

## **Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Threat and Response<sup>1</sup>**

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In the post-9/11 world, the landscape of terrorism in Southeast Asian has undergone profound change. Following the US-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, al-Qaeda's structure was significantly dispersed. In order to continue its campaign of international terror, a weakened al-Qaeda began to rely far more heavily on its regional and local Islamist counterparts around the world, including those in Southeast Asia.

### **Al-Qaeda Background**

In the late 1980's, Afghanistan and Pakistan became the international centers for ideological and physical training of Islamist guerrilla and terrorist groups. Following the defeat of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda emerged in this environment. Al-Qaeda continued the work of Afghan *mujahidin*, and throughout the 1990's provided trained recruits and funds to local Islamist groups in different parts of the world. As an organization with a global membership, al-Qaeda had diverse capabilities, as well as access to unprecedented resources, from its bases in Asia and the Sudan. It effectively armed, trained, financed, and theologically indoctrinated three-dozen Islamist groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Specifically, over the course of the 1990s, al-Qaeda and Taliban camps in Afghanistan trained between 70,000 and 120,000 Muslim youth to fight in the Philippines (Mindanao), Indonesia (Maluku and Poso), Myanmar, China (Xinjiang), Kashmir, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Dagestan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In these endeavors, al-Qaeda provided ideological, financial, and operational support to groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines; Lashkar Jundullah in Indonesia; Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) in Malaysia; Jemmah Salafiyah (JS) in Thailand; Arakan Rohingya Nationalist Organization (ARNO) and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) in Myanmar and Bangladesh; and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a Southeast Asian organization with a presence in Australia.<sup>3</sup> In addition to its training camps in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda also dispatched

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trainers to establish or serve in the training camps of other groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Presently, many of the smaller and more mobile camps in a number of the conflict zones of these regions partially compensate for the loss of Afghanistan, and are likely to produce the third generation of *mujahidin*.

### **Operations**

Since the late 1980's, there have been clear indications that al-Qaeda has ideologically penetrated and established a base of operations in Southeast Asia. In 1988, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, the brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden, established the Manila branch of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). The IIRO is a "respectable" Saudi charity that provides assistance to Islamist groups in the region, and at the time also served as a regional hub for al-Qaeda. Additionally, 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Ahmed Yousef and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad traveled to Southeast Asia in 1994 to plan the elaborate "Bojinka" operation, which included the bombing of 12 US airliners over the Pacific.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, within the MILF Camp Abu Bakar complex, the Kuwaiti trainer Omar Al Farooq established Camp Vietnam to train Southeast Asian groups in guerrilla warfare and terrorism.<sup>5</sup> The aim of these operations was to build a committed core of operatives to "liberate" suffering Muslims in US-supported regimes throughout the region.

### **Shared Ideology and Tactics**

Through dedicated infiltration efforts, al-Qaeda successfully influenced the strategic aims of regional separatist and religious groups in Southeast Asia from winning territorial struggles to waging universal jihad. For example, Singapore's branch of Jemaah Islamiyah, led by Ma Salam-at Kastari, had planned to hijack and crash an Aeroflot plane from Bangkok, Thailand, into Changi International Airport in Singapore. According to Kastari, the choice of a Russian aircraft was to teach Moscow a lesson for what it was doing to his Muslim brothers in Chechnya.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Bali and Jakarta Marriott attacks involved two suicide terrorists and aimed to produce mass civilian fatalities. These tactics were hitherto alien to Southeast Asian groups, and are clear examples of imported al-Qaeda-influenced methodology. Importantly, al-Qaeda's most enduring impact on Southeast Asian militant groups has been imbuing regional militant groups with the notion of an obligation to fight the "distant enemy"—or as Osama Bin Laden has said, the "head of the snake"—namely, the United States of America. Imam Samudra, a JI member and one of the key planners of the Bali attacks, revealed during his interrogation that Australia was specifically targeted in the Bali attacks in large part due to its direct support of the US.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Qaeda's creation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders in February 1998, established the group as the preeminent coordinating organization for Islamist groups worldwide.<sup>8</sup> Many Southeast Asian militant groups now emulate al-Qaeda's ideology and tactics. The marked spread of al-Qaeda's unifying ideology was demonstrated by the creation of the group's Southeast Asian regional umbrella organization, Rabitat-ul-Mujahidin ("Legion of the Fighters of God"), by Hambali in 1999. Some groups, such as the Free Aceh Movement (both MP-GAM and MB-GAM) in Indonesia, resisted attempts by al-Qaeda associate Hambali to appropriate

their ethno-nationalist Muslim movement into a regional organization with universal aims.<sup>9</sup> A very different approach was taken by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a group that inherited the 500-year old Moro struggle for independence from the Christian-dominated Philippines. Influenced by the ideals of Muslim Brotherhood, MILF willingly cooperated with al-Qaeda, and continues to provide critical assistance to Southeast Asian Islamist terrorist groups.

The consequences of al-Qaeda's influence in the region are evident—and chilling. The coordinated October 2002 bombings of Bali and the US consulate in Denpasar remain the world's second most deadly terrorist attacks since 9/11.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the bombing of Superferry 14 in Manila is the most lethal maritime terror attack to date. The intentions and capabilities of Southeast Asian groups to target regional governments and Western interests have not diminished since 2001. In fact, the region is likely to witness more incidents of terrorism in the immediate future.

### **The Emerging Threat**

There have been three major developments in the threat posed by jihadist terrorism since 9/11: the evolution of al-Qaeda into an ideological movement, strengthened by effective dissemination of propaganda, the recruitment of a new generation of *mujahidin*, and the dispersal of jihadist training centers across the world.

Traditionally, al-Qaeda's established hierarchy and centralized control of operations allowed the group to conduct long-term planning for high profile attacks on symbolic and strategic targets. As a result, al-Qaeda conducted a relatively small number of attacks, but those that were carried out were typically "spectacular." Through these awe-inspiring attacks, al-Qaeda aimed to inspire, instigate, and influence the regional groups and the wider global Islamic community to wage war against the US, its allies, and its friends. Al-Qaeda influenced regional groups by co-opting their leaders, and arming, training, and financing them, as well as by assisting them in acquiring tactical targets. Now, however, with its post-9/11 weakened position, al-Qaeda leadership is urging its regional associates to hit both strategic and tactical targets at their own discretion.

In contrast to its earlier incarnation as a single entity, post-9/11 al-Qaeda is a conglomerate of organizations. "Al-Qaeda proper," estimated at 4,000 members in October 2001, has been replaced by "al-Qaeda plus," composed of two-dozen associated groups armed, trained, and financed by original al-Qaeda elements. As the acknowledged "spearhead of Islam," al-Qaeda continues to provide both ideological and strategic direction for the worldwide jihadist movement. Indeed, in an October 2004 message, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, encouraged groups to attack western targets at any opportunity, and stressed the importance of "carrying on the fight" even if the leadership of al-Qaeda were to be killed or captured.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Qaeda's new role includes advancing its traditional mission through non-military means such as the mass media, and especially new communication technologies. The surge of regular pronouncements by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri in audio, video, and print media since the US-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan in October

2001 has resonated in the Muslim world, particularly after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. By continuing to politicize and radicalize Muslims (including both migrant and Diaspora communities) through the dissemination of propaganda, al-Qaeda intends to increase the pool of recruits and support that it considers critical for the continuity of jihad.

Prior to 9/11, al-Qaeda invested in propaganda to a lesser degree, as the organization's primary mission was to train as many Muslims as possible and to provide specialized assistance to Islamist groups worldwide. The group's pre-9/11 propaganda was primarily the responsibility of a number of Islamist parties and groups based in Europe and North America. With a number of these parties and groups coming under close scrutiny from Western governments, al-Qaeda and its associated parties and groups have taken over the role of information dissemination. In comparison to the pre-9/11 propaganda dominated by non-al-Qaeda groups, the al-Qaeda brand of propaganda is far more violent, explicitly calling for Muslims to kill.

Having suffered significantly in its operational capability, al-Qaeda is trying to compensate for its losses by turning to groups and members it had trained in Afghanistan and elsewhere and asking them to join the fight. Despite being aggressively hunted worldwide, al-Qaeda has had great success at providing ideological direction. Moreover, today the threat posed by jihadist is far more diverse, dispersed, and diffused than it once was. Thanks to the continued success of training camps, three generations of distinct but interlocking *mujahidin* feature in today's conflicts. The experience in Afghanistan has been pivotal in this regard.

The creation of new, regional training camps with a global agenda is an indication that a new threat is emerging in the form of jihadist fighters willing to carry on the global struggle. The post-9/11 Islamist camps active in Southeast Asia include Hodeibia, Palestine, and Vietnam in Mindanao, Philippines; Poso, Sulawesi and Balikpapan, Kalimantan in Indonesia; and Rohingya camps on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. While ideological training is imparted in a few Islamic schools (*madrassas*), military training is imparted in makeshift mobile and static camps that are difficult to detect from the air.

A good example of the evolving nature of the threat is the development of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). A few hundred Southeast Asians that fought in the anti-Soviet multinational Afghan *jihad* (December 1979-February 1989) returned home and joined several local Islamist groups after the Soviet withdrawal, helping to form the core of JI. Since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a marked increase in the number of both planned and successfully executed attacks by JI on Western targets. The group's most recent operation occurred on October 1, 2005 when three suicide bombers struck two sea food cafes in the Jimbaran beach resort for a second time, as well as a three story noodle and steakhouse in downtown Kuta, Bali, Indonesia's most popular tourist destination.<sup>12</sup> In March 2005, 20 JI members graduated from its terrorist training camps, and despite its targeting by regional governments, the group has successfully relocated to Mindanao, and continues to operate its training and base camps. These attacks and actions underline the continued threat to Southeast Asian economic and Western interests posed by JI's al-

Qaeda inspired objective of creating an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia.

Despite an active US presence aimed at combating the aforementioned ASG and related Islamist terrorist groups, the MILF works clandestinely with al-Qaeda, JI, ASG, and the Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement (RSRM).<sup>13</sup> Since the detection of JI in Singapore, group operatives have switched their focus and steadfastly worked with Southeast Asian groups to attack Western and domestic targets in the Philippines. In June 2003, Philippine authorities disrupted multiple attacks in Manila by arresting the MILF Special Operations Group leader Muklis Yunos and his Egyptian counterpart. They were planning to attack: the Presidential Palace with an oil tanker truck filled with ammonium nitrate mixed with saw dust and gasoline; the US Embassy; a US ship docked at the Manila bay area by ramming into it an explosives-laden speed boat; the Pandacan Oil Depot by using a rocket propelled grenade triggered by a mobile phone acting as a remote switch; the International Airport in Manila by ramming an explosives-laden vehicle into it; and a major commercial shipping line plying Philippine waters through the remote detonation of a car bomb hidden inside the ship cargo.<sup>14</sup> Beyond these specific plans that have resulted from the co-option and integration of al-Qaeda and JI elements into the MILF infrastructure, the jihadi integration has also had a broader political effect, complicating peace talks between the MILF and the Philippine government.

Spearheaded by JI, ASG, RSRM, and MILF formed Jayash al Madhi in November 14, 2004. This new organization was to be an overall structure for Southeast Asian Islamist groups, and at the meeting of the *majlis shura* (“consultative council”) in Datu Piang, Mindanao, group leaders agreed to put aside their many differences and work together in pursuit of a Southeast Asian Islamic state. Among the leaders present were Dul Matin, the senior-most JI leader in the Philippines, Umar Patek, a JI member involved in the Bali attack, and Gaddhafi Janjalani, the leader of ASG. Janjalani, formerly involved in criminal activities, has been reborn as an Islamist. At the meeting, a common doctrinal approach and joint training and operational efforts were embraced by the group leaders. Al-Qaeda also sent an unequivocal message to these domestic Islamist groups that they must not only attack domestic objectives, but foreign targets as well. All of the Islamist leaders escaped the Filipino government’s bombing of the meeting venue.<sup>15</sup> A key outcome of the Datu Piang meeting was the Valentine’s Day bombing of 2005, in which JI-trained RSRM and ASG members in MILF territory attacked three targets in Manila. Although another operation to simultaneously attack targets in Jakarta, Manila, and Mindanao was disrupted in April and May 2005, these groups are likely to succeed again at some point.

In sum, al-Qaeda has suffered grave losses in the form of the deaths and capture of its operational leaders and the destruction of its traditional bases in Afghanistan, but its intentions to attack the United States, its allies, and friends have not diminished. With the difficulty of striking targets in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, al-Qaeda and its associated groups are aggressively scouting for targets in lawless zones of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. When al-Qaeda and JI leaders deemed that US and Israeli targets in Manila were not suitable, they shifted their sights to Singapore. When

the Singapore operation was disrupted, they searched for targets in Taiwan, Seoul, Cambodia, and Bangkok. As sharks move rapidly in search of fresh opportunities and prey, so al-Qaeda and JI members seek out new targets. Given the porous borders, easy availability of firearms and explosives, lack of law and order, complacency, and corruption, the Southeast Asian region remains conducive for operations by local, regional, and extra-regional Islamist groups.

### **Crafting a Response**

In order to combat a threat, it must first be recognized as such. The disruption of al-Qaeda-JI plans to bomb American, British, Australian, and Israeli diplomatic targets in Singapore in December 2001 led Southeast Asian governments to uncover the links between al-Qaeda and JI.<sup>16</sup> Until the Bali bombings in October 2002, the Government of Indonesia had publicly denied the existence of the JI terrorist network on its soil. Until the disruption of JI plans to bomb American, British, Australian, Israeli, and Singaporean diplomatic targets in June 2003 in Bangkok, the Government of Thailand had done the same.<sup>17</sup> Afterwards, they had no choice but to confront the ugly reality of Islamist terrorists on their soil, and begin to devise a response.

### Domestic Improvements

While terrorists in the 1970s and 1980s killed in the tens, terrorists in the 1990s killed in the hundreds. Today, terrorists want to kill thousands. Because of the increased lethality of terrorist organizations, thanks to advancements in technology, weapons, and training, governments cannot wait until a terrorist attack occurs to act. Therefore, responses must be largely preventive. However, traditional law enforcement mindset is to wait for an incident to occur in order to begin an investigation. Without preliminary evidence, current criminal-justice systems will not permit wire-tapping, surveillance, arrests, raids, and searches of premises. Even today, law enforcement systems are designed to act efficiently after the event—to investigate, collect evidence, arrest, charge, and prosecute. Unless there is a lead, the average police officer will not expend the time, energy, or resources to pursue a case. Therefore a sea change in the culture of law enforcement is essential to combating terrorism. Instead of building cases by gathering evidence in order to prosecute, law enforcement authorities must invest their assets in collecting intelligence so as to better detect and disrupt terrorist attacks. These pro-active disruption efforts would involve confidential informants, undercover officers, and cultivation of other assets, as well as their effective management; a mind and resource intensive process.

Waging a campaign to win “hearts and minds” is a key component to any strategy aimed at defeating the Islamists. Like a company, terrorist groups need to grow in order to survive, and recruitment and flows of support – in the forms of intelligence, funds, weapons, and sanctuary—remain central to their success. To prevent terrorists from influencing the public, governments must co-opt ethnic and religious leaders of the communities from which Islamists draw support. They must also ensure that Muslims are not demonized in their societies as such intolerance provides recruiting material for the Islamists. To disrupt the public appeal of terrorist groups, it is also essential to criminalize and target terrorist support networks. In Indonesia, JI is still a legal group,

making it easier for operatives to disseminate virulent propaganda in attempts to indoctrinate supporters and attract recruits. Comprehensive legislation should be passed that criminalizes terrorist propaganda, including through the worldwide web, and fund raising by extremist groups. Likewise, religious leaders that espouse hatred must be prosecuted. History has shown that those governments that do not develop zero-tolerance policies such as these against terrorism will eventually suffer, Bali being a classic example.

At the same time, governments must be aware of the limitations of military responses to terrorism. It is certainly true that a military response is paramount in reducing the immediate threat of terrorism, especially if there is evidence of an impending attack. Nonetheless, to end terrorism, it is essential to address root causes. A multi-dimensional response is essential to dissuading terrorists from violence, and preventing the production of new terrorists. Unfortunately, a crucial aspect of this multi-pronged approach, namely the ideological response consisting of Muslim clerics condemning the preachers of hatred, is lacking in many countries.

#### International Cooperation

To counter the emerging threats of terrorism, Southeast Asian governments—with US, Australian, European, and Japanese support—are slowly but steadily strengthening their intelligence and military capabilities. Elements of cooperation and coordination include: harmonizing legislation, rendition, exchange of personnel, sharing of information and experience, transfer of expertise, joint training, and combined operations. Given the lack of trust among ASEAN countries, however, the extent of such cooperation has been largely bilateral, and at best trilateral.

As the Islamist groups depend on each other for support, a concerted and coordinated approach is essential. Al-Qaeda has served as the unifier, coordinator, and the guide for the modern Islamist movement, making it the primary target. Although al-Qaeda's capabilities have suffered, its intention to conduct violent operations (and its influence over Southeast Asian groups) has not diminished. The group remains ideologically resilient, and it still plays a significant role in setting the Islamist agenda. As the October 2002 attacks (the French oil supertanker *Limburg*, US personnel in Kuwait, and Bali) and the May 2003 operations (Riyadh, two attacks in Chechnya, 21 gas stations in Karachi, and Casablanca) demonstrated, al-Qaeda still retains the ability to coordinate and provide strategic and tactical direction to groups in Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Horn of Africa. For example, in Pakistan, Hamza al-Rabiyya, the successor to Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, continues to communicate with groups in Southeast Asia, and funds continue to flow from Saudi Arabia to regional terrorist groups. Additionally, al-Qaeda continues to use the internet and video releases to remain relevant to ongoing conflicts and to continue to spread the global jihad.

As al-Qaeda and Southeast Asian Islamist groups have learned to coordinate amongst themselves, so too must the Southeast Asian governments. Coordinated regional measures must be developed to prevent terrorists from acquiring sanctuary or support anywhere in the region. The problem posed by terrorist mobility is illustrated by the fact

that JI simply moved to Thailand and to Indonesia when it was targeted in Singapore and Malaysia in December 2001. To prevent escaping terrorists from relocating their support and operational infrastructures when they are attacked, the governments of Southeast Asia must engage in coordinated counter-terrorist action. Furthermore, the regional and international community should develop a zero-tolerance terrorism code, and those actors that defy the code should be punished.

It is also critical to extend cooperation between Southeast Asian countries from the security and intelligence domain to the domains of law enforcement and the judiciary. Furthermore, governments must graduate from cooperation to co-ordination and collaboration in joint and combined action in order to successfully combat terrorism. For example, terrorism will persist in the South of Thailand as long as Bangkok does not work collaboratively with Malaysia. As terrorism becomes increasingly transnational, the counter-terrorism of the future must as well, with initiatives in building common databases, exchanging personnel, joint training, combining operations, sharing experience, and transferring expertise.

But regional cooperation is not enough. An international fund against terrorism should be developed to assist poor countries or countries that lack the capacity to fight domestic terrorism. Sustaining a counter-terrorism campaign requires substantial resources and expertise. Most countries in the developing world that are affected by terrorism lack both the trained manpower and the resources to fight a protracted anti-terrorist campaign. As such, the rich and poor governments of the world must develop a cooperative approach in the fight against terrorism. Over 90% of the terrorist groups are born in the developing world, but they have established state-of-the-art terrorist support networks in the developed world. Until 9/11, the West tolerated the presence of these networks since they did not pose a direct and an immediate threat to their host countries. Whenever governments in the developing world requested the extradition of known terrorists from the West, Western governments spoke of the incompatibility of the criminal justice and prisons systems, or of human rights violations by the government making the request. Until 9/11, terrorists raised significant funds in North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand that supported multiple terrorist operations in the global South. Even today, a number of Islamist and non-Islamist groups generate significant support from their Diaspora and migrant communities as well as from charities, companies and other front, cover, and sympathetic organizations in the West.

With persistent calls from al-Qaeda leadership that it is the duty of every Muslim to wage jihad, terrorist support networks in the West are mutating into terrorist operational networks. Furthermore, with increased Western assistance to governments in the developing world, the terrorist threat to the West is likely to increase as well. It must be understood that al-Qaeda's first wave of attacks were in Middle Eastern and Asian countries, and that it was the failure of those governments to degrade and destroy these groups that led to a spill over of the threat into the West. A shared response, where the West works with the rest of the world, will reduce the threat at a global level. Similarly, Western assistance to Southeast Asia to fight terrorism at home will eventually reduce the threat to the West.

The post 9/11 environment is steadily creating a uniform global standard that sends a clear message to terrorists, namely that the use of terrorism as a political will result not only in their criminalization, but also the criminalization of all groups associated with them. Increasingly, terrorism as a tactic will hold less appeal for many groups and organizations as governmental, non-governmental, and intergovernmental organizations create institutions to address the grievances and aspirations of marginalized communities. With the opening of new avenues to vent anger and frustration, the threat of terrorism will remain, but will decrease substantially in the years to come.

### **Considering the Southeast Asian Environment**

In comparison with other regions, the security threats confronting Southeast Asia differ both in nature and scale. Having lived under the shadow of large Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu populations, the vast majority of Southeast Asian Muslims are tolerant and moderate. A minority of Southeast Asian Muslims who have been politicized and radicalized by extra-regional influences, primarily from the Middle East, are willing to use political violence, even terrorism, to create Islamic states. Today, the region hosts a few hundred Islamist and Muslim political parties, guerrilla groups, and terrorist groups campaigning for the enforcement of Islamic law. Although these organizations represent a miniscule percentage of the Muslim population, power hungry political leaders in religious garb have successfully (mis)used religion to mobilize significant popular support in order to achieve their own personal political aims. As Southeast Asia hosts one of the world's largest Muslim population, many Muslims perceive themselves to be duty bound to assist fellow Muslims who are suffering in conflict zones such as Mindanao, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and now Iraq.

The governments of Southeast Asia have had a variety of responses to the spread of jihadist violence in their respective countries. While some have inflamed internal strife in their hard-line approach, others have reacted weakly or too late, with dire consequence. The region is in need of strong leaders with the political will and capital to effect change; the appointment and promotion of leaders to the security sector on the basis of merit, ability, and performance; and the building of partnerships with Western governments. However, there is no "magic bullet" that will end terrorism in Southeast Asia. Instead, the counter-terrorist and anti-terrorist measures developed will have an impact on the terrorist groups and their support bases over time.

Furthermore, the policies formulated to fight Islamist terrorism, will reduce the threat posed by non-Islamist groups as well. Thus, legislative and practical measures will have an impact on ideological (left and right wing groups) and ethno-nationalist (separatist and irredentist) groups, eroding their operational and support capabilities. Some groups, such as the MILF, will agree to talks in order to escape the global counter terrorism measures. The post-9/11 environment will also force some terrorist groups to seriously consider engaging in politics even if only as a tactical measure.

### **The Future**

The post-9/11 security environment in Southeast Asia presents new challenges and opportunities. With enhanced security in the West, and a target-rich environment of Western interests and institutions in the developing world, Asia and the Middle East will face the brunt of terrorist attacks. Southeast Asian governments are burdened with the task of preventing such operations against domestic as well as Western targets. By supporting the West in the fight against terrorism, Asian and Middle Eastern countries have and will likely continue to gain the wrath of domestic and foreign Islamist groups. Nonetheless, governments in the developing world have no option but to cooperate with the resource-rich and technologically advanced West in the fight against terror. Until governments worldwide, including in Southeast Asia, develop common strategies and cooperative structures to fight extremism at the domestic, regional and international levels, terrorism will remain significant. Additionally, the burden of anti-terrorist responses should not be limited solely on the state, but should be shared by non-governmental organizations as well. To break the duality of some Muslim governments in the region and to reach out to pockets of Muslims subjected to anti-Western propaganda, public diplomacy, hitherto neglected by the West, is paramount.

As the situation is fluid and dynamic, there is no standard textbook for fighting al-Qaeda or its associated groups in Southeast Asia. The current threat can be reduced by maximizing the successes and minimizing the policy and operational failures against al-Qaeda and its associate groups in the region. With the destruction of al-Qaeda's camps throughout Afghanistan, and worldwide arrests of its leadership, Southeast Asian groups have had to establish their own training camps in their region. In contrast to the pre-9/11 setting, these camps now provide al-Qaeda type terrorist training in suicide operations, assassination operations, bombing of aircraft and ships, etc. As Western intelligence agencies assist Southeast Asian governments to interdict and target Southeast Asian groups, these groups are transforming their operational and support networks, including their modus operandi. For financing, in addition to relying on Gulf charities whose bank records can be more easily traced, they are also relying on local businesses and individual donors. For communication, given the ability of Western intelligence agencies to intercept satellite and mobile phones; they are using encrypted email communications and human couriers. They have also shifted from hard to soft targets, as hard targets have become more heavily protected. Therefore, flexibility and agility are keys for frontline law enforcement and intelligence services engaged in fighting terrorism. In this regard, terrorist groups must become the mentors of government operational agencies.

### **Conclusion**

Since the intervention of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, the Islamist terrorist threat has moved beyond al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has lost its pre-eminent status as the pioneering operational vanguard of Islamist movements, though it still fulfills this role ideologically. It lacks the organizational structure and resources to mount global operations, but is able and willing to inspire, instigate, and coordinate operations by other groups. As al-Qaeda diminishes in size and strength, it is increasingly trying to rebuild and regain its influence by relying on its associate groups in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caucasus to conduct operations. Unless and until the pressure on al-Qaeda diminishes, this is how it will survive. Accordingly, international, regional, and domestic responses to associated

Islamist terrorist groups will determine whether what remains of al-Qaeda will survive or perish.

The nature of the terrorist threat is changing rapidly to adapt to governmental security measures and countermeasures. In keeping with its mandate, the pre-9/11 al-Qaeda focused only on conducting spectacular attacks. Although al-Qaeda and its associate groups are no longer able to mount coordinated multiple suicide attacks on the scale of 9/11 inside the US, they are still capable of mounting medium and small attacks of the scale of Bali, Riyadh, and Casablanca within the US's borders. Al-Qaeda has failed to conduct another 9/11 inside the US for three reasons: increased vigilance on the part of the public and security services; unprecedented international and domestic law enforcement, security, and intelligence cooperation; and dedicated efforts to disrupt and destroy the group, which have denied it the time, space and resources to plan, prepare and mount spectacular attacks. As long as Western governments continue to release relevant threat information in the public domain in order to keep the public alert, sustain information sharing with Middle Eastern, Asian, and other governments, and keep the US-led global coalition against terrorism active, terrorist groups and their support bases will weaken.

To reduce the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia, it is essential to target both the indigenous and the foreign groups that are active in Southeast Asia. Therefore, severing al-Qaeda's ideological and operational links to the region is of paramount importance. Indeed, since 9/11, there have been over 100 attacks worldwide carried out by al-Qaeda and its associates, while a dozen attempted attacks in Southeast Asia have been aborted or disrupted. The Bali, Casablanca, Djerba, Chechnya, Mindanao, and Karachi bombings have also demonstrated that the Islamist terrorist threat has moved beyond al-Qaeda. Its regional associates, such as the Southeast Asian groups, are as lethal as their parent organization. They have learnt and will increasingly use al-Qaeda tactics such as hijacking and crashing aircraft, contact poisons, anti-aircraft weapons, and a range of other techniques to inflict mass fatalities on their enemies. As the East Africa bombings in August 1998, the attack on the Cole in October 2000, and 9/11 demonstrated, martyrdom operations—or suicide terrorism—will be their most effective tool.

The vigorous campaign of the war on terror has failed to crush the threat of al-Qaeda. Despite the arrest of al-Qaeda members and associates in 102 countries, including in Southeast Asia, the response has been inadequate to operationally shut down the group, and its network of violent Islamic movements have been able to replenish its rank and file losses and continue to fight. The robust Islamist milieu is facilitating the continuation of this fight, and as an organization nearly two decades in existence, al-Qaeda has proved a resilient and an agile organization. The fight against the jihadist brand of terrorism will be long and hard. As terrorist groups enjoy an average life span of 13.5 years, it is essential to build the global counter terrorist structures and trained personnel to meet both the current and the long-range threat. Furthermore, al-Qaeda threatens military, diplomatic, and civilian targets; uses conventional and unconventional weapons; and is capable of operating in the air, land, and sea. Therefore, a wide range of security countermeasures are necessary to protect both civilian and infrastructure targets from

attack.

Al-Qaeda's ideology also appeals to a cross section of the societies it targets, recruiting from the rich and poor, educated and less educated. As such, governments need to enlist the support of educational and religious institutions, as well as community and other influential leaders, to build norms and ethics against the use, misuse, and abuse of religion for political purposes. As the scale of threat is high, governments have no option but to work with a range of public and private sector partners in the fight against terrorism. To manage the threat posed by al-Qaeda and its associate groups, a multi-pronged, multidimensional, multi-agency, and a multinational effort is paramount.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Zeyno Baran for inviting me to deliver a talk on this subject at a joint Hudson Institute—ICPVTR meeting in Singapore in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan (2002), *Inside Al Qaeda*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 72

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with jihadist groups in Southeast Asia in 2003-4.

<sup>4</sup> Debriefing of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, Central Intelligence Agency, October 2003, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Turnbull, Wayne, A Tangled Web of Southeast Asian Islamic Terrorism: The Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network, 31 July 2003, <http://www.terrorismcentral.com>, 31 July 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Burke, Jason. "Al-Qaeda in plot to hijack British plane" *The Guardian Sunday*. 14 April 2002.

<sup>7</sup> CRS Report for Congress, "Terrorism in Southeast Asia." <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL31672.pdf>. 7 February 2005. p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Announcement of the formation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, 1998, ICPVTR Database, accessed October 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Indonesia Backgrounder, 'How the Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates,' Indonesian Backgrounder, [http://www.unsil.net/indon/ji\\_1.htm](http://www.unsil.net/indon/ji_1.htm), 11 December 2002

<sup>10</sup> Tan, Andrew, "The Singapore Experience," in Gunaratna, Rohan (ed.), *Terrorism in the Asia Pacific: Threat and Response* (2003), Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, p. 231.

<sup>11</sup> "Voice seems to be Al Qaeda Leader calling for an uprising," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/10/01/zawahiri.transcript/>, 1 October 2004.

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<sup>14</sup> Abodoolcarim, Zoher, "The Philippines' Terrorist Refuge Time Asia Magazine," 4 February 2003.

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<sup>17</sup> CRS Report for Congress, 18 November 2003 edition, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL31672.pdf>