

Japan Vulnerable to Attacks from Jemaah Islamiya

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Japan's immediate security concern is the threat posed by North Korea, which conducted a nuclear test on October 9. Yet, the country has been singled out by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden as an enemy, has had diplomats and aid workers killed by Iraqi insurgents (such as two diplomats in November 2003), has arrested suspected al-Qaeda sleepers and has lost citizens in terrorist attacks in Indonesia (The Star, October 21, 2004). Japanese tourists have been victims of terrorist attacks against soft targets in resort locations such as Bali. If southern Thailand's insurgents ever come to staging an out-of-area attack on a soft target, whether in Bangkok or in a resort area, Japanese citizens would inevitably be among the victims. Is Japan, however, a target in its own right?

On one level, the answer should be an unequivocal "yes." Following the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings, a statement by the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigade identified Japan as a potential target, as did the October 1, 2004 audiotape by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Osama bin Laden directly warned Japan not to send troops to Iraq in October 2003; Japan eventually dispatched 1,000 to southern Iraq. Al-Qaeda has a consistent track record in following through on its threats. Japan contributed personnel to operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and has been closely allied with the Bush administration's war on terrorism.

Yet, the most immediate threat for Japan that is posed by the regional terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiya (JI) is less certain. In December 2002, Laskar Jundullah—a JI-affiliated paramilitary group—bombed a Toyota showroom in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi (Kyodo News, December 9, 2002). Two Japanese were killed and seven wounded in the October 12, 2002 Bali attacks and one was killed and three were wounded in the 2005 triple suicide bombings in Bali. Yet there is no significant evidence that JI has determined that Japan itself is a target in its own right, as they have done with Australia, which was singled out in JI web postings. In 2005, there were reports that JI was conducting reconnaissance on a major power plant 150 kilometers southeast of Surabaya that is owned by an international consortium, including Japanese. Two men, arrested for their roles in harboring a JI fugitive, revealed that the plot was abandoned simply because JI did not have the material resources to mount an attack on such a large target (Yomiuri Shimbun, April 17). Those same sources also revealed that JI leader Noordin Mohammad Top ordered operatives to find Japanese related targets in Indonesia (Terrorism Focus, July 25). Nevertheless, other JI detainees have not revealed a concerted plan to target Japan. When JI's top bomber Dr. Azahari bin Husin was killed, police found 33 small bombs like those used in the Bali II attacks, indicating that JI had adopted a strategy of smaller and more frequent bombings against indefensible soft targets.

Japan has been a target of demonstrations and popular antipathy in Indonesia in the past, and there is latent anti-Japanese sentiment, in addition to general unhappiness with Japan's role in the war on terrorism. To date, however, there have not been any attacks that have specifically targeted Japanese in the region. Japan's large presence in the region—diplomatically, commercially and as tourists and residents (more than 13,000 in Indonesia, 11,000 in the Philippines and 40,000 in Thailand, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs)—makes them susceptible targets. Moreover, the continued interest of terrorists in London and the Philippines in targeting airliners directly impacts Japan because airport security in the region is still vulnerable.

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