

The State Of Jemaah Islamiya And The Future Of Terrorism In Southeast Asia

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The war on terror has continued apace in Southeast Asia, and the governments in the region and their Western counterparts deserve credit for the arrests of some 250 Jemaah Islamiya (JI) members through December 2003. Several of the members of JI's regional shura, its leadership body, were arrested, including Hambali, its operational chief. Hambali has revealed more names of JI members throughout the region, while the spiritual leader of the group, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, is currently incarcerated. Although Hambali may have been leading his interrogators astray, he has stated that the JI organization has been devastated.

Investigations have led to a far greater understanding of how the network operates and its command and control structure, leading to subsequent arrests. These arrests were significant, especially as the JI is not a large organization, and netted between 500 and 1,500 people. Its members are less able to plan and execute terrorist attacks than they were a year ago, particularly against hardened targets, such as US embassies, though they still maintain their capacity to attack soft targets, such as the 5 August 2003 bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, or other venues such as nightclubs or malls. Since the 11 September attacks on the United States, Jemaah Islamiya has been one of the most active Al Qaeda affiliates, and Southeast Asia one of the most important theaters of operation. Although Al Qaeda has suffered severe setbacks with the arrest of two-thirds of its known senior leadership, the organization will continue to rely more on regional affiliates. One would be foolish to underestimate JI's capabilities or goals. As many of the key operatives are still at large, the organization retains the capacity and will to launch devastating terror attacks throughout the region. In particular, there are five causes for alarm that this paper will address.

1. The Colonels: Although a number of JI's leaders were arrested, the majority of the 200 arrests to date have been of foot soldiers with no knowledge of operations or the organization. These individuals performed specific functions (running safe houses, meet and greeters, surveillance, procurement). Very few "operatives" trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan have been arrested: i.e. people with technical proficiency and who are able to plan, coordinate and execute attacks.

One of the key variables now is how well new members are being trained. We have all seen the Al Qaeda videotapes of bomb-making lessons. JI "cook books" were written in a way that nearly anyone, even someone with only a limited Koranic education, could understand. Indonesian and Australian police have found pre-weighed bags of chemicals in some quartermaster dens allowing for quick construction of bombs with little technical expertise.[1] Moreover, the Bali and Jakarta bombings indicate a sharp learning curve over those in 2000, in terms of the complexity and lethality of the bombs. Has that knowledge been effectively transmitted? How are JI recruits being trained? Can the training be as effective while they are on the run, and spending most of their resources on trying to ensure their own survival? The issue of training also brings into question the next variable, the role of the MILF.

2. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front: The MILF has been fighting for a homeland since the 1970s and began to receive significant amounts of funding (lethal and non-lethal) from Al Qaeda in the early-1990s. In return for the aid, the MILF opened its doors to Al Qaeda trainers, who instructed not just MILF cadres in terrorism but also local JI operatives who were unable to get to Pakistan and Afghanistan in significant numbers. Unless the MILF cuts its ties to JI, there will be a terrorist problem in the region since without the MILF camps and secure base area, JI cannot train effectively. Yet, to date there have been no incentives for the MILF to cut ties or cooperate. Although its spokesmen strenuously deny it, the MILF resorts to terror when it suffers battlefield losses, such as this past spring when it bombed the Davao airport or after the 1999 offensive when it bombed the LRT in Manila. They deny every act of terror - or when confronted with overwhelming evidence that implicates them, blame the attack on "lost commands." [2]

MILF officials whom I have interviewed are very pessimistic about the prospect of peace talks. Since March 2003, there have been three rounds of exploratory talks to resolve the preconditions for the resumption of formal talks. Three issues were agreed to in principle, yet, to date, none have been implemented. Even were formal peace talks to resume, they would be unlikely to yield any durable solution. There is no willingness on the part of either side to compromise on the three issues that led to the breakdown of talks in late-2001. First, the MILF has given no indication whatsoever that it has abandoned its quest for an independent state or would accept the government's offer of "expanded and enhanced" autonomy. Furthermore, it rejects the government's precondition that the MILF accept the constitution and territorial integrity of the Republic.

The two sides are far apart on other issues as well such as "joint development projects" and cantonment, disarmament and demobilization which the MILF sees as tantamount to surrender. There is the apparent unwillingness of each side to implement the ceasefire, or alternatively, the inability to exert command and control over their troops. Third, the death of Hashim Salamat, the MILF's founder and leader, also calls into question the ability of the MILF Central Committee to cut deals with the government. The fact is, we know very little about the new leader as well as generational and factional differences and how this will play out in the peace process. The Philippine government, in the midst of a presidential election, is unlikely to yield much at the negotiating table. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is lagging in the polls, and the MILF is waiting, with trepidation, for the result of the May election.

Perhaps the only tangible difference now is that the United States is more involved in the peace process.[3] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Daley secretly met with members of the MILF peace panel in Kuala Lumpur and warned them to cut their ties to JI and tried to indicate the seriousness the US attaches to this issue. Daley offered \$50 million to the MILF as an incentive to signing a peace accord. Yet the MILF is insistent that this revolution is about principles and they cannot be bought off.

The outbreak of hostilities between government forces and the MILF is likely, and to that end, terror will remain part of their arsenal, thus necessitating ties to JI and Al Qaeda. There is now significant evidence that there are two new camps in operation deep in MILF territory where Indonesians are being trained. Recent revelations have added concern that JI members are continuing their training in small batches. More importantly, in my recent talks with MILF leaders and negotiators, they for the first time did not deny their links to JI nor the existence of the camps. They understand that this is one of their most important cards in negotiations and anticipate that the United States government will hence pressure the Philippine government to compromise its stance.

3. Independent Al Qaeda Cells: Much of the focus of the war on terror in Southeast Asia has been on Jemaah Islamiya, yet there has been little attention paid to independent Al Qaeda cells and operatives. States in the region feel threatened by JI, yet not by Al Qaeda. This is a dangerous attitude if we begin with the premise that Al Qaeda seeks to expand its war in order to cause American and Western resources to be spread too thin. Indeed Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the key theaters of operation. Second, we cannot forget that Al Qaeda first came to Southeast Asia in the early 1990s, years before JI was founded. It developed its network slowly and deliberately without attracting the suspicion of the region's security services.

There is no way to ascertain the number of operatives in the region, yet certainly Al Qaeda has a dispersed organization. One should not forget that when Abdullah al-Rahim al-Nishiri was arrested in Yemen in early-October 2002, the senior Al Qaeda operative was reportedly on his way to Malaysia. It is a decentralized organization, with multiple nodes of power, and thus operations.

4. The Money Trail: [4] The financial war on terror has failed in Southeast Asia. To date, almost no assets have been frozen although the region has become more financially important to Al Qaeda.[5] Much of the fundraising is impossible to stop: hawala, cash being brought in person, and petty crime. Hambali has revealed that JI was increasingly dependent on cash infusions for terrorist acts. But even the money that we should be able to curtail, we have not. Although the US Department of the Treasury identified 300 individuals, corporations and charities, the list was winnowed down to 28 individuals and corporations, many of which are already arrested or defunct. The designations that were finally announced on 5 September 2003 were a diplomatic compromise and belied the scope of the problem.[6] The US government designated 14 individuals while Malaysia submitted a list of 10 terrorist funders directly to the United Nations. Yet, of those 24 individuals, 9 had already been arrested, while none of the others are expected to have significant assets. The list included none of the charities and known front companies.

Saudi charities remain very active in the region, despite considerable evidence that they have directed funds to JI and its paramilitary arms. Only Al Harramain's branch in Indonesia has been shut down. But there are hundreds of other charities to step in its place. The banking sectors remain weak and under-regulated, especially the Islamic banking sectors. Even states that are threatened by terrorism either question the utility of going after terrorist funding or fear the adverse effect that such measures would have on their economy.

5. JI Reaches Out: Between 1999 and 2000, JI held a series of three meetings that included members of other small and radical Muslim groups from around the region, including Thai and Bangladeshi organizations. This was known as the Rabitatul Mujiheddin. There is significant evidence that JI cadres are using southeastern Bangladesh to regroup and there are close ties between Fazlul Rahman's HUJI, the Rohingya Solidarity Organizatio and JI. Bangladesh has been off most people's radar screen, and there has been an appalling lack of transparency on the part of the Bangladeshi government, whose mantra eerily sounds like the one that emanated from Jakarta pre-Bali. The May-August 2003 arrests in Thailand-Cambodia further highlight the penetration of societies that were thought to be fairly immune to Islamic radicalism. Thailand and Cambodia became important staging grounds, but also very important financial conduits. The 13 arrests in Pakistan of a group led by Hambali's brother in September 2003 are also indicative of how JI has developed its network overseas and how it uses foreign territory to regroup and rebuild.[7]

JI's Vulnerabilities

Although JI has suffered severe setbacks in the past year and a half, it has the potential to cause inordinate economic damage and political instability in the coming years. But JI also possesses a number of vulnerabilities. First, we now have a much better understanding of how JI operates and how its members communicate. Those who have been arrested have been forthcoming in their interrogations, which have greatly assisted on-going investigations. Second, inter-state cooperation has improved dramatically, though it began from a very low level. The instances of joint operations are no longer the exceptions. States are cooperating with one another more in the handing-over of suspects. There is also some momentum regarding getting each state to amend existing laws to bring it into line with other states. (There still, however, has been no interest in developing an ASEAN extradition treaty.) Finally, JI needs to stand for something clear and tangible, rather than simply being an organization that is against the West. What is the attraction to this organization other than a vitriolic hatred of the West and a desire for revenge?

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Notes:

1. Interview with a senior Australian Federal Police official, Jakarta, 9 June 2003.
2. Interview with Eid Kabalu, MILF Spokesman, Cotabato, 9 January 2002.
3. Simon Elegant, "The Terrorist Talks," Time Asia, 5 October 2003.
4. For more on the financial aspect of Jemaah Islamiya, see Zachary Abuza, Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Financial Network of Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya, National Bureau for Asian Research (December 2003).
5. Jane MacCartney and Simon Cameron-Moore, "US to Freeze 'Terror' Funds in SE Asia- Sources," Reuters, 13 March 2003. AFP, "FBI Watching al-Qaeda Funds in Southeast Asia," Financial Times, 31 March 2003.
6. Department of the Treasury, Office of Public Affairs, "Snow Announces Designation of 10 Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorists," Press Release, 5 September 2003.
7. "Pakistan Rounds Up Hambali's Brother, Terrorist Suspects," Associated Press (AP), 22 September 2003; "Indonesian Held in Karachi is Hamabali's Brother," Reuters, 22 September 2003.

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