

OUT OF THE WOODWORK: ISLAMIST MILITANTS IN ACEH

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The humanitarian catastrophe caused by the December 26 tsunami has led to an outpouring of humanitarian aid and support from some unlikely quarters. While media attention has focused on how the relief efforts will affect the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) counter-insurgency campaign against the Acehese separatist movement, GAM [1], the real security issue is how militant Islamist organizations and charities, especially the Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the Laskar Mujahideen and the Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MER-C), and a handful of others are taking advantage of the situation.

With the exception of the FPI, all of the above-mentioned organizations are linked to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a regional affiliate of al-Qaeda which has been responsible for three major terrorist attacks in Indonesia since the Bali bombing in October 2002. Moreover, all four organizations were involved in fomenting the sectarian conflict in the Malukus and Central Sulawesi, from 1999-2001, which left more than 9,000 people dead.

On January 4, the MMI dispatched the first group of 77 volunteers to Aceh, from their Jogjakarta based headquarters as part of a 206-man contingent. [2] The MMI is an overt civil society organization that was founded in August 2000 by the alleged spiritual chief of Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. Many of its senior leadership positions were held by members of JI or their kin. For example, MMI leaders Mohammad Iqbal Abdurrahman (a.k.a. Abu Jibril) and Agus Dwikarna were not only members of JI's shura, but also heads of the two paramilitary organizations, the Laskar Mujahideen and the Laskar Jundullah, established by JI to engage in sectarian conflict in 1999-2001.

The Laskar Mujahideen is inextricably linked to JI and al-Qaeda. Founded in January 2000 by Jibril and JI's operational chief Hambali, the organization fielded roughly 500 armed combatants. They were armed by JI operatives in the southern Philippines, and were equipped with high speed motor boats. Laskar Mujahideen operatives worked closely with al-Qaeda operatives, such as Omar al-Faruq and the jihadist filmmaker Reda Seyam.

Malaysian authorities detained Jibril in June 2001 and deported him to Indonesia in the summer of 2004, where he was detained on immigration offenses but quietly acquitted and released last October. Indonesian authorities asserted that they did not have enough evidence to link Jibril to any terrorist attacks, and downplayed his involvement with Laskar Mujahideen. (The U.S. Treasury had placed Jibril on their list of specially Designated Global Terrorists.)

Since 2001, with Jibril's arrest and the crackdown against JI members, the Laskar Mujahideen (and its fraternal organization the Laskar Jundullah) has gone completely underground. [3] Although it was thought to be behind some of the sporadic violence in the Malukus that resumed in 2004, most Indonesian police and intelligence officials interviewed by this author assume the group had disbanded.

Yet the Laskar Mujahideen dispatched some 250 persons to Aceh, over 50 of whom were ferried aboard Indonesian military planes. They established four base camps in the province, including one outside the airport, adjacent to the camps of other domestic and international relief organizations, beneath a sign that reads, "Islamic Law Enforcement". Unlike the MMI, which is more concerned with providing "spiritual guidance" and restoring "infrastructure in places of religious duties," the Laskar Mujahideen has been involved in relief work, including the distribution of aid and the burial of corpses.

The MMI and Laskar Mujahideen have been joined by a small Indonesian charity that was previously an important executor agency for Saudi funding. The Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MER-C) was established on August 14, 1999 in response to sectarian strife. They now have 12 offices in Indonesia, concentrated in the regions most directly affected by sectarian violence (Sulawesi, Malukus and Kalimantan). In 2000-2001, MER-C produced two well-publicized jihadi videos for fund-raising purposes. [4] While MER-C members were not implicated in directly supporting Laskar Jundullah and Laskar Mujahideen paramilitary operations in the Malukus and Central Sulawesi, to the degree that another Indonesian charity KOMPAK was [5], its one-sided approach to the Malukus conflict, as well as the actions of some individual members, inevitably raised suspicions. MER-C's operations abroad, particularly in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan, have also raised some concerns. Indeed the MER-C website states that they operate in the tribal areas of Pakistan with the support and permission of the Taliban. This is not to cast aspersions on what MER-C has been able to accomplish in Aceh. According to a separate English language website, they have used donations to buy medicine and basic foodstuffs as well as rent tractors and bulldozers to clear rubble and distribute food.

The FPI, founded by the fiery cleric Habib Rizieq in August 1998, has also taken a high profile position in Aceh. [6] The group, best known for destroying bars, night-clubs, massage parlors and discos, dispatched 250 activists to Aceh and promised to send an additional 800. "FPI is not only an organization that destroys bars and discos in major Java cities, it has a humanitarian side as well that the media is not happy to expose," asserted Hilmy Bakar Alascaty, the head of the FPI's contingent in Aceh. [7] Alascaty stated that the military had provided the group with air transport and that Vice President Jusuf Kalla had arranged for FPI members to travel on a government-chartered plane. He announced that in addition to providing aid and burying corpses, his group would ensure that foreign soldiers did not violate Islamic law.

Interestingly, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the seemingly ubiquitous Pan-Islamic organization, is also on the ground in Aceh. The hardline Wahhabi organization, Hidayatullah, does not yet have a presence in Aceh, but they are raising money for mosque reconstruction through their website and other media organs. [8]

The central questions, of course, revolve around the possible ulterior motives of these Islamic organizations. Broadly speaking, and aside from a genuine desire to assist fellow countrymen and Muslims, these organizations are motivated by four objectives. The first is extensive press and media attention. It is particularly instructive that in the April 2004 parliamentary election, the party that had the most spectacular gains was the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), which increased its share of the vote from under 2 percent in 1999 to almost 8 percent. While there is a debate over the degree to which the PKS has downplayed its Islamist goals, all acknowledge that the party's popularity was in large part due to their anti-corruption stance and high-profile charitable relief work. Indeed, the PKS has dispatched almost 1,000 cadres to Aceh, one of the largest contingents thus far. Their previous work in the sectarian conflicts of Poso, Sulawesi and the Malukus, confirmed in them the belief that humanitarian aid is a very effective way to win the hearts and minds of an afflicted community and garner support for their political program.

Secondly these groups are dedicated to cleansing Indonesia of western influence. From their posturing and rhetoric, it is apparent that none believe the Americans or Australians are motivated by sheer altruism, but have an ulterior motive. It should be noted that even the PKS has called on foreign troops

to be in the restive province for no more than a month.

Thirdly, these groups see the disaster as an opportunity to proselytize. Several groups, such as the MMI, indicated that their primary goal was to provide "spiritual guidance" to victims and assist in the reconstruction of mosques. With 400,000 refugees and mosques at the center of rural community relief efforts, the potential for influence is great.

Fourthly, these organizations all seek to provide relief and assistance in order to discredit the corrupt, secular regime that they seek to replace. The slow and haphazard response of the Indonesian government's relief efforts confirms their belief that the government is unable and unwilling to truly serve the needs of the Muslim community.

The Indonesian government has shown little concern about the motives of these organizations. It was only after international donor organizations raised the alarm that the TNI expelled 19 MMI members from Aceh. There are many possible explanations as to why the TNI assisted their movement to Aceh: with the role of the so-called "green generals" or the machinations of army Chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu, who is engaged in a pitched political battle with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, amongst the favorites.

Ironically, the Acehese separatist organization GAM has raised the sharpest concern about their presence. While the radical groups have supported Shari'ah law and other concessions that GAM has wrought from the government, they do not support their secessionist insurgency. To that end, it is likely that the TNI will not divert its resources to these groups and will instead focus on resuming the war against GAM.

What is the implication for the United States? The most pressing issue is the legal ramifications of the TNI's assistance to the militants. In addition to transport, they have provided tents and equipment. Under the terms of the Lehey Amendment, the TNI is to sever relations with all militia groups. This is acutely consequential as many in the U.S. Executive Branch seek to use the humanitarian crisis as a cover for lifting congressional restrictions on bilateral military relations. How the United States deals with this sensitive issue will likely have a significant impact on the dynamics of Islamic militancy in Indonesia.

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Notes:

1. Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Aceh Independence Movement (GAM)) has been fighting for an independent state since 1976.
2. "Baasyir's Mujahidin Bound for Aceh," Laksamana.Net, 4 January 2004.
3. The suspected head of the Laskar Jundullah, Yasin Syawal, the son-in-law of JI founder Abdullah Sungkar, is one of the top JI leaders at large.
4. A communications division of the charity, Studio MER-C, produced the two videos: "Pasir Hitam Teluk Galela" ("The Black Sand of Galela Bay") and "Dan Kesaksian Pun Menangis" ("And the Witnessing Despite the Crying"). Both are available from the MER-C website: www.mer-c.org/vcd_01.htm.
5. KOMPAK, a charitable relief agency founded in 1999 and affiliated with the Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia, has maintained a low profile in Acehese relief efforts.
6. Rizieq was on trial in Jakarta for conducting "sweeps" of bars and foreign-patronized establishments, when he allegedly organized FPI militants to travel to Iraq. Rizieq himself made his way to Iraq in 2003, though he was quickly apprehended by American forces and returned to Indonesia. He was charged with violating his house arrest, but has never stood trial.
7. Matthew Moore, "Radical Groups Arrive in Force," The Age, 6 January 2005.
8. www.hidayatullah.com.

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