

# Is Southeast Asia a “Terrorist Haven”?

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On 12 October 2002, bomb blasts rocked two exclusive Bali nightspots frequented by Australian and European clientele. The perpetrators of the bombings, as investigations subsequently confirmed, belonged to a region-wide clandestine radical Islamist group known as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI or “Islamic community”). The devastation at the Paddy’s Bar and Sari nightclub — Bali’s “Twin Towers”, according to some pundits, in a reference to the 11 September 2001 terror attacks that *inter alia*, brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York — proved horrific: 202 dead, most of whom were Australian. Ominously, it emerged that the Bali attacks had involved suicide bombing.<sup>1</sup> Bali proved to be the most devastating terrorist strike in the world since 9/11. It came a mere ten months after a previous JI plot to blow up American and other Western targets in Singapore in December 2001, a strike that would almost certainly have killed scores of people, had been foiled.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, in 2003, a series of smaller scale bomb attacks in the southern Philippines and Indonesia culminated in the 5 August 2003 car bombing of the American-owned J. W. Marriott Hotel in Jakarta. This time, 11 people were killed and about 150 injured.<sup>3</sup> Indonesian police investigations quickly uncovered the role of yet another suicide bomber, Asmar Lanti Sani, recruited, again, by JI. Ominously, investigations suggested that had Sani not panicked at the approach of security guards and detonated his bomb prematurely, he might have killed 200 people — a similar number as the Bali

death toll — in the Marriott.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, Indonesian police were searching for explosives that documents seized in Jakarta and Semarang, Java in July 2003 had indicated were to be used in future terrorist operations in the Indonesian capital.<sup>5</sup> In addition, regional intelligence services believe that JI has set up a special unit, Laskar Khos — led by an experienced Indonesian militant named Zulkarnaen — comprising specially indoctrinated and trained operatives capable of carrying out terrorist assaults, including suicide attacks. It is believed that Asmar Lanti Sani may have been a Laskar Khos member.<sup>6</sup> Some intelligence officials worry that Laskar Khos may be subdivided into three to four sub-units, and may yet be deployed against an “array of targets identified with the US, or its Western and Asian allies”.<sup>7</sup>

It is little wonder therefore that the international media have pronounced Southeast Asia “a terrorist haven”, thanks to the machinations of JI and its putative sponsor, the transnational, borderless Al Qaeda terrorist network led by Osama bin Laden.<sup>8</sup> The propagation of such a perception has had tangible economic implications for a region only just recovering from the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998. The important tourism industry, for instance, has been adversely affected by travel advisories issued by many Western governments. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), after the Bali attacks, posted travel advisories to tourists warning that popular Southeast Asian tourist destinations such as Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia were subject to a “continuing threat from terrorism throughout Southeast Asia”. Following the Marriott attack, moreover, the FCO advised against “non-essential travel to Indonesia”.<sup>9</sup> Even after the capture of JI operational leader Riduan Isamudin alias Hambali in Thailand on 11 August 2003, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage warned that “a general threat” still existed.<sup>10</sup> Australian and American intelligence officials even charged that Southeast Asian governments were “not doing enough to counter the threat of extremist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah”.<sup>11</sup>

## **Deconstructing the Discourse of Blame**

This book seeks to challenge the prevailing discourse of blame. It asks three broad questions. First, while it is undeniable that a terror threat certainly exists in Southeast Asia, is it really accurate to suggest that the region is a “terrorist haven” and the “second front” in the global war on terror?<sup>12</sup> Second, to what extent are Southeast Asian states to blame for the continuing terrorist problem in the region? Third, to what extent is US foreign policy responsible for

contributing directly to both the terror threat and the concomitant circum-spection of the regional response to it? This volume seeks to ground its analysis by constructing essentially a "bottom-up" middle-range perspective on the issue of terrorism in Southeast Asia. It is "bottom-up" because it has brought together many specialists based within, or frequent visitors to, Southeast Asia who have been following regional trends at close hand. It is middle-range because the editors recognise that any prescriptions for coping with the terrorist threat within the region must be tailored specifically to regional and even national realities and conditions. There can be no "one size fits all" counter-terror strategy applicable equally across geographical domains. In short the volume offers a long overdue, Southeast Asian-generated, nuanced corrective to existing "top-down" macro-analyses of the war on terror in the region. Usually devised in the West and popularised directly or indirectly by the Western news media, such top-down analyses of the terrorist threat in the region tend to gloss over or ignore the complex multi-layered contexts within which Southeast Asian governments have had to combat terrorism. This is precisely why a counter-terror strategy aimed at reducing the terror threat in Southeast Asia, devised from the bottom up by Southeast Asian specialists, promises better returns than a grand scheme devised in abstract in the West and imposed upon the region.

It is this very "bottom-up" analytical approach that as we shall see, uncovers the broad if at times implicit concern in the following pages, that the highly militarised orientation of the American response to the war on terror may not at all be adequate in neutralising the threat within Southeast Asia. It may even have the direct opposite effect. The embers of radical Islamist terrorism can only be doused by the adoption of a comprehensive approach requiring the addressing of a host of real or perceived social, economic, political and ultimately, ideological challenges. As one aim this chapter will outline such a bottom-up counter-terror strategy for Southeast Asia.

However, as a second aim this introductory chapter, drawing on the insights of the essays in this volume, will engage with the burning question as to whether Southeast Asia has indeed become a "hotbed of terrorism". This requires closer analysis of six key issues. First, we must examine the trajectory of political Islam in the region and its ideological affinity, if any, for terrorism. Second, we must analyse the extremely thorny issue of the so-called "links" between Al Qaeda and JI, as well as the wider problem of evaluating evidence of terrorist activity within the region. Third, the role of the global media in interpreting terrorism in Southeast Asia for the wider international audience must be subjected to closer scrutiny. Fourth, the prevailing tendency of much

US strategic analysis to regard Southeast Asia as the so-called “second front” in the war on terror must undergo critical re-examination. Fifth, we have to engage with the oft-heard argument that Southeast Asian governments, for a variety of reasons, contribute to very the terrorist threat they seek to neutralize. Finally, we must also lay bare how US policies and actions elsewhere have a very direct impact on the terrorism problem within the region.

### Political Islam<sup>13</sup> in Southeast Asia

First, to suggest that Southeast Asia has become a hotbed of terrorism of the JI and Al Qaeda variety is to suggest, at root, that a highly virulent, radicalised political Islam holds sway within the region. This in turn implies that many Southeast Asian Muslims concur that they can only practise their faith within an Islamic social and political framework and that to attain this goal *jihad*, defined as violent struggle, including terrorism against regional governments and their Western, especially American allies, would be justified. Certainly, at face value, such a contention might seem reasonable which, as a recent study suggests, US allies and strategic partners in Southeast Asia take quite seriously.<sup>14</sup> After all, alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir, who has made no secret of his call to establish an Islamic state within Indonesia, saw his book *Dakwah and Jihad* sell enough copies within Indonesia to merit a second print run within months of its release in February 2003. In it he writes:<sup>15</sup>

Even if one were to die as a result of this struggle, his death would not be in vain as he will be a martyr and be amply rewarded in heaven.

However, does the apparent popularity of radical Islamist publications such as *Dakwah and Jihad* demonstrate the widespread acceptability within Indonesia, and perhaps Southeast Asia, of the Bashir vision? In this volume, renowned Indonesian Islamic scholar Azyumardi Azra (Chapter 1) argues forcefully that despite the influence of the puritanical Middle Eastern strains of Islam that permeated the region in the past and continues to do so today, Southeast Asian Islam has retained its traditional peaceful and tolerant characteristics. He points out that while there has certainly been increasing evidence of Islamic consciousness throughout the region, as evidenced by dress and other social habits, as well as the emergence of Islamic financial and educational institutions, these developments are not to be equated with extremism and violence. Azra argues that the essential thrust of Islamic fundamentalism is to rejuvenate the faith by returning to the “pure and pristine Islam

as practised by Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the salafs)". This is why most Islamic fundamentalist movements are called Salafiyyah. Azra, however makes the important point that not all Salafiyyah movements are violent. He makes a distinction between "classic Salafiyyah" and "neo-Salafiyyah"; or "peaceful Salafiyyah" and "radical Salafiyyah". He adds that the Wahhabi movement that emerged in 18th century Arabia could be considered as "both classic and radical Salafiyyah", as it believed that Salafiyyah principles could only be reapplied within Arab society by force. Importantly, Azra argues that neo-Salafiyyah movements emerged in the modern context of "harsh encounters between Muslim societies and Western colonial powers from the 17th century onwards". Hence "the external factors — associated mainly with the Western world — that could incite radicalism increasingly became more dominant". Azra brings his analysis up to date by pointing out that it is the neo-Salafiyyah ideological thread that has caused many Muslims all over the world to develop an adversarial mindset toward the West, accusing it of seeking to subjugate the Islamic world. It is such a mindset that fosters a susceptibility to conspiracy theories about the West, especially the US. Hence, rather than a widespread commitment to radical Islamist ideals, it is the persistence of a conspiracy mindset amongst segments of the Indonesian body politic that may help explain the apparent popularity of radical publications like Bashir's *Dakwah and Jihad*.

Following Azra, Ramakrishna (Chapter 14) argues that a real cause for concern within Southeast Asia is not Salafism per se but neo-Salafism, which blends the return-to-roots fundamentalism of traditional Salafism with "the additional ideational thread of an Islam under siege from Christian, Zionist and secular forces". He adds that one utterly crucial consequence of neo-Salafism has been the propagation of a rigid, inflexible, "us-versus-them" worldview by political parties like Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in Malaysia as well as social organisations like "Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Komite Pengerakan Syariat Islam (KPSI), Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII) and Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia". He avers that while "it is true that such political parties and social organisations appear willing to attain their Islamist agendas gradually by working peacefully within existing political systems, the problem is that the dividing line between neo-Salafism and violent radical Salafism is rather thin". He suggests that this is why several MMI leaders have had close links with JI and other radical Islamist, or more precisely, radical Salafiyyah groups in Indonesia, and there have even been contacts between senior PAS leaders and individuals who have had some connection to militant activities in the region.<sup>16</sup> More evidence of the reality that a "neo-Salafiyyah ideological milieu

can be hospitable to the radical Salafiyah agenda” is evidenced by the fact that the radical al Mukmin *pesantren* associated with Abu Bakar Bashir, and which has produced many of the Indonesian JI militants implicated in terror attacks across the region, has been funded not just by student fees but “donations from the surrounding community”.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Ramakrishna emphasises that “while neo-Salafiyah ideology may not in and of itself promote violence directly, it certainly engenders an exclusionist mindset that may prove readily radicalisable in certain circumstances.”

Patricia Martinez (Chapter 2), another well-known Southeast Asian Islamic scholar, likewise asserts that both “militants like Osama bin Laden” and “Muslims with a fundamentalist orientation”, which from the context of her article would imply arguably Muslims holding neo-Salafiyah perspectives, tend to envisage an Islamic social order in which the world is perceived in “sharp dichotomies: the way of heedlessness and the way of submission to Islam are seen as institutionalised in the existence of Islamic and non-Islamic political entities”, namely the “territory of war (*dar al harb*)” and the “territory of Islam (*dar al islam*).”<sup>18</sup> Martinez adds that the struggle to expand Islam’s space “and thus of peace and social order” is the *jihad*. She proceeds in these pages to “deconstruct” *jihad*, a key concept that has been exploited by JI ideologues calling for armed struggle to set up an Islamic state in the region. Martinez argues that the term *jihad* derived from *jahada*, which means to strive, exert or struggle against a visible enemy, the devil or oneself. She points out that while *jihad* is “never used to mean warfare in the Quran, its connotation with *qital* (which means ‘fighting’) in early Muslim history and in the Quran — where it appears in 167 verses — was to legitimate warfare” for the expansion of the Muslim empire until the end of the Umayyad caliphate in 750. After 750, “without expansion as a main cause, Muslims became introspective, turning their attention to the internal ordering of their own society”. Accordingly, “more emphasis began to be placed on the peaceful spiritual quest”, even though, as she points out, “the concept of religiously sanctioned warfare remained ‘on the books’ to be invoked if needed”.

Martinez shows that by the 20th century, enormously influential Islamist radicals such as Sayyid Qutb reinterpreted and couched *jihad* in a “profoundly polemical and furious anti-American and anti-Western idiom” as a call for Islamic world revolution. She notes that the Gulf War of 1991, “Western efforts to reorder the Middle East, defend Israel, root out Al-Qaeda and to overthrow Saddam Hussein”, had the effect of reinforcing “Qutb’s indictments of the West as the enemy of Islam”. She makes two worrying observations: first, the modern radical Islamist reinterpretation of *jihad* as world

revolution to establish a new Islamic global hegemony ignores the strict Quranic injunctions against harming women, children or civilians. This may help explain why one of the worrying features of the radical Islamist "new terrorism" is its apparent indifference to mass civilian casualties.<sup>19</sup> Second, within Southeast Asia, she laments that many Muslims appear caught in a "core-periphery dynamic" that sees Middle Eastern Islam as defining what is "authentic and best". This increases their susceptibility to the heavily Middle-Eastern influenced neo-Salafiyyah paradigm that the West and the US in particular are waging a new crusade against Islam. Thus for many impressionable young Muslims it is but a small step to the next level of buying into the radical Salafiyyah claim that "militant *jihad*" would be a "righteous", "legitimate" and "defensive" Islamic response to a powerful external threat.

### **Al Qaeda, JI and Southeast Asian Islamist Militancy**

This brings us to the issue of ascertaining the operational configuration of radical Islamist terrorism in Southeast Asia. In this respect, the burning question must be: what has been the precise role of Al Qaeda and what has been the nature of the "links" between it and JI? Carl Thayer is certainly right to caution against being "too quick to blame every incident on Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda", especially when "there was no evidence of such links" and an "outrage", presumably including a terrorist incident, "was more likely to be the work of local groups or criminals".<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, however, it would be equally erroneous to hold that Al Qaeda has not been involved in the region at all. In this volume, respected terrorism analyst Clive Williams (Chapter 3) elucidates the precise typology of the so-called "links" between Al Qaeda and Southeast Asia. Williams argues that the "links from, or with, Al Qaeda" can take several kinds, including:

- Al Qaeda funding for a spiritual leader's activities.
- Al Qaeda providing training in Afghanistan, Pakistan or elsewhere.
- Al Qaeda providing trainers and experts at a local level.
- Al Qaeda financing of regional operational activities.
- Al Qaeda financing of regional logistic support, such as weapons and explosives.
- Al Qaeda requesting a regional operation.

Williams adds that other "links that bond or tie" are:

- Shared combat or religious or training experiences in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Mindanao.

- Both parties providing sanctuary for wanted individuals.
- Meetings of activists to exchange views.
- Regional groups' support for Al Qaeda operations.

The upshot of all this, of course, is that not all “links” between Al Qaeda and Southeast Asian radical Islamist groups, or between the regional groups themselves are of the same kind or quality. While JI for instance, may have had closer contact and association with Al Qaeda, as Williams observes, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) in Aceh, is driven by local issues essentially, and has had only “marginal association” with Osama bin Laden. Williams adds that a major problem facing the majority of academics engaged in terrorism analysis is that they have access to only a “small percentage” of the total information available. Intelligence agencies have total control of the relevant data and as is well known, rarely see it fit to share such information with one another, let alone academics. Moreover, even when intelligence or other government officials are prepared to provide data to journalists or academics, “it is usually off-the-record and only to those selected individuals who can be trusted to accurately portray what they have been told, without them raising difficult or contentious issues.” Moreover, “less knowledgeable government officials will, for various motives”, provide “unofficial ‘background’ briefings or leak classified material to journalists”. The danger here is that “they may be pushing a particular inaccurate point of view”, something, Williams observes, “is very common in Indonesia and the Philippines”. Williams thus advises analysts or journalists against “quoting of anonymous sources, or quoting information that cannot be checked against other sources”. In like vein, the International Crisis Group, in its most recent report on JI, acknowledged the danger of detained militants giving “misleading information to interrogators”. It thus claims to ensure that through “cross-checking different accounts of the same incident”, bias or inaccuracy is reduced, and a “reasonably reliable description of events” attained.<sup>21</sup>

Very much in line with Williams’ injunction, and Thayer’s warning, not to associate uncritically every Southeast Asian radical Islamist group or activity with Al Qaeda, is the essay by Andrew Tan (Chapter 4) on the roots of the very important Moro insurgency in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. The key question Tan asks is the extent to which the problem of Muslim separatism in Mindanao has been instigated or exploited by Al Qaeda and JI. The picture that emerges is a complex one indeed. Tan demonstrates that rather than being externally driven, the Moro rebellion in fact has had enduring indigenous historical, political, economic and social causes. Fundamental

grievances driving Muslims in the south into the ranks of the Abu Sayyaf Group and particularly the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) include "Moro landlessness, poverty, unemployment, widespread discrimination and Catholic militia abuses". Tan notes that while various Moro rebel groups such as the MILF have accepted foreign assistance, including Al Qaeda funding and training, and Islam has served as a focal point of resistance to the central government, the Moro struggle is principally a nationalist and territorial one. Tan cautions that given the complex nature of the Moro rebellion and the presence of fundamental grievances, "not every Muslim rebel in the region" should be confused "for a dedicated Al Qaeda operative". Nevertheless, Tan takes care to point out that there is "evidence that some MILF factions have continued to maintain links with the Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) which carried out the deadly 12 October 2002 Bali attack, even to the extent of carrying out operations for it as well as providing refuge and training for JI operatives on the run from authorities in the region". In similar vein, Zachary Abuza observes in his chapter that Al Qaeda has sought to get "groups such as the MILF, which had primarily national-agendas to think and act internationally", by persuading their leaders of "the benefits of linking up to an international network". Ramakrishna suggests that JI, through its loose Rabitatul Mujahidin coalition in Southeast Asia, has sought to engage the MILF in the pursuit a pan-regional radical Islamist agenda as well. Nevertheless, Tan believes that with the death in August 2003 of MILF leader Hashim Selamat, who had well documented personal ties with Osama bin Laden, the organisation may adhere more strongly to a nationalist line as the new leader, Murad Ebrahim, lacks an affinity for the pan-Southeast Asian Islamic vision.

The Moro example provides evidence that while conflicts in Southeast Asia involving Muslim separatists may well have indigenous roots, both Al Qaeda and JI constantly seek opportunities to transnationalise them. Hence while one should be careful not to label every Muslim rebel a dedicated Al Qaeda operative, perhaps one should watch for signs that he is being co-opted into becoming one. Zachary Abuza (Chapter 6) notes that the Maluku fighting between Christians and Muslims attracted "radical Islamists from around the Muslim world", including Al Qaeda. He recounts one informant explaining that Jafar Umar Thalib's Laskar Jihad militia "maintain contact with the international Mujahidin network, including Osama bin Laden's group." Moreover, whenever a "*jihad* is in force, [bin Laden's] network provides money and weapons and all tools needed for the *jihad*, and they mobilise fighters to go to the *jihad* area". Apparently, in the case of the Maluku fighting, the foreign jihadi contingent included "Afghans, Pakistanis and Malays".

Osama bin Laden sent two of his lieutenants to Ambon as well. For his part, Rohan Gunaratna (Chapter 5) observes that Al Qaeda continually seeks “lands of *jihad*” to set up a presence and co-opt indigenous leaders, as it has done in the southern Philippines, the Pankishi Valley in Georgia, Algeria and other places. This, he adds, was “particularly the case in Southeast Asia”.

It would appear, moreover, that JI, like Al Qaeda, seeks to develop greater synergistic “links” with regional Muslim separatists. Ramakrishna points out that “the continuing political, religious and socioeconomic repression by Yan-gon of the Rohingya Muslims in the Arakan region contiguous to Bangladesh, has generated support for the extremist Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which seeks to set up an Islamic Republic in the Arakan”. Both he and Abuza suggest that some JI militants have sought refuge amongst the Rohingya refugee community within neighbouring Bangladesh. Tellingly, the RSO and another less militant Rohingya body, the Arakan Rohingya Nationalist Organisation (ARNO), have attended the JI’s Rabitatul Mujahidin meetings. On the other hand, Leonard Sebastian (Chapter 16) is forthright in maintaining that any endeavour to “link GAM with the Al Qaeda would founder on lack of evidence”. Sebastian points out that while Al Qaeda senior leader Ayman Al Zawahiri certainly visited Aceh in June 2000, GAM was not interested in granting his request to set up Al Qaeda training bases in Aceh. Furthermore, while the Indonesian police alleged that GAM had been involved in terrorist activities such as the Jakarta Stock Exchange bombing in 2000, the Cijantung Mall attack in South Jakarta in 2001 and a series of bombings in Medan, North Sumatra, Sebastian avers that GAM’s “intention is to set up an independent Sultanate in Aceh”. It has little interest in Al Qaeda’s global *jihad* cause and is keen only in “fighting for independence from Indonesian rule”. Furthermore, while Aceh may be a conservative Muslim province, “its society is pluralistic and minorities are well accepted and protected and therefore unlikely to gravitate to the insular Islamic ideologies championed by the groups like Al Qaeda”. Thus Sebastian does not believe that Jakarta, which mounted a new military offensive on 19 May 2003 to stamp out the Aceh rebellion, will be successful in persuading the United Nations to designate GAM a terrorist group, thereby obligating member states to freeze its assets. Nevertheless, it might be prudent to remember that GAM was represented at the JI’s Rabitatul Mujahidin meeting in Malaysia in 1999.<sup>22</sup> Thus, to reiterate, while not every Muslim separatist movement in Southeast Asia has Al Qaeda or for that matter JI in the background orchestrating developments, that does not mean that such a scenario can never develop at some point. Watchfulness is called for.

Moreover, while Al Qaeda may, as Thayer suggests, not be behind everything, it has certainly been behind some things in Southeast Asia. Leading Al Qaeda expert Rohan Gunaratna explains that despite the setbacks suffered by Al Qaeda since the commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 in Afghanistan, the network is far from finished. Instead, the "post-9/11 Al Qaeda cells are more clandestine, compact and self-contained, thus harder to detect and disrupt". In addition, the network has decentralised and dispersed its operations from Afghanistan outward to various regions, including Southeast Asia, where its relationship with JI has assumed greater importance. Within Southeast Asia, Gunaratana argues, despite "partial government successes and failures against terrorist networks, Al Qaeda remains a threat to Southeast Asian governments and societies". This is because "the organisation's leadership; support (propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, procurement, transportation, safe houses); and operational (surveillance, attack) organs remain fully functional". Importantly, Gunaratna claims that JI, the most important partner of Al Qaeda's Southeast Asian network, has taken on the role of its "mother group" within the region. He adds that "JI Indonesia is clearly the distinct node of the Al Qaeda network in the region", and that JI "as an organisation is still functional in Indonesia". In an important contribution to the literature, moreover, Gunaratna traces in detail how Al Qaeda and JI operatives planned and executed the Bali attacks.

Reinforcing Gunaratna's argument, Zachary Abuza insists that "JI must be seen as an integral part of Al Qaeda". The strength of Abuza's essay is the detail he provides on the various modalities by which Al Qaeda funds have been channeled to radical Islamist groups in the region. In this connection, Abuza identifies three important Saudi-based charities that have played a role in financing militant activities in the region: "the Islamic International Relief Organisation (IIRO), which is part of the Muslim World League, a fully Saudi state-funded organisation, the al Haramain Islamic Foundation, also based in Saudi Arabia, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth". Abuza asserts that while most of the Saudi money is for "mosque construction, charities, cultural centres, and NGOs, much of the money is diverted to clandestine activities". He shows how the IIRO in the Philippines, for example, was used by bin Laden to "distribute funds for the purchase of arms and other logistical requirements of the Abu Sayyaf and MILF". As far as Indonesia is concerned, Abuza suggests that KOMPAK, a charity associated with the hardline DDII, has played a role in funding radical Islamist militancy. For example, KOMPAK produced propaganda and recruitment videos for Laskar Jundullah, "emphasising both their military strength and sense of Muslim persecution". Abuza

adds that Al Qaeda established “not just charities, but also corporate entities” as part of its funding infrastructure in the region. While front companies were set up to purchase materials or mask terrorist-related activities, additional companies were set up with Al Qaeda funds for initial capitalisation, but their primary purpose was for “revenue generation”. Abuza observes that the most important front companies were started up by JI’s Malaysian cell in order “to channel Al Qaeda funds and procure weapons and bomb-making material”.

Hence, while there are clear “links” between Al Qaeda and JI, as well as between these two networks and other radical Islamist groups in the region, these are of varying kinds and intensities. In addition, while Al Qaeda may not be behind every separatist insurgency involving Muslims, and one must be careful not to posit a transnational radical Islamist guiding intelligence where one does not exist, by the same token one must not forget that the likes of Al Qaeda and JI are keenly interested in exploiting local conflicts for their own purposes. Vigilance is necessary. Finally, as far as the principal link between Al Qaeda and JI is concerned, it may be fair to assert that while JI operatives may receive funds, and carry out operations at the explicit direction of Al Qaeda, this is not always the case. JI is an autonomous network with its own agenda that is well capable of executing its own operations without reference to Osama bin Laden. Indeed, with the capture of so many JI leaders and the attendant disruption of its internal lines of authority and communication, it is possible that a greater degree of decentralisation may be forced upon JI, with the possibility that individual cells may engage in actions that have little to do with the JI leadership, let alone Al Qaeda.<sup>23</sup> The operational picture in Southeast Asia is therefore very dynamic and complex.

## The Role of the Global Media

Given the convoluted, constantly shifting configuration of radical Islamist terrorism in Southeast Asia, it follows that understanding and interpreting its nuances accurately for a wider international audience requires a very high degree of rigour. In this respect, because the global mass media is extremely influential in shaping popular perceptions of the region and *ipso facto* the volume of inflows of much-needed foreign investments and tourist dollars, it is vitally important that journalists, especially in the West, get their analyses right. Contributor Jonathan Woodier (Chapter 7), however, himself an experienced journalist, expresses a view on this very issue that is far from sanguine. He observes that the increasing trend toward concentration of global media ownership, exemplified by the increasing consolidation of power amongst

an increasingly smaller number of players such as, for example, AOL Time Warner, Viacom and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, is driven by economic considerations, deregulation and technological developments. This however, has not necessarily been accompanied by "an increase in quality of content and programming":

Wherever you look in the communication media today, there is a feeling that content has become dumber and weaker as a pragmatic choice of publishers and broadcasters who have consciously selected quantity of readers over quality of content. Content looks formulaic, driven by audience research, enslaved to populism and the "dull conformity" of sensationalism.

Woodier reveals that even "news and current affairs" are not at all "immune from the general trends within the industry". He claims that British television producers for instance, a well-respected group of professionals, complain of being pressured to "create exciting, controversial or entertaining programmes, even if that means distorting the truth or misrepresenting views". Commercial and market pressures, moreover, are exacerbated by simple prejudice. Gwynne Dyer observes how "the image of Muslims that the rest of the world gets through international coverage is deeply misleading". Dyer reckons that while the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for example, is not anti-Muslim, it has nevertheless found itself "responding to a definition of international news that makes 'violent Muslims' more newsworthy than violent people in other places". Dyer acknowledges that ultimately, this definition is rooted in an agenda "set mainly by the dominant US media". The modalities of communications technology are another factor hindering accurate, substantive news coverage. Woodier points out that television is a very powerful medium of influence in Asia, but that it emphasizes "perceptions", "pictures and emotions" over analysis. Hence television news coverage, already encumbered by the general lack of interest in foreign news, especially in the US and UK, tends to focus on the stories "that make for eye-catching headlines", such as 9/11, the Bali attacks, and more recently, the Marriott blasts. There are, Woodier laments, too few "attempts to put stories into perspective".

For his part, well-known Thai journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn (Chapter 8) identifies "fierce competition" amongst powerful "media establishments" such as Cable News Network (CNN), *The New York Times*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* as driving their coverage of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Chongkittavorn, like Woodier, observes that to capture "the Western, especially American, attention span", US media players have "constantly been searching for new angles and leads" to maintain

the edge over their rivals. To be sure, this has sometimes produced somewhat exaggerated, not altogether accurate reporting. Chongkittavorn recounts how one major international newspaper proclaimed on 7 November 2002 that the Bali bombings had been planned at a January 2002 meeting in southern Thailand. Following a hue and cry from the Thai authorities, the newspaper backtracked on 25 November, stipulating more precisely that according to intelligence sources, it was believed that the Bali attacks had been planned in Thailand. Chongkittavorn acknowledges that the Western media have to a large extent shaped “an agenda for the Southeast Asian media, Thailand in particular, as well as policy makers in the region”. It is such power, however, to shape the prevailing orthodoxy that is so problematic. Ramakrishna observes elsewhere that the enormously influential American media tend to see Southeast Asia as a “monolithic ‘second front’ in the war on terror, with coverage skewed towards a focus on terror plots, terror attacks and detentions of alleged terrorists with links to Al-Qaeda”. He notes:

The richness and diversity of Southeast Asia and regional Islam is virtually ignored. The result: American policy-makers and investors conclude that the region is a hotbed of terrorists and Southeast Asian Muslims are a potential fifth column awaiting orders from Osama bin Laden.<sup>24</sup>

That Ramakrishna is not exaggerating is borne out by a commentary by two leading American commentators who attempted to impose in a deductive, top-down manner a model of “militant Islam” divorced from empirical realities on the ground. They alleged in an article in *The New York Post* soon after the Bali bombings that GAM “may be an Al Qaeda affiliate”, whose goal, along with “other radicals”, is “to turn the world’s most populous Muslim country into an extremist Islamic state by 2003”.<sup>25</sup> As we have noted, it would be utterly incorrect to assume an exact confluence of aims between GAM and JI, let alone between GAM and Al Qaeda. GAM’s goals are far more sharply defined, and more to do with Acehnese nationalism rather than transnational global *jihad*.

### **Southeast Asia and the “Second Front” Discourse**

Nevertheless, empirical nuances have been lost in Washington’s grand strategic perspective. It is abundantly clear that US officials see Southeast Asia through the prism of 9/11, Al Qaeda and the global war on terror. This is why US Secretary of State Colin Powell embarked on his six-nation tour of Southeast Asia in late July 2002 to “press for tougher action and new cooperative pacts on the ‘second front’ in the counter-terrorism campaign”.<sup>26</sup> There are however

two problems with the prevailing "second front discourse" that dominates discussions of the terrorism problem in Southeast Asia. First, the so-called "new terrorism" defined by religious extremism has not reared its head in Southeast Asia alone. The Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, Japan and even Europe and the US have had their share of such incidents as well.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, even after the Bali and Marriott attacks, the recrudescence of Taliban activity in Afghanistan,<sup>28</sup> the bombings in Mumbai in late August 2003,<sup>29</sup> the continuing suicide attacks in Israel, and the emergence of radical Islamist terrorist activity in US-occupied Iraq<sup>30</sup> compel one to question why Southeast Asia should be regarded as the second front in the war on terror at all. Ajay Sahni argues with great perspicacity elsewhere that the conceptual notion of a geographically demarcated "locus of terrorism" may in fact be very misleading. He asks rhetorically:

How are we to locate the locus? Is it the region of the largest concentration of terrorists? Or of their leadership? Or of their activities? . . . The concentration of terrorist groups in organised "training camps" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance was a deceptive aberration . . . The dispersed patterns that have emerged after the US campaign against the Al-Qaeda-Taliban combine in Afghanistan, in fact, are more characteristic of the nature of terrorist mobilisation and movement and, while transient concentrations of terrorist operatives and leaders may, from time to time, be evidenced, these are immensely fluid and highly unpredictable manifestations.<sup>31</sup>

Sahni argues persuasively that there is little conceptual rigour driving the widely used "locus of terrorism" heuristic. If, for instance, one were to use "the most devastating terrorist actions" as a key variable in determining the locus, then Bali aside, one could conceivably argue even more persuasively that the locus of terrorism should be in Washington and New York, especially after 9/11.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the propensity of some in the West to label certain regions as "terrorist hotspots" and not others explains why Chongkitavorn warns that the issuing of travel advisories based on unconfirmed hearsay might generate resentment in a region dependent on tourism, thereby harming ASEAN-US co-operation in the counter-terror war. In a similar vein, other analysts have speculated that Canberra's issue of a travel advisory following the Bali bombings might prove inimical to ASEAN-Australia counter-terror co-operation,<sup>33</sup> although the successful arrests of perpetrators involved in the 12 October attack suggests otherwise. Sahni's argument, moreover, about the "immensely fluid" concentrations of terrorists and by implication, the innate difficulties of bracketing a well-defined geographical location as a static

“front”, is further buttressed in these pages. Both Abuza and Ramakrishna stress that the relative inaction of the Bangladeshi government in dealing with radical Islamist extremism within its borders helps sustain terrorist activity in neighbouring Southeast Asia, and has even enabled linkages to be brokered between South Asian and Southeast Asian radical Islamists. Hence the radical Rohingya Solidarity Organisation that is part of the JI’s loose Rabitatul Mujahidin regional network, has maintained close ties and received material assistance from South Asian radical Islamist groups like the Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, the Hizb-ul-Mujahidin in Kashmir as well as the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. It might well be asked, where then is the “front” in this instance: Bangladesh, South Asia or Southeast Asia? It appears disingenuous to pigeonhole Southeast Asia in particular as the second front in the global counter-terror campaign.

This brings us to the second major problem with the “second front” discourse permeating much discussion of Southeast Asia: its roots in an overall counter-terror perspective in which military power is given far too much emphasis. Sahni explains that the US-led war on terror is driven by an intrinsic conventional warfare notion of seeking out the enemy’s “decisive areas” or fronts against which substantial force can be applied.<sup>34</sup> In like vein Ramakrishna in these pages argues that “military considerations and modes of thought” have nudged “key Bush Administration officials towards adopting what the French strategist Andre Beaufre would have called a *direct strategy* in the global war on terror”:

That is, Washington has emphasized military power as the primary instrument of what Beaufre called “total strategy”, with the various legal, administrative, diplomatic, economic and financial resources of several government agencies and Coalition partners orchestrated in close support of the principal military thrust.

Ramakrishna posits that the US National Strategy for Countering Terrorism (NSCT), released in February 2003, evinces a strong direct strategic thrust. The heart of the NSCT is the so-called “4D strategy”, which is dominated by the first two “D”s of defeating “terrorist organisations of global reach by attacking their sanctuaries; leadership; command, control and communications; material support; and finances” and denying “further sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists” by requiring other states to “accept their responsibilities to take action against these international threats within their sovereign territory”. The NSCT asserts that while Washington would work with its Coalition partners in the fight against terrorism, it would also “act

decisively to counter the threat" posed by "unwilling states" and "compel" them to "cease supporting terrorism". In fact, the military and coercive law enforcement, or what we might term military-operational, thrust of the NSCT clearly animates US counter-terror strategy in Southeast Asia: the US-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism, signed in August 2002, commits the US and its ASEAN partners, *inter alia*, to improving "intelligence and terrorist financing information sharing"; developing more effective counter-terrorism policies and regimes; enhancing liaison between law enforcement agencies; joint operations; and addressing "transportation, border and immigration control challenges" to "stem effectively the flow of terrorist-related material, money and people".<sup>35</sup>

However, as John Gershman points out, Southeast Asia's current problems are unlikely to be resolved by a counter-terror strategy that emphasizes military solutions.<sup>36</sup> Ramakrishna himself castigates the US "military-operational" fixation that encourages the second front discourse in analysis of the region. He has argued recently that "it would be strategic inefficiency pure and simple to physically eliminate scattered terrorist groups without addressing the roots of the anti-Americanism that animates them". In the final analysis therefore:

Osama bin Laden and his ideological bedfellows in Southeast Asia need to count on willing recruits for their terror plans: cut the supply of committed foot-soldiers and middle class terrorist leaderships will face severe difficulties in executing their schemes.<sup>37</sup>

Hence we return to the theme discussed earlier that the ideological milieu that produces radical Islamists is of the utmost importance in the counter-terror campaign in Southeast Asia. Ajay Sahni in this respect hits the nail on the head when he iterates that, rather than a "transient geographical location or concentrations of terrorist incidents, activities and movements", it is radical Islamist ideology per se that represents "the actual limits or foci of extremist Islamist terrorism".<sup>38</sup> It is this ideology that should be targeted. This is a crucial point to which we shall return shortly.

### **Are Southeast Asian Governments the "Root Cause" of Terrorism in the Region?**

In fact the prevailing military-operational paradigm has funnelled analysis along the single dimension of the alleged deficiencies of regional and national

state responses in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, Southeast Asian governments are often criticised as being loath to co-operate with one another in counter-terrorism action. It is well known that ASEAN states still grapple with continuing bilateral tensions and suspicions.<sup>39</sup> This fact, however, at times takes analysis to untenable extremes. For instance, Michael Smith and David Martin Jones argue that beneath the outward rhetoric of ASEAN amity, there has been in fact a “disturbing picture of non-cooperation between ASEAN intelligence services”.<sup>40</sup> They add that ASEAN as a regional association has tended to treat the discovery of a pan-Southeast Asian radical Islamist terrorist threat “merely as an opportunity to disclaim responsibility for the growing sense of crisis in the region by pointing the finger elsewhere and condemning the failings of their ostensible partners”.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, they report that during its May 2002 Special Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime, ASEAN “could not agree a [sic] definition of terrorism”.<sup>42</sup> This perspective, however, like many Western analyses, lacks nuance.

While essayists Daljit Singh and K. S. Nathan (Chapters 9 and 11, respectively) acknowledge that counter-terror co-operation in Southeast Asia (in Nathan’s words) “is necessarily diluted by the rather strict adherence of member-states to the principle of national sovereignty”, this has not prevented ASEAN from “moving quite steadily” in the direction of inter-state counter-terror co-operation. Besides, it might be asserted that Smith and Jones overstate the failure of ASEAN to settle on an agreed definition of terrorism in May 2002. After all, as Nathan informs us, the Extraordinary Meeting of OIC Foreign Ministers on Terrorism, held in Kuala Lumpur a month earlier, could not arrive at a definition either. Hence ASEAN’s failure to agree on the definition of terrorism has more to do with the innate complexity of the exercise than any lack of commitment to counter-terror co-operation on its part. After all, ASEAN states, as Singh tells us, are fully aware that it is in their “own vital interests” to combat terrorism because it is “not merely a danger to some innocent lives and to property”:

It is a threat to the economic well being of ASEAN countries because terrorist incidents affect the tourist industry and undermine investor confidence. Further, the JI is ultimately a threat to existing state power or territorial integrity of a number of countries, in view of its ultimate goal of setting up an Islamic caliphate embracing Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Philippines, southern Thailand and eventually Singapore and Brunei.

This is precisely why, despite the assertions of Smith and Jones of a “disturbing picture of non-cooperation between ASEAN intelligence services”,

the actual empirical situation is considerably less negative. Singh shows that intra-ASEAN intelligence co-operation has been concrete and sustained on a sub-regional basis, leading to the capture of key militants such as Indonesian JI explosives expert Fathur Rohman Al-Ghozi in Manila in early 2002, Singapore JI leader Mas Selamat Kastari in the Indonesian Riau archipelago in February 2003 and Arifin Ali, of the Singapore JI again, in Thailand in May 2003. It should also be recognised that the capture of JI operational chief Hambali, also in Thailand in August 2003 could not have been achieved without intelligence sharing and cooperation between several states. It might be added, moreover, that the Singaporean and Malaysian governments willingly provided video testimony of Singaporean and Malaysian JI members during the trial in Indonesia of alleged JI spiritual leader Bashir. Last and not least, ASEAN states have been co-operating very closely with external actors like the US and Australia. The US-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism of August 2002, for example, commits both sides to closer intelligence exchange and co-operation.

Another example of the concerted co-operation amongst ASEAN states at the sub-regional level is mentioned by Singh, Nathan, as well as Jose T. Almonte (Chapter 10): the signing in May 2002 of an Anti-Terrorism Pact by Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, three states with porous maritime borders. According to Nathan, "the tripartite pact is aimed at (a) targeting potential terrorist threats, and (b) devising measures to tackle money-laundering, smuggling, drug-trafficking, hijacking, illegal trafficking of women and children, and piracy". In fact Smith and Jones criticise this pact for its focus on "illicit activities" such as money laundering and human smuggling, wondering in what ways these "fall under the rubric of 'anti-terrorism'".<sup>43</sup> However, as Ramakrishna argues in his essay, transnational criminal activities such as money laundering and illegal people movement should be seen as part of the "functional space" that directly expedites terrorist operations. In addition, Singh argues that periodic regional-level ASEAN declarations on terrorism, such as the Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism in November 2001 and the Declaration on Terrorism in November 2002 are important as they express a shared political commitment to combating the regional terrorist threat. Furthermore, in terms of regional level "practical co-operation", the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), headed by ministers of Home Affairs, forms the core of ASEAN counter-terror co-operation. The AMMTC, Singh says, permits an exchange of ideas and information on best practices in combating terrorism-related "transnational crimes like drug trafficking, trafficking in persons, sea piracy,

arms smuggling and money laundering”. While there has been no lack of counter-terror activities within ASEAN, K. S. Nathan however, acknowledges that the bigger challenge for the association would be to move more boldly and aggressively to engage “in non-traditional cooperation to address non-traditional threats to regional security”.

Apart from suggestions of less than optimal inter-state co-operation in the war on terror in Southeast Asia, a second oft-heard criticism is that some Southeast Asian governments have been too slow in taking decisive action against terror cells and activities within their national boundaries. Singh reckons that the state-level response to the terrorist threat has been strongest in Singapore, Malaysia and to some extent the Philippines. Additionally, Indonesia’s response since the Bali attacks has been much stronger. One important reason for the variation in national responses throughout Southeast Asia is the operational context. K. S. Nathan in this respect argues that both ASEAN and the wider ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) “face major constraints in their ability to respond swiftly to acts of terrorism in Southeast Asia due to at least four factors that characterise the regional security environment”:

- (1) Porous borders and generally weak immigration controls, with administrative requirements being surmounted through corruption;
- (2) long-standing economic and trade links between Southeast Asia and Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, many of which operate outside normal financial channels not readily monitored by governments, and which in turn have facilitated funds transfers from the Middle East and South Asia to radical groups in the region;
- (3) widespread criminal activity including drug trafficking in the region which in turn can facilitate the movement of resources by terrorists; and
- (4) the availability of large supplies of indigenously produced and imported weapons in Southeast Asia.

The reality is that not all Southeast Asian states have similar capacities to interdict the circulation of terrorist funds, material and manpower. In this connection, Indonesia and the Philippines stand out, as Jose Almonte laments, as “weak states” with incomplete administrative coverage over their extensive territories, in comparison to the strong, well-resourced states of Singapore and Malaysia. Chongkittavorn’s discussion of the lack of central government coverage over the remote south suggests that Thailand may in some respects demonstrate elements of state weakness as well. Complicating state-level responses to the terrorist problem are complex bureaucratic rivalries amongst security agencies. In Indonesia, according to Leonard Sebastian, the police lack the resources as well as “an effective database of domestic radicals and their links

to international terrorist groups". Moreover, there is doubt as to whether the Indonesian military will willingly share their intelligence on domestic groups with the police. Institutional rivalries and lack of co-ordination between various Thai intelligence agencies, Chongkittavorn avers, also hamper Bangkok's counter-terror effort, while in the Philippines, Singh highlights the possibility that elements of the military may be fomenting trouble so as to undermine Manila's peace negotiations with the MILF.

Nevertheless, despite these diverse difficulties, ASEAN governments have been seeking to strengthen their respective legal and administrative counter-terror regimes. Thus Jakarta, following the Bali bombings, promulgated two emergency Presidential decrees to immediately facilitate investigations of detentions of suspected terrorists, which were subsequently passed as laws on 6 March 2003. According to Singh, these laws "confer powers on the police to detain suspected terrorists without trial, authorise the death penalty for certain terrorist acts, and allow intelligence reports to be used as evidence". In addition, according to Chongkittavorn, the new anti-terrorism decrees issued by the Thaksin government in August 2003 and tacked on to the existing Criminal Code and the Anti-Money Laundering Act, confer power on the authorities to "make arrests", detain terrorist suspects, issue search warrants or "tap suspects' phones". However, the Indonesian and Thai legislation do not empower the central governments the way the internal security laws in Singapore and Malaysia do.

The question is, should they? The issue of whether the strong state in Southeast Asia actually combats or fuels Islamist radicalism is another point worth closer scrutiny. Smith and Jones argue that state authoritarianism in the region and attendant governing ideologies emphasising national unity above all else have generated alienation amongst some Muslims that radical Islamist clerics have exploited. Hence in this sense the strong "surveillance state" in Southeast Asia has been a root cause of radical Islamist terrorism. The major problem with this viewpoint has been touched on already: not all Southeast Asian states are strong states, and Singapore, the focus of Smith and Jones' analysis, cannot be said to be typical of the rest of Southeast Asia. Again, we encounter an instance of Western analysts attempting to impose a theoretical construct onto the region, obliterating in the process important regional variations. In particular, Smith and Jones contend that "increased surveillance of the ISD (Internal Security Department) variety is part of the problem, not the solution", as "megalomaniac hyper-vigilance" generates the potential "to undermine the fabric of national security".<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, it can be argued with equal force, as some of the contributors to this volume

do, that a dearth of the state capacity to monitor remote areas in eastern Indonesia, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, have allowed JI and even Al Qaeda to establish a presence. Hence, it is precisely a strong surveillance state that is needed to check the freedom, or as Ramakrishna terms it, the “functional space”, of terrorist groups to operate.

Nevertheless, efforts to increase state capacity in Southeast Asia to close down terrorist functional space are not enough. These must be balanced by enhanced attempts to improve state efficiency in delivering social services as well as create more public space within which important issues of concern to the region’s Muslim communities can be articulated more openly. Rizal Sukma (Chapter 15) in this vein makes the case that the real problem facing Indonesia is not radical Islam per se but rather the lack of good governance. He opines that the emergence of many radical Islamist groups in Indonesia has been due to oppressive state policy during the New Order period, as well as real and perceived political and socio-economic injustice at the current time. He warns that radical Islam might gain further ground if Jakarta fails to engineer a speedy economic recovery and construct a viable democracy based on the rule of law. Warning against reverting to a greater role of the military in the politics of the country in order to foster greater *stabilitas*, Sukma reckons that such a development would only foster a return to the repression that Indonesians do not wish to undergo yet again. As he puts it, oppression is not the answer to radicalism, and will only lead to more radicalism. Sebastian echoes this view. He asserts that Jakarta’s challenge is to devise legislation and counter-terror policies able to prevent and punish terrorism — while respecting the democratic space within which strong political or religious dissent can be articulated peacefully. He feels that Jakarta’s new anti-terrorism regulations seem to have achieved a balance between Indonesia’s desire to preserve order, respect international anti-terrorism conventions and yet protect its fledgling democracy.

There appears to be some truth in the assertion by Smith and Jones, moreover, that the dearth of “avenues of independent thought and analysis”<sup>45</sup> fosters the development of closed minds that radical Islamist clerics can readily exploit. Woodier in this collection makes a similar point:

The limited coverage of alternative perspectives by the mass media, partly because of their preparedness to bow to local controls and partly because of a process of dumbing down, clearly played a role in the failure of both Singapore and neighbour Malaysia to recognise the extent of the coherence and cohesion of the politically radicalised Islamic opposition in their own backyard.

One of the Singapore JI members, for instance, revealed that he had been attracted to JI preachers partly because other mainstream Muslim groups "had disregarded *jihad*", and he reckoned that "by preaching *jihad* JI was more complete".<sup>46</sup> As we shall see shortly, the development of a social and political milieu within which critical thinking can flourish may in fact be an important plank of an effective counter-terror policy.

## **The US Factor in Southeast Asian Counter-Terror Policy**

Daljit Singh notes "Indonesia was in denial mode about the terrorist network within its borders until the Bali bombing of 12 October 2002", while Thailand's response "evolved from denial to cautious acknowledgment in May 2003". In early September 2003, moreover, there was widespread disappointment that an Indonesian court sentenced alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir to only four years' jail on charges of being involved in a series of church bombings in 2000. Significantly, he was found not guilty of being JI's spiritual leader or *amir*, something that would have earned him a much stiffer sentence. While one Western analyst called the judgement a "glorified slap on the wrist",<sup>47</sup> other observers lamented that apart from Singapore, the other Southeast Asian states were not tackling the regional terrorist problem with sufficient vigour.<sup>48</sup> In a thickening of the plot, it was pointed out shortly after that in fact, Hamzah Haz, the Vice-President of Indonesia and leader of that country's largest Islamic party, the United Development Party (PPP), had been working behind the scenes to influence the outcome of the Bashir trial. There had apparently been anxiety at the highest levels in Jakarta that had Bashir been found guilty of the more serious charge of leading JI, President Megawati Sukarnoputri's government might have been obliged to close down his *pesantren* in Solo, Central Java as well as disband his MMI organisation. Not only would such action, it was feared, have alienated Muslim voters ahead of the 2004 elections, it might have even have provoked JI terror reprisals in Jakarta.<sup>49</sup>

Such apparent vacillation on the part of Jakarta has earned the ire of regional security analysts. One respected commentator for instance urged President Megawati to "name Jemaah Islamiyah publicly as the organisation behind the bombings that have killed hundreds". She criticised government officials for giving in to Muslims leaders who argue that the name Jemaah Islamiyah refers to the "broader Muslim community". She asserted that until Jakarta acknowledges categorically and unequivocally JI's existence, "they're not going to be able to stop it".<sup>50</sup> While such sentiment is understandable, it is

not entirely fair. As pointed out earlier, ASEAN governments genuinely want to deal with the radical Islamist threat, but, to use a Clauewitizian metaphor, are facing “friction” in doing so. Their counter-terror action, either singly or in concert, appears half-hearted only partly because of internal factors such as a dearth of state capacity, bureaucratic politicking, and bilateral issues such as lingering mutual tensions and occasional spats. It must be recalled that Southeast Asia is home to 230 million Muslims, “more than in all of the Arab Middle East”,<sup>51</sup> and the interests of these Muslims have to be taken into account when national and even foreign policies are formulated. As several contributors to this volume show, a major, paradoxical factor introducing friction in the conduct of ASEAN counter-terror policy is the United States itself. Or as prominent US scholar Chalmers Johnson bluntly put it, his government’s reaction to 9/11 has “made an already terrible situation worse”.<sup>52</sup>

It is not merely that radical Islamist ideology portrays Washington as the primary enemy of Islam, though this is certainly crucial. It is that Washington’s attitudes, policies and behaviour toward the Muslim world reinforce such negative stereotypes promoted by the radicals. See Seng Tan (Chapter 12) contends in these pages that the Bush Administration’s counter-terror discourse, in conjunction with other ancillary security-oriented discourses — including, among others, those in missile defence<sup>53</sup> — is “productive” of an ideological construction of a particular variant of Islam as a dangerous “Other”: as “terrorists,” “enemies of America,” and so on. While Tan acknowledges that this process of Otherness-making constitutes and maintains to an extent the political identity of the United States, he warns, however, that it is precisely such a discursive process that *inter alia* tends to foster a “totalising” image of Islam as an inherently problematic civilizational entity. This in turn hinders the effective analysis needed to differentiate between various streams of Islam, thereby preventing US policymakers from recognising that much of the anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is adducible to specific US policies rather than what America per se represents. Hence while the war on terror does not have to connote a clash between the West and Islam, American discursive practices, by inadvertently promoting a theologocentric construction of Islam as inherently violent and prone to terrorism, does nothing to prevent such a civilisational collision.

Evelyn Goh (Chapter 13) argues that Washington’s conduct of the war on terror has adversely affected the vital “soft” foundations of its power: the appeal of American values and culture; the perception that US hegemony is benign; and the apparent legitimacy of the exercise of American power. In

particular, the Bush Administration's National Security Strategy "of strengthening primacy, intervening more assertively to protect security and interests, and adopting a more explicit ideological basis for foreign policy, can be expected to exacerbate extant problems". Goh holds that such a hard power-dominated strategic approach has undermined both the coherence of its global counter-terror coalition as well as its image with Muslim polities and societies everywhere. Ramakrishna (Chapter 14) concurs with Goh's general assessment of US strategy, pointing out that the Bush Administration's NSCT document in particular, that divides states neatly into "willing" and "reluctant" partners in the global counter-terror war is too abstract. He opines that the "reality is not reducible to simple black and white terms":

The essential concern, even in relatively "willing" states such as Singapore and Malaysia, is that if governments are seen to be too closely aligned with the US, this would provoke an electoral and even militant Muslim backlash. The problem is that amongst Southeast Asian Muslims — both "radicals" and "moderates" — the US is generally perceived to be against Islam. In other words, there exists amongst pockets of Southeast Asian Muslims, to widely varying degrees, a modicum of sympathy for JI, even if the vast majority of Muslims deplore utterly the network's *modus operandi*.

Ramakrishna's essential point is that Washington's policies and military action, especially within Muslim theatres where US combat troops are currently deployed such as Afghanistan and Iraq, tend to inadvertently alienate local Muslim populations, thereby generating "political oxygen" that radical Islamist clerics everywhere, including Southeast Asia, have exploited to reinforce the anti-American ideological thread that animates both neo-Salafiyah and radical Salafiyah discourse. This in turn reinforces conspiracy theories like the one recounted in this volume by Tatik Hafidz (Chapter 17), that the "CIA and Mossad masterminded the Bali bombings to prove that terrorist networks do exist in Indonesia, so that Jakarta would be drawn into supporting the American-imposed war on terror". Within such a supercharged political and ideological context, is it not at all surprising that Jakarta feels that it must tread very carefully in sentencing radicals like Bashir; that in setting up the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism in 2003 Kuala Lumpur took pains to deny any overt "US interference" in its running; and that Thai Muslims in the southern town of Narathiwat regarded the arrests of alleged JI militants in their midst as a "gesture of appeasement to the United States, and that US President George W. Bush is bent on creating a climate of

distrust of Muslims”.<sup>54</sup> It is in truth this increasingly powerful radical Islamist ideological paradigm — with its central exclusionist neo-Salafiyah core — that ensures that the efforts of Southeast Asian governments are encumbered by “friction” in their counter-terror fight; a paradigm which in no small irony, Washington itself has inadvertently reinforced. It is therefore not without justification that two Singapore analysts, writing just before the 9/11 tragedy, urged that America exercise “strategic restraint” in its foreign policy, particularly towards Southeast Asia.<sup>55</sup>

## Countering Radical Islamist Ideology

One theme that unifies the various contributions in this volume is the idea that radical Islamist ideology is the centre of gravity of the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia. This ideology is dynamic, robust, and draws its sustenance from exploitation by radicals of objective political and socio-economic grievances of Muslim communities within the region and — thanks to information technologies such as satellite news channels and importantly, the Internet — in the wider world. In this sense JI may have its roots in Indonesia, but it is no exaggeration to assert that it driven by a global *jihad* agenda that is coloured very heavily by an anti-American, anti-Western bias. Imam Samudra, the alleged field co-ordinator for the Bali attacks, under interrogation by Indonesian police, provided much insight into two aspects of JI’s radical Islamist ideology: its content, and its mode of transmission.<sup>56</sup> In terms of content, Samudra, when asked by investigators in late November 2002 why he had planned the Bali attacks, provided an extremely detailed, telling response. This is well worth quoting in some detail as it may shed valuable light on what drives both JI and perhaps even the wider radical Islamist global network spearheaded by Al Qaeda:<sup>57</sup>

To oppose the barbarity of the US army of the Cross and its allies . . . to take revenge for the pain of . . . weak men, women and babies who died without sin when thousands of tonnes of bombs were dropped in Afghanistan in September 2001 [sic] . . . during Ramadan . . . To carry out a [sic] my responsibility to wage a global *jihad* against Jews and Christians throughout the world . . . As a manifestation of Islamic solidarity between Moslems, not limited by geographic boundaries. To carry out Allah’s order in the Book of An-nisa, verses 74–76, which concerns the obligation to defend weak men, weak women, and innocent babies, who are always the targets of the barbarous actions of the American terrorists and their allies . . . So that the American terrorists and their allies understand that the blood of Moslems is expensive

and valuable; and cannot be — is forbidden to be — toyed with and made a target of American terrorists and their allies. So that the [American and allied] terrorists understand how painful it is to lose a [sic] mothers, husbands, children, or other family members, which is what they have so arbitrarily inflicted on Moslems throughout the world. To prove to Allah — the Almighty and most deserving of praise — that we will do whatever we can to defend weak Moslems, and to wage war against the US imperialists and their allies.

Several key themes stand out: the notion of a global Islamic community, “not limited by geographic boundaries”, that must be defended; the “US army of the Cross and its allies” representing the repository of the “Crusader spirit” of this age, an idea which finds deep resonance within Sayyid Qutb’s writings<sup>58</sup> which have been circulated within the JI network; the idea that JI is seeking to wage a legitimate defensive *jihad* to “defend weak men, weak women, and innocent babies, who are always the targets of the barbarous actions of the American terrorists and their allies”; the rationale of avenging the deaths of innocent, helpless Muslim civilians at the hands of “the American terrorists and their allies” in Muslim lands such as Afghanistan; the importance of driving home the point that the blood of Muslims is not cheap;<sup>59</sup> the imperative to give the “the American terrorists and their allies” a taste of their own medicine, so to speak; and finally, and perhaps significantly, the notion that part of the definition of being a good Muslim is the very willingness to “prove to Allah” that one is willing to wage global *jihad* in defence of the faith anywhere. In Southeast Asia, such motivations have already produced “martyrdom” operations, or more precisely suicide attacks, against “infidel” US targets in Bali and in Jakarta.

But how did Samudra arrive at this understanding of what a good Muslim in the 21st century must be? Here Samudra, a well-educated individual who had taught himself the use of computers and who considered himself a leader within the JI network may be less typical than the average JI foot soldier. While most of the JI rank and file appear to adhere very closely to the ideological interpretation laid down by their leaders,<sup>60</sup> Samudra seems to conform to the model of the radical Islamist who, rather than adhering slavishly to the *fatwas* or religious edicts of a small coterie of religious scholars or *ulama*, believes that *ijtihad*, the independent interpretation of Islamic doctrine — is a right to be exercised by every knowledgeable Muslim.<sup>61</sup> Thus when he was asked in December 2002 whether his understanding of *jihad* had been influenced by “Jafar Umar Thalib”, “Abu Bakar Bashir”, “Habib Rizieq Syihab”, “Hambali” or “Muklas”, he responded: “I’ve never thought of the five people above as being leaders or idols; and I’ve never consulted any of

those five”.<sup>62</sup> Samudra proceeded to inform investigators that he had made up his own mind after reading books by radicals such as Abdullah Azzam, Safar al-Hawali and Ibn Taymiyyah, amongst others. He added that articles posted on certain radical Islamist Internet sites had shaped his views as well. Samudra’s admission that he had been influenced by what he himself had read and imbibed from the Internet underscores Zachary Abuza’s worry in these pages that the real danger, aside from nebulous institutional “linkages”, is that Al Qaeda, through the over 1,000 sites on the Internet Gunaratna mentions, is metastasising into an ideology that many Southeast Asian radical Islamists are finding irresistible. Hence while Southeast Asia is still home to very secular and moderate Muslims, the number who share Al Qaeda’s world view, sense of injustice and intolerance, and conviction that a militant *jihad* are necessary to bring about their social, political and economic vision, is growing. This, according to Ramakrishna, will translate into greater “political space” within which JI can sustain itself.

While sustained effort must therefore be expended on intelligence sharing and law enforcement measures to interdict the flow of JI militants, funds and terrorist material throughout the region, thereby closing down, in Ramakrishna’s phrase, the network’s functional space, equal effort must be expended on closing down the network’s political space that empowers and complements its functional space. Ramakrishna reckons in this respect, three key policy thrusts are necessary:

[E]radicating local political and socioeconomic “root causes”; assisting progressive Islamists win the ideological battle for Islam in Southeast Asia; and reducing the “political oxygen” issuing from US policy and behaviour that fuel regional radical Islamist propaganda that the America is attacking the worldwide *ummah*.

Ramakrishna argues that in essence targeting JI’s ideology is the key to closing down its political space within some Southeast Asian Muslim communities. It is suggested here that to counter this ideology, more effort needs to be expended in three inter-related realms: developing appropriate counter-ideologies, encouraging more active participation by progressive Muslims and fostering more public space in the ideological war, and urging more calibrated US foreign policy behaviour toward the Muslim world. In terms of developing an appropriate counter-ideological response to radical Islamism of the Al Qaeda and JI kind, it seems particularly important for progressive Muslims in the region and elsewhere to more aggressively promote what the Tunisian scholar Rachid Ghannoushi calls a “realistic fundamentalism”. This

seeks to revive Islamic values in all spheres of life while grounding them in current realities, and instead of a binary "us-versus-them" dichotomised worldview, celebrate the value of religious pluralism.<sup>63</sup> This approach implies an ideological engagement not merely with violent radical Salafism, but also its not necessarily violent but nonetheless rejectionist ideational forebear, neo-Salafism.

In this connection, Azyumardi Azra is forthright in calling on Southeast Asian Muslim leaders to engage in ideological combat. He insists that "it is time for moderate Muslim leaders to speak more clearly and loudly that a literal interpretation of Islam will only lead to an extremism that is unacceptable to Islam, and that Islam cannot condone, let alone justify, any kind of violent and terrorist act". Significantly, Azra, whose views carry considerable weight in Indonesia, argues that President Megawati should not feel overly hampered by her lack of Islamic credentials:

She is regarded as very hesitant and indecisive in taking any harsh measures against the radicals, because she is worried — it seems — of the possible backlash from the Muslim public. It appears that she does not realise that the moderate Muslim leaders and organisations are more than willing to rally behind her in opposition against any kind of religious extremism and radicalism. This has been made clear by the statements of Hasyim Muzadi (national chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) and Syafii Maarif (national chairman of Muhammadiyah) since the 11 September 2001 tragedy in the US that Indonesian Islam cannot accept any kind of religious extremism.

In addition, encouraging greater activism by progressive Muslims in the counter-ideological war with the radical Islamists and their neo-Salafiyah cousins implies opening up more political space within Southeast Asia for more open discussion of topics such as various understandings of *jihad*; ways to reconcile the obligations of dual citizenship in both a national state as well as a transnational Islamic community or *ummah*; and the challenges and rewards of practising one's faith within a modern, secular, multi-religious society. In particular, more open discussion on the various interpretations of the *dar al islam* or realm of Islam might be salutary. As well-known Egyptian-born, European-based Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan suggests, Muslims "should not consider Europe and other 'non-Muslim' countries as lands of darkness, the *dar al-harb*, and therefore unsafe for Muslims".<sup>64</sup> Ramadan suggests that *ulama* and professionals should form national, regional or international committees to discuss openly these and other questions.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the mass media can also help "promote transparency and public criticism by exposing

the attempts of radical preachers to misuse Islam for violent ends”.<sup>66</sup> More open debate within the Muslim community in Southeast Asia will also foster greater critical thinking that might well be an antidote to JI recruitment. It is telling that the Singapore government’s January 2003 White Paper on the JI threat noted that the Singapore JI detainees relied heavily upon their leaders for pointing out what “true Islam meant”. They themselves had found it “stressful to be critical, evaluative and rational”, and displayed “high compliance, low assertiveness” and did not really question their religious values. This rendered them very vulnerable to manipulation and indoctrination by the leaders.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, given the very direct connection between perceived US antipathy against the Muslim world and Islamist radicalisation in Southeast Asia, as evidenced by Imam Samudra’s comments, it is very important that Washington makes a serious effort to improve its image with Muslims worldwide. On the one hand, as Ramakrishna observes in the volume, more nuanced public diplomacy showing how America has “genuinely helped alleviate the plight of Muslims in Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and now Iraq” is needed. On the other hand, Ramakrishna argues that:

America must not undercut its own public diplomacy by inadvertently generating political oxygen that can be exploited by JI for propaganda purposes. Any air strike or military/law enforcement operation that accidentally kills, injures or brutalises Afghan or Iraqi civilians would only generate political oxygen that JI can exploit to fuel anti-Americanism.

Ramakrishna warns, moreover, that if the US does not ensure the emergence of viable states in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and is seen as one-sided in its approach to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, “this would further reinforce the JI ideological narrative” of a “Crusader” America persecuting Islam, and in Southeast Asia, produce more Amrozis and Imam Samudras.

### **Saving Southeast Asian Salafism with a “Smiling Face”**

The upshot of the preceding discussion is that while it may be unfair to label Southeast Asia as a “terrorist haven” and thus the “second front” in the war on terror, it most clearly is a front in that war. Moreover, while it is certainly true that Al Qaeda and JI are not necessarily behind all militant Islamist groups within the region that does not mean that they are not trying to co-opt them. The operational picture is always dynamic. Southeast Asia cannot be

considered a "terrorist haven" because of the Bali and more recent Marriott bombings, simply because terror plots and terror attacks are occurring in other theatres as well. The real danger is not that the region is becoming a hotbed of terrorism, but rather that the region's tolerant, progressive brand of Islam is in danger of being gradually marginalised by a far more virulent, rejectionist ideological variant in the form of neo-Salafism and its radical offshoot. In a recent article Emmanuel Sivan suggests that Indonesian "liberal" Islam, with its contention that the faith should be a private affair and need not "regulate every aspect of life", is unique and cannot be considered a model for the rest of the Muslim world.<sup>68</sup> However, he ignores the fact that a nuanced Indonesian Islamic fundamentalism, or Salafism with a "smiling face", as Azyumardi Azra might well put it, has also been developing in that land for many decades. According to Azra, the distinction between Clifford Geertz's classic *santri* and *abangan*<sup>69</sup> categories has been blurring for a very long time, and Islamic orthodoxy in the cultural rather than the political sphere has been gradually gaining ground over an extended period, a phenomenon also visible in other Southeast Asian communities. It is this Southeast Asian "realistic fundamentalism" with its emphasis on the commingling of *tawhid* as well as religious tolerance that is worth saving, precisely because its projection beyond Southeast Asia might encourage the rise of similar, contextualised ideological variants elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Given, as we have seen, the primacy of ideological factors in the war on terror, such a scenario would have profound strategic effects. If this volume can encourage the adoption of a middle-range, bottom-up counter-terror strategy that helps secure the survival and wider propagation of Southeast Asian Salafism with a "smiling face", the effort would have been worth it.

## Notes

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8. Romesh Ratnesar, "How an Al-Qaeda Bigwig Got Nabbed", *Time*, 25 August 2003, p. 42.
9. "Travellers Face No-Go Zones", *Insurance Day*, 22 August 2003.
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11. Peter Kammerer, "Anti-Terror Drive in Southeast Asia is 'Half-Hearted': Experts Say Not Enough is Being Done to Stop the Spread of Muslim Extremism", *South China Morning Post*, 5 September 2003.
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13. In this work, political Islam refers to a political ideology based on Islamic principles. Islamic fundamentalists have also been termed Islamists. Radical Islamists refer to Islamists who adopt violence in pursuit of their goals.
14. See essays on post-9/11 security cooperation between the US and its Asian allies and partners in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Evolving Approaches to Asia Pacific Security* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming).
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19. See Kumar Ramakrishna and Andrew Tan, "The New Terrorism: Diagnoses and Prescriptions", in Andrew Tan and Kumar Ramakrishna, eds., *The New Terrorism: Anatomy, Trends and Counter-Strategies* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), p. 6.
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42. Jones and Smith, "The Perils of Hyper-Vigilance", p. 47.
43. Jones and Smith, "The Perils of Hyper-Vigilance", p. 47.
44. Jones and Smith, "The Perils of Hyper-Vigilance", p. 49. Smith and Jones refer here to the Internal Security Department of Singapore.
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59. A similar notion appears to have also motivated the Ramzi Yousef cell that bombed the World Trade Centre in New York in 1993. Benjamin and Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, p. 13.
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