



IDSS COMMENTARIES (13/2003)

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THE JI SPECTRE IS STILL HERE

Yeo Weimeng*

3 April 2003

The US war on Iraq has driven news about terrorism to the back pages of regional papers. Reports about the trial and investigation of those involved in the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002 and the arrest of the head of the Singapore cell of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Mas Selamat Kastari, in Indonesia have taken a back seat to the dispatches from the Gulf. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the threat from JI has receded. The arrest in Pakistan of a top Al-Qaeda leader, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is said to have financed the Bali bombing, may have dented the capacity and capability of JI to mount attacks into the region. Certainly the measures implemented by the security agencies in Malaysia and in Singapore have succeeded in thwarting the JI threat by strengthening protective procedures and hardening the potential targets of terrorist attacks, such as tourist spots as well as vital government and economic installations. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to underestimate the capabilities of JI in this region.

There are many reasons for believing that the threat of JI in this region will continue to exist. Firstly, even with the disruption of the JI cell connected to the Bali bombing and the arrest of Mas Selamat Kastari by the Indonesian security agencies, the JI network has proven to be resilient and robust; there are a number of senior members of JI still active in the region, among them Hambali, the operations leader of JI, Abu Hanifah and Dr Azahari Husin, the leaders of the JI's Malaysian cell. Yasin Syawal, who is JI founder Abdullah Sungkar's son-in-law and the current head of Laskar Jundullah, the militant wing of the Indonesian Mujahideen Council (MMI), is also still at large. And it is likely that one of the two Singapore JI members who were not apprehended by Indonesian authorities would replace Kastari as the Chief of JI Singapore.

Secondly, while the regional security agencies are working tirelessly to combat terrorism JI is also working to rebuild its own capabilities to launch another attack. Like Al-Qaeda, JI places a great emphasis on training and is currently refocusing its efforts to mount

large-scale operations in this region. Some JI members have reportedly regrouped and are lying low in Bangladesh in preparation for another attack in Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, although Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan have been dismantled, there are still training camps run by the Moros Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Southern Philippines, which are continuing to turn out new JI operatives. It is believed that some 50 Al Qaeda trainers are active in these MILF camps. Thus, the loss of Afghanistan as a secure training base has been compensated with training camps in the Southern Philippines. Indeed, with the dispersal of its bases and leading cadres from Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda is increasingly dependent on associate groups such as JI to mount the attacks against American and other targets.

Fourthly, security agencies have yet to come out with a coherent plan to stop funds being channeled to terrorist groups such as JI. Though countries in the region have clamped down on illegal money laundering activities, it must be noted that funds used in the financing of terrorism do not necessarily derive from criminal activity, which is a requisite element of most existing money laundering offences. For example, Laskar Jundullar, the JI paramilitary group, has received funding from KOMPAK, the largest Islamic charity organization in Indonesia, as well as from the Al Haramain foundation, an international charity based in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, successful participation in this fight by the financial sector requires global cooperation between governments and financial institutions. The latter can assist governments and their agencies in the fight against terrorism through prevention, detection and information sharing. They can also prevent terrorist groups from accessing their financial services; assist governments in their efforts to detect suspected terrorist financing and promptly respond to governmental enquiries.

Fifthly, while the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed would hurt the Al-Qaeda- JI nexus, his capture will also provide an opportunity for Hambali to take control of Al Qaeda operations in Southeast Asia while maintaining close contacts with Khalid Sheikh's likely replacement, Mohammed Tawfiq Attash, a Yemeni suspected of masterminding the USS Cole attack. By being the main architect of the Bali bombing operation, the worst terrorist attack since 9-11, it appears that Hambali has again proven to JI and Al-Qaeda his ability and loyalty to their cause.

Finally, the international environment has become more favorable for the Islamic militants. The worsening of the Israeli-Palestine issue and the ability of Al Qaeda to survive and retaliate in Middle East, East Africa and Southeast Asia has unleashed a torrent of support. The US war in Iraq will only further compound the problem and swell the flow of

recruits and other forms of support to Islamic militants and radical Islamic political groups pursuing an aggressive Islamic political and terrorist agenda in the near future.

In conclusion, despite the regional security agencies' success in disrupting the JI network in this region, JI still remains a threat and would continue to be a scourge in the Southeast Asia region for the foreseeable future. So long as the factors discussed above exist, the JI network will remain intact. JI operatives are indeed currently moving across borders, establishing lines of communication among themselves, and maintaining their operational capability.

The war on terrorism in the South East Asia will be long and arduous. Governments in this region must work together if they are to have any chance of eliminating the JI threat. The JI spectre is still with us and it is essential to exorcise it before more innocent lives are lost.

(Yeo Weimeng is a Research Analyst in the Political Violence and Terrorism Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.)