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TERRORISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: DOWN BUT NOT OUT

A year ago, the International Crisis Group's well-informed Indonesia analyst, Sidney Jones, argued that terrorism in South East Asia - as opposed to insurgency-related violence – seemed to be in decline, and that the global economic crisis would not necessarily have an impact.

Earlier this year, a Rand Corporation study for the Office of the United States Secretary for Defense described the terrorist threat in South East Asia as 'evolving' – a 'serious but largely manageable security problem'.

But in January this year, Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) terrorists kidnapped three foreign ICRC members on Jolo Island in the Philippines Sulu archipelago. Substantial ransoms subsequently paid for their release will potentially empower the ASG and enable it to enhance its weaponry and capability. For much of this year, elements of the Armed Forces of the Philippines have also been undertaking operations against so-called rebel commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao, following the breakdown in peace negotiations in 2008. Key Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorists, including several associated with the 2002 Bali bombings, remain at large in the southern Philippines and work with the ASG and elements of the MILF.

Then in June an attack, apparently by Buddhist vigilantes, on worshippers in a mosque in Narathiwat in southern Thailand reminded us that the separatist insurgency in Thailand's largely Malay Muslim southern provinces continues to fester, the most lethal conflict in Southeast Asia. Around 300 people have died there this year, in over 100 terrorist bombings using improvised explosive devices (or IEDs) of growing sophistication, 11 beheadings and frequent shootings. Around 3500 people have died since the insurgency revived in 2004.

And on 17 July, terrorist attacks on the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta again claimed foreign victims, including three Australians. Subsequent investigations point to involvement of a group splintered off from Jemaah Islamiyah, or JI, led by Noordin Mohamad Top, a key figure in most major terrorist incidents in Indonesia in recent years. There are also possible links to Middle East financiers and apparent

attempts to restore links between elements of Jemaah Islamiyah and al Qaeda.

The absence of major attacks in Indonesia since 2005, relatively effective counter-terrorism measures and the apparent fracturing of JI have helped to create the impression that the terrorist threat in South East Asia has been contained if not largely defeated, indeed that it has been the pre-eminent success story in what used – unfortunately - to be called 'the global war on terrorism' or GWOT. Australian tourists have returned to Bali in record numbers, despite the government's travel advice "advising you to reconsider your need to travel to Indonesia, including Bali, at this time due to the very high threat of terrorist attack".

So what is really going on? Have we been caught napping? Or did we never really understand the forces at work? Is terrorism a major security threat to the region and to Australian interests, or simply a continuing if sometimes deadly irritant, one of a range of transnational challenges to our security interests?

And why has South East Asia, ostensibly peaceful and preoccupied with economic development, incubated terrorism?

Before going any further, I want to stress that overwhelmingly, South East Asia has not. Only tiny minorities within large, eclectic and moderate Islamic communities are extremist, and even less are committed to violence. Most Muslims in South East Asia live comfortably and at peace within secular and democratic states – principally Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

Extremism, where it exists, has different roots or causal factors in each of these countries, so regional generalisations are inappropriate. But there are some factors which have enabled terrorist groups to develop.

Paradoxically, democracy is one. Political Islam in Indonesia – represented by the *Darul Islam* movement which had its roots in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood – was suppressed in Suharto's authoritarian Indonesia. But Indonesia's vibrant democracy – undoubtedly one of the most positive developments in Asia's strategic situation – has created space for a range of fundamentalist and extremist Islamist groups to develop, proselytise and recruit. Islamist political parties compete for popular support in both Malaysia and Indonesia, although in both they struggle to get broad-based support.

Another enabler of extremism is information technology. The ability of extremists to utilise the internet and mobile phone technology has greatly extended their ability to proselytise, to recruit, to transfer skills and to relay operational information – and to develop transnational links. Relatedly, this technology has facilitated money movements and the production of illicit documentation. Rapidly growing access to the internet across Asia has enabled larger numbers of principally young people to access extremist websites, which in turn have proliferated, numbering in the hundreds if not low thousands.

In Southeast Asia, geography, the underdevelopment of border controls and in some cases the laxity of enforcement has facilitated cross-border movement. Long land and sea borders, thousands of islands, particularly in archipelagic Indonesia and the Philippines, makes border security a huge challenge for what are still, in most cases, underdeveloped countries. The smuggling of people, arms, explosives, narcotics and money is relatively easy, and in this environment the line between criminal and separatist activity is often an indistinct one.

A less obvious factor, and one facilitated by information technology, the relative ease of international travel, student study in other countries, *dakwah* or missionary activity by Muslim groups and the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, is a growth of common identity across the Muslim world or Muslim community, the *ummah*. Shared widely is the view that the West (led by the United States) is antithetical to Islam, that Israel (supported by the West) has denied Palestinians a nation, usurped their land and brutalised the Palestinian people, and that the West has invaded and occupied the lands of Islam, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan. What is striking is that this message resonates in rural Java, southern Thailand and Mindanao, and in far flung Muslim communities elsewhere, although to us the issues may seem distant, if not irrelevant, to their local interests.

Another common factor common to much of – but not all of – members of South East Asia's violent extremist groups is poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment. The fact that Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, Azahari bin Husein and Noordin Mohamad Top are well-educated, and mostly from middle class backgrounds, obscures the reality that most of the foot soldiers come from poor and uneducated backgrounds, where alienation, frustration and marginalisation can make them susceptible to extremist messages.

In Thailand and the Philippines, this is compounded by disadvantage as members of minorities which are ethnically, religiously and linguistically

different from the mainstream and from the ruling elites. In both countries, the Muslim majority areas are amongst the poorest and least developed. Limited education facilities often forces children into poorly regulated *madrassahs*, where religious instruction, sometimes delivered by poorly-qualified or mendacious *ustadz*, or teachers, can substitute for the imparting of skills which would open employment opportunities.

With the benefit of the research and experience undertaken since 9/11 2001, we can see this pattern – with local variations - replicated in Pakistan, Afghanistan, parts of North Africa, within diaspora communities in western Europe and even in Australia.

But while in both southern Thailand and the southern Philippines, warped interpretations of Islam may provide a theological justification for violent activity, the separatist insurgencies in both are largely driven by perceptions – and indeed the reality - of discrimination, injustice and disadvantage. Principally, these are ethno-nationalist conflicts, with a veneer of transnational jihadism brought about by identity with struggles elsewhere as imparted via a few *mujaheddin* who earlier joined the struggle in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation, or via the internet or the sorts of contact I mentioned earlier – study, the hajj pilgrimage missionary activity and so on.

As separatist insurgencies, these conflicts are amenable to political resolution. That they are long-standing is a reflection of the fact that national governments in both countries have been unwilling to concede a significant measure of autonomy, which they see as undermining national unity. Instead, they have principally responded to violence with military force, sometimes of an indiscriminate or excessive nature. Repression, arbitrary arrests and detentions and abuses of human rights have compounded perceptions of discrimination, feeding alienation and anger, and hence support for the insurgencies.

The risk in this cycle is that festering local conflicts will develop international links or support. On the one hand, groups such as al Qaeda, its affiliates or associates, may see these conflicts as presenting fertile ground in which to extend their transnational jihadist aspirations, while frustrated local insurgents may look elsewhere for funding, training, ideological justification and other forms of support.

Indonesia is a different case altogether. It is overwhelmingly a Muslim country – indeed the world's largest – with strong historical links to the Middle East, even if Islam has developed in Indonesia distinct local

characteristics. As a big and diverse country, it is scarcely surprising that radical, extremist and violent groups have existed within Indonesian Islam.

Islamist influences - that is, the political or ideological manifestation of Islam – have come via centuries of exposure to Arab traders and settlement, and more recently through student study in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Some hundreds of Indonesian *mujaheddin* trained in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, forming a ready base for Jemaah Islamiyah on return. Middle Eastern governments have actively sponsored educational and *da'wa* (missionary) activity, to some degree encouraging the propagation of salafi or Wahabi streams of Islam and the political activism of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

Political Islam or more fundamentalist approaches to Islam do not equate with terrorism. But their spread may encourage a political environment more receptive at the margins to extremist messages.

In Indonesia, the conjunction of repression of political Islam in the Suharto period, the exposure of Indonesians to *mujaheddin* training in Afghanistan and Pakistan and their contact there with al Qaeda facilitated the growth of Jemaah Islamiyah in newly-democratic Indonesia. (This is not, incidentally, to suggest that democracy fostered terrorism – simply that it allowed for the expression of extremist views that had earlier been driven underground). JI was well-established, including in Philippine training camps, before the demise of the Suharto regime or the events of 9/11, but its operatives were able to return and organise as the political landscape in Indonesia transformed. The JI that resulted had a well-defined command structure, a small but significant core membership of some hundreds, support structures through some radical Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren,* and a lofty transnational aspiration to spread Islamic rule throughout South East Asia.

The rest is well-known: the Bali bombings of October 2002, the attack on the JW Mariott hotel in Jakarta in 2003, the capture in Thailand of the Indonesian JI terrorist Hambali in 2003, the attack on the Australian embassy in 2004, the second Bali attacks in 2005. Less well-known was the beginnings of this terror campaign in the communal conflicts in Sulawesi and Ambon in 2000, and the more recent disruption of a planned bombing operation in Palembang in 2008.

With hindsight, perhaps the most striking feature of the period was the determination and ultimately the effectiveness with which the Indonesian

authorities pursued the terrorists. Without doubt, there was a lot of international pressure on Indonesia to do so – particularly from Australia – but it was no easy task in a climate of denial, of conspiracy theories and of anti-westernism, fed by the post-9/11 military action first in Afghanistan and then Iraq.

Indonesia's preparedness to work with international partners – particularly Australia and the United States – took some political courage, but the result has been public acceptance in Indonesia that it faced a home-grown terrorism problem, and the development of effective and modern police intelligence, investigative, forensic, prosecutorial and other capabilities. Over 450 terrorists have been arrested as a result, with well over 200 convicted. The judicial process appears to have had a marked impact in convincing Indonesians of the nature and extent of the problem, something that has been missing from some other states in South East Asia, which have indefinitely detained terrorist suspects without charge or trial under domestic Internal Security Acts (ISAs). Programs to rehabilitate (or de-radicalise) terrorist prisoners have been developed, to address recidivism, although the overall effectiveness of these has yet fully to be demonstrated.

The practical outcome has been the break-up of *Jemaah Islamiyah*, the fracturing of its links to al Qaeda, a loss of membership and support and the creation of a major internal debate within radical ranks on the utility of terrorism and the western target, on collateral Muslim casualties from bombings and on the eventual objective of Muslim rule throughout South East Asia. JI has been seriously weakened, but it has not disappeared; rather, it is re-grouping around a more limited set of long-term objectives. And a new umbrella group for radicals, *Jemaah Anshorut Tawhid*, led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the former *emir* of JI, has emerged as a focus for radical Islamist forces.

If this is the case, that the terrorist structure has been dismembered and contained, then how do we explain the 17 July Marriott and Ritz-Carlton bombings?

The common signature in the major terrorist bombings in Indonesia has been that of Noordin Top and, until his death in 2005, his key bombmaker, Azahari bin Hussein – both longstanding Malaysian members of JI. The extensive analytic base now available on terrorism in Indonesia strongly suggests that Noordin heads a splinter group of JI, that has for years refused to take direction from JI and is increasingly detached from it.

Noordin's activism has obvious appeal to extremists concerned that JI has given up violent jihad. He appears to have had little difficult in recruiting supporters, including those prepared to 'seek martyrdom' as suicide bombers. He also appears to be able to draw on a network of sympathisers who offer safe haven in his continuing evasion of justice.

And Noordin appears to have upped the stakes. The 17 July bombings may have been an attempt to demonstrate to al Qaeda Noordin's capability, in an attempt to secure the status of an al Qaeda affiliate, with the advantages in recruiting, funding and technology transfer that might accrue from association with the iconic al Qaeda brand. The recent arrest of a Saudi Arabian national in Java is suggestive at least of a possible Middle Eastern funding link.

The 17 July bombings and the investigative trail all lead to Noordin, but his ability to elude capture, continued capacity to undertake bombings requiring considerable planning and of considerable sophistication, and to sustain a local network, mean that Indonesia continues to face a significant terrorist threat. If his efforts to rebuild international links and to secure affiliate status from al Qaeda were to be successful, his reach and impact could be magnified.

But, like al Qaeda's senior leadership in the federally Administered Tribal areas of Pakistan, Noordin is under pressure. What will be the impact if he is apprehended and his cell dismantled? Can Indonesia declare a victory – however imperfect – over jihadist violence?

The answer is no. Key JI fugitives remain at large, particularly in the southern Philippines. Extremists within Indonesia, including in *pesantren* boarding schools linked to JI, continue to propagate radical interpretations of Islam. Numerous convicted terrorists are coming toward the end of their sentences, or have been released, and some at least may prove not to have reformed. Access to the internet will enable increasing numbers of Indonesians to access jihadist websites. Events elsewhere in the world will continue to mobilise concerns in the Muslim community.

A renewal of communal violence in Indonesia could revive the appeal of JI or other extremist groups – and such violence has become part of the fabric driving insurgencies in both Thailand and the Philippines.

Some of these contributing factors will be evident in other countries in the region, and some indeed can be found in vulnerable communities in Australia. Our response and that of our partners in the region, needs to be pre-emptive, agile and sustained, but it also needs to be preventive. Operational collaboration and capacity-building, particularly in the law enforcement and justice sectors, is critically important, as the Indonesian experience demonstrates.

But addressing in a sustained way the socio-economic issues that give rise to alienation and to grievance will be important in lessening or removing the 'tipping points' that may carry an individual along the path from dissatisfaction toward violence. The availability of secular education, access to fairly-administered justice, the provision of government services and national policies which do not discriminate against ethnic, religious or linguistic difference are likely to undermine the appeal of the terrorist's message.

It is unlikely, in the foreseeable future, that we will reach a point where it can be said that terrorism in the region has been defeated or eliminated. Terrorism has a long history as a tactic used by a weak party to maximise its impact in support of its political or ideological objectives. Jihadist terrorism has been marked by its ability to deliver mass casualties and to use modern technology to proclaim international reach and transnational objectives. But in the end local issues drive it, and addressing them will go a long way toward undermining its reach and its appeal.