015 (IPAC 2016b/2016c). Unlike Aman's unstructured network in the past, JAKI had a semblance of a "proper" organisational structure. It had, inter alia, a division of military affairs and regional *emir* (leaders) for Ambon, South Sulawesi, East Java, and Central Java.

IS Central – JAD's Connection

Aman was allegedly involved in the January 2016 attack in Jakarta that killed eight people, including four attackers from JAD (Purnama 2016b and Tempo 2016). He allegedly communicated with Abu Jandal, who delivered a message from IS central to carry out an attack in Indonesia (IPAC 2016c). Three out of five IS-linked attacks in Indonesia in 2016 were attributed to JAD; they were the January 2016 Jakarta attack, the October 2016 stabbing of three police officers in Tangerang, a suburb of Jakarta, and the November 2016 church bombing in Samarinda, the capital city of East Kalimantan (Metro TV News 2016, Friastuti 2016, Tempo 2016). Two JAD-linked attacks (the January 2016 Jakarta attack and the Tangerang attack) were claimed by IS central in *Dabiq* (13th edition) and *Rumiyah* (3rd edition), respectively. This indicates a strong connection between IS central and JAD, especially since not all attacks linked to IS fighters, such as the Bahrin Naim-linked suicide bombing in Solo police post in July 2016, were acknowledged by IS central.

In June 2016, JAD members planned to replicate the Jakarta attack in Surabaya, the capital city of East Java. JAD members also planned to stab police officers in a police post in Purwakarta, a West Java district, on New Year's eve in December 2016 (Novianto 2016 and Bangka Pos 2016). JAD members also joined other pro-IS cells under Bahrin Naim, such as the cells that carried out the July 2016 Solo bombing, and the plot on New Year's eve (Tribun News 2016 and 2016b, Armenia 2016).

The death of Abu Jandal in a suicide bombing mission in Mosul, Iraq, in November 2016 and the isolation of Aman Abdurrahman following the January 2016 Jakarta attack have disrupted a "direct channel" between IS central and Aman Abdurrahman. Abu Jandal's death means Aman has lost an important contact with close connections to the IS leadership in Syria. This would probably eliminate Aman's chances of becoming the *emir* of IS Indonesia in the future. Additionally, Aman does not enjoy good relations with Bahrumisyah, who was appointed by al-Baghdadi as the leader of the Southeast Asian IS fighting unit Katibah Nusantara (KN) in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, JAD activists have maintained connections with IS central. This was made evident in the stabbing of three police officers in Tangerang for which IS central claimed responsibility. They are also well connected with either Bahrin Naim or Abu Jandal (before his demise) (IPAC 2016c, Chan 2016, Purnama 2016, Dewi 2016).

Further evidence of Aman's influence and connection with IS central can also be seen in his despatch of Indonesians to Syria. He reportedly vetted Indonesian IS fighters before they departed for the Levant. In some cases, jihadists could not join IS without Aman's recommendations, despite having already reached Iraq (DetikX 2010). At least four men from his pesantren (Islamic boarding school), who were going to Syria through Singapore were deported in February 2016 (Batam News 2016).

Conclusion

Aman will complete his nine-year sentence in 2019 but he is likely to be charged again because of his alleged involvement in the January 2016 Jakarta attack (Setyawan 2016 and Purnama 2016b). Keeping him isolated means Aman is probably no longer "commanding" JAD. Instead, members of the group conduct attacks on their own or by joining other pro-IS

cells. His isolation notwithstanding, Aman will likely remain the ideological leader for many Indonesian pro-IS individuals through his audios and writings that are widely circulated in various pro-IS social media networking applications. The fact that Aman does not have combat experience nor overseas militant training like those of older JI leaders may seem irrelevant for many young IS supporters.

The case of Aman Abdurrahman and his group JAD raises three issues which the Indonesian authorities would have to deal with. The first is whether writings, books, articles, videos and audios of convicted felons who preach violence and extremism should be allowed free circulation as well as easy access on social media platforms? The second is the unrestricted activities and movements of members of militant and terrorist organisations such as JAD. The third concerns the position to take when the prison sentences of jihadist ideologues and militant leaders like Aman Abdurrahman (now 45 years old) expire. These are pressing issues which also concern countries grappling with online jihadi subversion, terrorist networks and cells, and imprisoned ideologues and militants. How they are dealt with and resolved will determine the threat levels in the countries concerned and to some extent the present and future trajectory of terrorism.

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