



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (35/2004)

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## **TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM: A Clear and Present Danger**

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It is easy to forget that less than three years ago, in Singapore itself, Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorists came close to successfully mounting what would have been the worst terror attack anywhere in the world since September 11. As recent press reports have indicated, despite setbacks, both Al Qaeda and JI are by no means spent entities.

No surprise then that the recently released Singapore's National Security Strategy (SNSS) identifies "transnational terrorism" as the clear and present danger to national security. The transnational terrorist threat, the SNSS explains, is defined by four key elements: its "global reach", its ideological basis, its employment of "sophisticated methods" and its quest for "catastrophic outcomes".

Terrorism, as the SNSS rightly points out, is not exactly new in the Singapore context. When the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was wreaking havoc in both Singapore and Malaya in the 1940s and 1950s, grenade attacks in public places, train derailments as well as all-too-public assassinations of so-called "running dogs" of the "British Imperialists" were not uncommon.

Similarly the March 1965 MacDonal House bombing in Orchard Road by Indonesian agents; the January 1974 hijack of the ferry *Laju* by left-wing Japanese and Palestinian militants and more recently the March 1991 hijack of a Singapore Airlines aircraft by Pakistani militants, all shared a certain essential trait: the employment of violence in pursuit of well-defined political aims.

For instance while the CPM sought the political goal of a Communist regime in Singapore and Malaya, Sukarno, during Confrontation, sought to break up the newly formed Federation of Malaysia because he saw it as a challenge to his desire for regional pre-eminence.

### Global Aims, Apocalyptic Ideology

In the case of transnational terrorist networks like Al Qaeda and JI, the aims are less precisely defined but certainly more ambitious. Osama bin Laden and his senior lieutenants, inspired by their success against the mighty Soviet Army in Afghanistan seek, somewhat ambiguously, to "restore" the multinational Islamic caliphate in lands that they believe used to be under Muslim rule. Al Qaeda's global vision encompasses a borderless, seamless Islamic community spanning North Africa to Southeast Asia.

Because Southeast Asian militants, including JI leaders and cadre, trained and even fought

together with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were similarly inspired to imbibe this global caliphate or *khilafatist* vision. This is precisely why JI itself seeks to create a pan-Southeast Asian Islamic caliphate - as a self-consciously integral part of Al Qaeda's global conception.

However, compared to the clearly-conceived game plans of previous nationalist or leftist organizations, the Al Qaeda global and even JI Southeast Asian Islamist agendas are politically fuzzy at best and naïve at worst. One good reason for this is that transnational Islamist terrorism, as the SNSS rightly suggests, derives from an otherworldly, apocalyptic ideology. When one examines the rhetoric and speeches of Al Qaeda or JI leaders, it becomes clear that they believe that they are engaged in a *cosmic war* with a "Jewish-Crusader alliance" led by Israel and the United States.

Evidence of Jewish-Crusader aggression is allegedly found in the sufferings of Muslim women and children in Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, the Maluku and elsewhere. According to Al Qaedaists it is therefore incumbent upon all Muslims anywhere to strike back at the Jewish-Crusader axis by any means possible, including terrorism. This is the precise reasoning behind JI's targeting of US and Western interests in Singapore in December 2001. In this view the world is irrevocably divided into the Realm of Peace (*Darul Islam*) and the Realm of War (*Darul Harb*). There is no middle ground, no scope for compromise and negotiation with infidels and apostates. It is a fight to the finish.

### **Terror Unlimited**

The SNSS says this is precisely why catastrophic "terror attacks against civilized and open societies" are utterly justified in transnational Islamist terrorism. In the mind of the fully indoctrinated Al Qaeda or JI terrorist, there is no distinction between civilians and combatants. They argue that the citizens of the states within the Jewish-Crusader alliance pay the taxes that fund the killing and maiming of innocent Muslims in areas such as the Occupied Territories and Iraq. This hate-filled absolutist mindset explains why mass civilian casualty attacks such as September 11, Bali, and most recently, Madrid, have occurred.

Besides ideology, what makes the transnational threat more terrifying is its appeal. The profiles of the September 11 hijackers, leading Al Qaeda leaders and even JI members in Southeast Asia clearly show that "Al Qaedaism" seems to have met the deep psychological needs of people from differing class backgrounds. Rather than being poor and downtrodden, many transnational Islamist terrorists have been found to be well educated, sophisticated professionals, often with technical backgrounds, well able to exploit the scientific and technological fruits of modernity to pursue their anti-modern agenda. That is why terrorist attacks have displayed a "high degree of operational and technical sophistication", and are "more lethal and dangerous" than in the past. The measures that the SNSS therefore outlines for strengthening land transport, aviation and maritime security are important and should be pursued with vigour.

### **Now, More than Ever: "Total Defence"**

Ultimately, the greatest danger posed by transnational terrorism as exemplified by Al Qaeda and JI, is to Singapore's social fabric. Hence while the physical and economic costs arising from any successful terror attack in Singapore might be considerable, they would be dwarfed by the political and psychological fall-out. This is because regardless of the ever-mutating

threat, Singapore's core vulnerability - its multi-religious, multi-racial fabric - remains unchanged, and any enemy worth his salt knows this.

That is why, quite apart from government efforts, both Muslim and non-Muslim Singaporeans need to play their part in countering transnational Al Qaedaism. Non-Muslims must not uncritically equate the terrorists' ideology with the Islamic faith, while Muslims must make it their business to know where the distortions lie. "Total Defence" may be a 20-year old idea, but it is by no means outmoded.

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