

Indonesian Jihadis Dispatched to Lebanon

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Indonesian press reports suggest that the events in the Middle East are reverberating in Southeast Asia beyond the pro forma anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. demonstrations as two organizations announced that they were sending jihadis to Lebanon (Detik.com, July 19). Suaib Didu, the head of a radical Indonesian student organization, the Islamic Youth Movement (GPI), announced that a group of 217 Southeast Asian jihadis have pledged to travel to Lebanon to fight the Israelis. This group, calling themselves the Palestine Jihad Bombing Troops (PBJ), is hitherto unknown. Suaib presented 12 of the 217 jihadis to the press. He denied that the 217 had any links to terrorist or insurgent organizations in the region and said that this was strictly a show of Islamic solidarity and part of their obligation to the ummah (the Muslim community) (Detik.com, July 19).

What is notable is that the PBJ is a pan-regional organization, and not exclusively an Indonesian grouping. Suaib explained that 72 of the 217 were Indonesian but that 57 were from the Philippines, 36 from Malaysia, 43 from Thailand, five from Brunei, three from Bangladesh and one from Singapore (Detik.com, July 19). He claimed that 22 of them "had waged jihad in Afghanistan with the mujahideen." They planned to leave from their respective countries and regroup in an undisclosed third country. He did not indicate if they would be fighting alongside Hamas or Hezbollah, or if either of those organizations was facilitating their travel. Additionally, the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) spokesman, Yusuf al-Qardawi, announced that 90 members of the militant group were independently leaving for Lebanon and "are ready to die as martyrs" (Detik.com, July 19).

Indonesian groups, such as GPI and FPI, have been vociferous in their condemnation of the United States and especially its policies in the Middle East. Both have led large protests in the past, and the GPI allegedly threatened to attack the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta in 2003. The GPI has sent recruits to Bosnia and Chechnya before. Both the GPI and FPI vowed to send mujahideen to fight the United States in Iraq in 2003, although few actually made it there. Indeed, the FPI's bombastic leader Habib Rizieq was quickly detained and repatriated in mid-2003 by U.S. forces (Terrorism Focus, February 21). This time could be different for two reasons.

First, the current conflict in Lebanon is taking place in the Holy Land. Southeast Asian Islamists and jihadists are always seeking to bring the Islamic periphery into the Muslim core and to convince their Arab coreligionists that they are true Muslims worthy of jihad. There is no better way to prove their Islamic faith than to fight against Israel in the Holy Land. Second, jihadists across Southeast Asia have been seeking for ways to both recruit anew and to tap into more mainstream Islamist movements.

The inclusion of some Southeast Asians will have no tangible impact on the course of the war in Lebanon, nor will it enhance Hezbollah's capabilities. It is still important, however, because it gives Southeast Asians the ability to network among themselves and with jihadis in the Middle East. Second, Southeast Asian militants often use repression of Muslims abroad to justify violence at home. Third, they may be heeding Ayman al-Zawahiri's call for Sunni Muslims to go and wage their own jihad against Israel in order to take back some of the media attention from Hezbollah. These reasons make it clear that this current threat must be taken seriously.

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