Terrorism in Southeast Asia
Springboard for International Terrorist Attacks

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International attention on the threat of Southeast Asian Islamic extremism has escalated markedly since al-Qaeda launched its devastating attacks against the United States on September 11th. Not only is this part of the heightened global awareness of terrorism in general, it also reflects the fact that groups and militants based in the region are known to have either passed through training camps formerly under the charge of the Taliban or to have established links with Osama bin Laden and his global terror network.

Several aspects of Southeast Asia make it acutely vulnerable to general exploitation as a springboard for local and wider international terrorist attacks:

- The region is characterized by highly porous land and sea borders that are well suited to the smuggling of arms and personnel.
- Many Southeast Asian governments retain close links with the West - notably Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines - which make them ideal as substitute targets for anti-American aggression.
- There exists a substantial Islamic demographic milieu that extremists can quickly disappear into (Indonesia currently boasts the world's largest Muslim population).
- Political corruption and economic problems throughout the region both mitigate against effective internal security measures and provide fertile ground for the fundamentalist rhetoric of outside demagogues.
- Southeast Asia's status as a global commercial and tourist hub have provided a highly developed transport and finance infrastructure that can be used just as effectively for illicit as licit purposes.

al-Qaeda Links in Southeast Asia

al-Qaeda, which is thought to link extremists in some 60 countries around the world, has typically extended support to three main types of groups: entities opposed to secular/moderate Muslim governments that are deemed to be morally bankrupt; organizations fighting against regimes that are deemed to be suppressing their internal Islamic populace; groups striving to create and maintain an independent Islamic state.

In Southeast Asia, this backing appears to have coalesced most visibly in the southern Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Southern Philippines

In the southern Philippines, most concern has centered on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The organization emerged in 1988 under the ultra-fundamentalist leadership of Abdurajak Janjalini. It is committed to the establishment of an exclusive, independent Islamic theocratic state of Mindanao and is infused with a highly intolerant religious credo that calls for the deliberate targeting and/or expulsion of all southern Filipino Christians.
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ASG cells are known to have established links with bin Laden affiliates, receiving financial as well as materiel support. Philippine and Western intelligence sources assert that the bulk of this assistance has been channeled to the group via a series of front organizations and aid charities originally created by Jamal al-Khalifa (bin Laden's brother-in-law). Prior to his arrest in San Francisco in 1994, Khalifa doubled as the president of the Philippine chapter of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and director of the World Muslim League both since identified as key logistical conduits for Islamic extremism and terrorism.

During the early 1990s, the ASG used its foreign contacts to help with the creation of local logistics for international Islamic organizations wishing to operate out of the Philippines. Concrete evidence of these transnational ties first emerged in 1995 when the group was linked to a multi-pronged plot (known as Operation "Bojinka") to bomb U.S. regional embassies, assassinate the Pope and destroy American commercial airliners flying trans-Pacific routes. It is now known that the plan was developed under the auspices of Ramzi Yousef, the convicted mastermind behind the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, who allegedly had been dispatched to the Philippines as a personal emissary of bin Laden.

ASG links with transnational Islamic extremism appear to have diminished since 1995, a factor that most commentators put down to the criminal degeneration of the group following the death of Janjalini in 1998. This being said, Western officials remain concerned that elements within the ASG continue to identify with the goals and rhetoric of global jihad, pointing out that many of the kidnappings carried out by the group since 2000 have been justified in explicit internationalist religious terms. Certainly this is the opinion of Washington, which initiated joint military operations with Filipino Special Forces in February 2002 to root out and eliminate all ASG strongholds in Basilan and Sulu. Known as Balikitan-02-I, these operations are generally viewed as an integral component of the United States’ continuing war against global terrorism and possibly the first infusion of this campaign into Southeast Asia.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, Islamic extremism has emerged as an increasingly salient threat in the wake of the economic and political chaos that was first triggered by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and further exacerbated by the fall of Suharto in 1998. While several radical groups exist in the Republic, the one that is generally viewed as posing the greatest threat in terms of links to al-Qaeda is Laskar Jihad (LJ).

LJ was established in early 2000 in response to what was seen as the deliberate persecution of Muslims in the Moluccas. The organization, led by Jafa Umar Thalib, asserts that there is a global Christian and Jewish conspiracy to undermine Islam. It blames the West and Jakarta's democratic and secular orientation for all the problems currently plaguing Indonesia and has called on all "true Muslims" to participate in a jihad specifically aimed at liberating the country from the influence of the U.S. and its infidel cohorts.

Although currently there is no definitive evidence tying LJ to al-Qaeda, speculation is rife that some sort of linkage does exist. Indonesian intelligence sources, for instance, have claimed that bin Laden operatives based in Malaysia have participated in LJ attacks in the Moluccas and Sulawesi; helped to carry out a series of church bombings in central and eastern Jakarta during December 2000; have moved to establish an international terrorist training camp close to the port city of Poso on Sulawesi; and are now working to establish sleeper cells across the rest of the country. These allegations have struck a responsive chord in Western capitals where a consistent theme over the last six months has pertained to the use of LJ as a dedicated vehicle for facilitating the logistical relocation of al-Qaeda forces post-Taliban.
Malaysia

The threat emanating from Malaysia is more diffuse and less easily discerned than that in the southern Philippines and Indonesia. Although no concerted radical Islamic insurgent groupings exist per se, the country is known to have formed the basis for a loose logistical network that has figured prominently in the activities of Muslim militants, both regionally and internationally.

Western focus on Malaysia has markedly increased since September 11. Initial concern followed revelations by the Central Intelligence Agency showing that an al-Qaeda operatives meeting took place in the country during January 2000 in which plans for several anti-American attacks were discussed. It is now known that at least two of the hijackers involved in the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington - Kalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi - attended this meeting and that Zacarias Massouli, the so-called “29th hijacker” currently on trial in Virginia, was also in the country later that year.

The limelight on Kuala Lumpur has been further intensified since December 2001 after it became apparent that Malaysian-based militants were deeply involved in a wider al-Qaeda plot to bomb several high profile Western targets in Singapore. These attacks were allegedly to have been carried out under the auspices of Jemaah Islamiya (JI), a hitherto largely unknown entity that is now thought to constitute bin Laden’s main operational wing in Southeast Asia.

At least 200 JI affiliates are thought to exist in Malaysia, the senior members of which are alleged to act as the group's main leadership consultative council. Somewhat more worrying, this cell has been connected to the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia - a protectionist front for the Pan Islamic Opposition Party (PAS) - which may possibly suggest that al-Qaeda's radical world view is beginning to make inroads into mainstream Muslim sentiment in Malaysia.

Southeast Asian Cooperation

If Southeast Asian governments are to effectively deal with the future threat of terrorism in the region - both dependent and independent of al-Qaeda, it is essential that they develop an effective and rigorous framework for coordinating collaborative action. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum, which is the pre-eminent intergovernmental organization in the region, represents the logical mechanism through which to achieve such institutionalized cooperation. Thus far, however, ARF has proven to be somewhat less than effective in security deliberations given the member states continued preference for fully consensual and non-intrusive decision-making.

While these modalities may be conducive to furthering the appearance (some might argue sham) of harmonious interstate relations, they are hardly suited to the frank and honest discussion needed for effectively dealing with national and international terrorism, particularly in a region where internally-based actors can so easily transcend and impact across national frontiers.