



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (24/2002)

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## THE TRUE MEANING OF BALI

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The horrific terrorist attack in Bali that killed almost 200 people has generated numerous questions. Some have pointed the finger at Al Qaeda. Others have fingered the Southeast Asian militant Islamic group Jemaah Islamiah. There have even been suggestions that the blast was the work of shadowy militant nationalists still angered at Canberra's perceived role in detaching East Timor from Indonesia in 1999. There is thus a need to dissipate the "fog of war" that currently obscures the true meaning of Bali.

The first question is obvious: who could have done this? We know several things. First, the attack was aimed unambiguously at generating numerous civilian casualties. This is highly suggestive. Throughout the 1990s, indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks have been the defining characteristic of religiously oriented messianic militants. The terrorist driven by a virulent form of religious fundamentalism does not want to use terror to extract political concessions. He seeks to impose his vision of the Good Society by force. Aum Shinrikyo and Al Qaeda are exemplars of religiously motivated terrorism.

Second, it is abundantly clear that Westerners – mainly Australians, but also Britons and others - were deliberately targeted. This strongly hints at a militant Islamic involvement. In this respect, intelligence experts have been warning that a decentralized and restructured Al Qaeda is mounting a renewed offensive against America and its Coalition partners. On 6 October Osama bin Laden and his top deputy, Ayman Al-Zawahiri issued audio-taped declarations of new attacks. The same day a French supertanker was bombed off Yemen; on 8 October a US Marine was killed by an Al Qaeda-linked gunman in Kuwait; and there have been bomb attacks in the Philippines, most recently on 17 October. An Al Qaeda link to Bali is also suggested by the fact that the blast occurred on 12 October, the second anniversary of the USS Cole bombing in Yemen.

Third, the ruthless, professional sophistication of the bombing operation, as well as the type of explosive believed to have been used – C4 – suggest the involvement of professionally-trained terrorists. In this respect it is telling that Indonesian intelligence officials are now "convinced" that the Bali attack was carried out by Al Qaeda and JI. If these are indeed the real culprits, then rather than Australians per se, it was probably Bali itself that was the real target. For many, Bali symbolized what at its best, Indonesia could be: a peaceful, tranquil, bustling enclave in which people of different ethnicity and faiths could

live in harmony. By striking so devastatingly at Bali, the perpetrators not only disrupted the Balinese tourist industry, but also struck a disproportionate psychological economic and political blow that has had ripple effects radiating out across Indonesia and indeed, maritime Southeast Asia.

This is in all probability the terrorist calculus: destabilize economic and ethnic stability in high-profile Bali, and you discourage foreign investors from putting money in Indonesia and even Southeast Asia more generally. As is widely known, foreign capital sees Southeast Asia as a more or less undifferentiated bloc. Thus an Indonesian problem is a Southeast Asian problem. This attitude poses great difficulties. For a region that is only just recovering from the 1998 Financial Crisis, capital flight is the last thing it needs. Increased socio-economic difficulties can only compound the extant problems of poor governance and enhance the extremist appeals of militant Islamic agents provocateurs. Exacerbating matters is the widespread anti-Americanism that has partly been generated by Washington's own errors of omission and commission on a host of issues ranging from Afghanistan and the Middle East to Iraq. Al Qaeda and JI are fully aware of all this.

What we must understand is that in the ultimate analysis, despite their anti-modern, retrogressive worldviews, Al Qaeda and JI are utterly modern in their appreciation of the uses of power to attain their goals. It is worth reiterating that Al Qaeda seeks to reconstruct a global Islamic caliphate from Morocco to Mindanao. As is known, it has indoctrinated and trained militant Islamist leaders from Central and South Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Southeast Asia to help flesh out this grand strategy. In a very real sense, therefore, JI, whose leaders have been trained in Afghanistan, has been co-opted by Al Qaeda and is engaged in fomenting a radical Islamic form of Southeast Asian regionalism. JI's well-known quest for a pan-Southeast Asian Islamic state thus fits snugly into the wider Al Qaeda project. Perhaps the grand strategy of Al Qaeda and the theatre strategy of JI are too messianic to succeed. But it is precisely their fusion of an anti-modern, virulent ideology with an extremely modern strategic acumen and technical capability that poses the clear and present danger. That is the true meaning of Bali.

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