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## Indonesia and Transnational Terrorism

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I N F O R M A T I O N   A N D   R E S E A R C H   S E R V I C E S

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Indonesia and Transnational Terrorism

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## Introduction

In the wake of the 11 September attacks on the United States, attention has turned to Indonesia, and the possibility of Islamic terrorist groups operating from or within that country. Indonesia has experienced a resurgence of Islamic activity since the fall of President Soeharto in 1998, but the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims practice a moderate form of the religion. Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic country, with 170 to 180 million Muslims out of a total population of around 215 million.<sup>1</sup> Although most Indonesians are concerned with the response of the United States to the terrorist attacks, the vast majority do not as yet support militancy. However, some Islamist organisations have become increasingly vocal in the weeks since the attacks. In addition, a number of reports have pointed to connections between these groups and transnational terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda, the organisation headed by Osama bin Laden. Rohan Gunaratna from the St Andrew's University Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence has stated recently that the Al Qaeda network has a number of cells active in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

## Indonesian Islamist Organisations

There is no organised hierarchy of radical Islam in Indonesia, rather a number of largely unrelated groups. The main extremist Islamist organisations in Indonesia are Darul Islam, the Islamic Defender's Front and Laskar Jihad.<sup>3</sup> According to Al Chaidar, an Islamic activist and leader of one of eight factions of the Darul Islam network, the organisation is largely constituted by the approximately 15 000 Indonesians who returned from Afghanistan after fighting alongside the *mujahadeen* against the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

Laskar Jihad is the most prominent and organised of Indonesia's radical Islamist organisations. In 2000, Laskar Jihad sent around 5000 armed militia members to the Maluku region in eastern Indonesia, where they are considered to be the main reason for continuing conflict there.<sup>5</sup> The government in Jakarta has been criticised for not preventing the activities of the organisation, some analysts suggesting the government is restricted in its possible response, not wishing to appear 'anti-Islamic'.<sup>6</sup> The prospect of US retaliation for the terrorist attacks has boosted Laskar Jihad membership, with 300–400 joining since 11 September.<sup>7</sup> Laskar Jihad's popularity rests on more than its ability to support Muslims in conflicts, such as that in Maluku, the organisation also providing a strong sense of Islamic identity. Families of the young men fighting in Maluku also

receive remuneration, funded by such activities as garment exports.<sup>8</sup> The country's ongoing economic crisis makes such organisations more appealing.

## **What Kind of Threat do Indonesian Islamist Organisations Pose?**

Indonesia's top Islamic authority, the Council of Indonesian Ulemas followed President Megawati's meeting with President Bush (on 19 September) by calling for Muslims to unite and join a *jihad* (holy war) against the United States in the event of attacks against Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> Similar threats have also been made by Laskar Jihad, Laskar Jundullah and the Islamic Defender's Front.<sup>10</sup> Some of these claims have since been moderated. Ulama Council spokesperson, Dien Syamsuddin, when asked if warnings of a *jihad* meant armed struggle, said that the term may mean any number of forms of struggle (including peaceful), and condemned plans to 'sweep' (locate and evict) US citizens in Indonesia. However, the impact of calls for a *jihad* must have been relatively predictable, the public likely to perceive the term in the literal sense of armed struggle.<sup>11</sup>

However, daily demonstrations are taking place in front of the US Embassy, one protest involving 4000 people on 28 September, and another on 8 October involving over a thousand members of a number of different organisations including the Islamic Defenders Front.<sup>12</sup> These demonstrations have been largely peaceful although Indonesian police fired warning shots to disperse protestors on 8 September,<sup>13</sup> and shouted threats outside the Embassy caused the US Ambassador, Robert Gelbard, to pressure the police for a plan to evacuate diplomatic staff. On 23 September, members of several Islamist groups calling themselves the Anti-American Terrorist Soldiers worked through the town of Surakarta in Central Jakarta searching for Americans to evict, although there are no cases of violence reported as yet.<sup>14</sup> Two powerful explosions were detonated in the busy Plaza Atrium Senen shopping mall in Central Jakarta on 23 September, although they have not as yet been linked to the 'war on terrorism'.

However, radical Islamist organisations and anti-American protests do not currently enjoy the support of the majority of the population. The vast majority of Indonesians practise a moderate form of Islam, excluding practices such as the veiling of women. This moderate position has been expressed by some Islamic leaders. Syafi'i Maarif, the chairman of Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation, *Muhammadiyah*, said Indonesian Muslims should focus on the problems of the Afghan people, rather than attacking US citizens.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, now that United States (and United Kingdom) missile strikes against Afghanistan have occurred, demonstrations across Java and elsewhere may become more widespread, greater in size and violent. Involvement in radical organisations may become more widespread if grievances against the US strikes combine with the perceived benefits of joining such organisations, and possible coercion on the part of the organisations. If the threats of the Islamist organisations discussed above are carried out following these attacks, the consequences could include a possible evacuation of foreign diplomatic and commercial staff, and a flight of tourists and investment. Some of these consequences



have eventuated already. On 9 October, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) issued a warning against travel to Indonesia. Non-essential staff of the US Embassy in Jakarta were withdrawn on 27 September, and the families of the staff of some American companies, such as Nike, have been evacuated.<sup>16</sup>

One of the major dangers posed by Indonesian radical Islamist groups may be to the Indonesian Government itself. While she was in the United States, President Soekarnoputri pledged Indonesian support to the US lead coalition against terrorism, receiving in turn from President Bush pledges of aid and loan guarantees.<sup>17</sup> In supporting the US lead war on terrorism, the government of Megawati Soekarnoputri may face difficulties fending off challenges from the Islamic parties in her coalition, who in turn will be pressured by Islamist sentiment. President Soekarnoputri has already been criticised in political circles. House Speaker Akbar Tandjung stated that she should be more critical of the US led attacks.<sup>18</sup> Concerns within the Indonesian Government have also become evident, with Vice President Hamzah Haz cautioning the United States against attacking a sovereign country with the aim of targeting terrorists. It is also possible that radical Islam may be aggravated and manipulated by those wishing to destabilise Megawati.

### **What is the Presence of Al Qaeda and Other Transnational Extremist Organisations?**

For the past two years, the United States has warned that increasing Islamic militancy in Southeast Asia was creating a large pool of potential recruits for transnational terrorist networks. The United States Embassy in Jakarta had been on high alert since August after receiving intelligence from Europe of bomb threats and surveillance of the US Ambassador to Indonesia by Sudanese nationals linked to the Al Qaeda network.<sup>19</sup> According to Umar Juoro, an economist with the Habibie Centre, while the known radical Islamist organisations within Indonesia are manageable, the real problem lies with the activities of groups that are as yet not clearly identified.

Connections between the Islamist groups discussed above and transnational terrorist organisations or networks are often claimed but generally not corroborated. It was reported on 27 September that seven Afghan nationals flew into Ambon (Maluku) to a welcome from local police and the Laskar Jihad.<sup>20</sup> The Indonesian Director of Immigration, Muhammad Indra, has agreed it is likely that members of Afghan militias are entering Indonesia illegally.<sup>21</sup> On 27 September a Muslim activist and writer claimed that an envoy of Osama bin Laden had visited Indonesia at least four times, and that the radical Darul Islam movement and Al Qaeda enjoy a 'special relationship'.<sup>22</sup>

Indonesian students have long studied in the Islamic religious schools of Pakistan and elsewhere, and reports suggest growing numbers are being exposed to the same radical teachings as the Taliban. Throughout the 1990's the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) monitored 700–1500 Indonesian students travelling to the Middle East and suggests that

30–40 per cent never arrived at their stated destination. It is thought many of these joined the Taliban in the Afghanistan civil war.<sup>23</sup>

However, many of the Indonesian Islamist organisations deny involvement with Al Qaeda. While the leader of the Laskar Jihad, Ja'far Umar Thalib, fought alongside the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan in the 1980's and met Osama bin Laden, he has stated that he has little respect for the Saudi terrorist.<sup>24</sup> According to Thalib, the Al Qaeda organisation approached the Laskar Jihad, but he had declined to become involved with the organisation. He also denied that there were any Afghan Mujahadeen in Maluku.<sup>25</sup> Ja'far does however support the attack on the United States, saying, 'it should be an important lesson for America.' Another Islamist organisation with supposed links to bin Laden, Majelis Mujahidin, also denies such links.<sup>26</sup> The Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Nazri Adlani has described as 'slandorous', international reports that Indonesian Islamist organisations have become involved in global terrorist networks.<sup>27</sup>

There are also official claims of links between Indonesian groups and Southeast Asian terrorist and/or separatist organisations, although independent evidence for these is also largely inadequate. In August, Indonesian police arrested a Malaysian national following a bombing in the Atrium Plaza, and two others for bombings in churches throughout Indonesia.<sup>28</sup> Last year the Philippines Ambassador was injured in a bombing, and the Malaysian Embassy was attacked with a grenade. Carlyle Thayer, an expert on Southeast Asian security, has stated that there are groups of armed militia members that move around the region.<sup>29</sup> Ja'far Umar Thalib has stated the Laskar Jihad does have links to the Malaysian Kumpulan Mujahadeen Malaysia (KMM) Islamist organisation. Intelligence reports suggest these Southeast Asian groups may be linked to international terrorist networks. The suspected hijackers of the 11 September attacks were, according to US intelligence, sighted in the Philippines and Kuala Lumpur.

## **Conclusion**

The impact on Indonesia of the terrorist attacks on the US and the US reaction and increasingly active local Islamist organisations is likely to be continued sporadic outbursts of protest and occasional violence. The relatively porous nature of Indonesian national borders and the weakness of the Indonesian Government in detecting terrorists, means that Indonesia may well serve as either a transit point or a sanctuary for international terrorists. However, the Indonesian Government has a narrow path to tread in protecting Indonesia from terrorist activity and ensuring the country is not used by terrorist networks as a sanctuary, and preventing the spillover of radicalism from Islamist organisations to moderate Indonesian Muslims.

## Endnotes

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1. T. Dodd, 'Megawati faces Muslim backlash', *Australian Financial Review*, 20 September 2001.
2. 'International Terrorism: Where to From Here?', *Vital Issues Seminar*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament House, Canberra, 26 September 2001.
3. I am not considering the Free Aceh (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) organisation as a terrorist group in this discussion, as this group is in armed struggle with the Indonesian security forces.
4. 'Osama envoy made several trips to Indonesia: Activist', *The Straits Times*, 27 September 2001.
5. See 'Indonesia: Overcoming Murder and Chaos in Maluku', *International Crisis Group Report*, no. 10, 19 December 2000. The Maluku conflict has been particularly bloody, with estimates of casualties since 1999 from 6000 to 9000, and the creation of hundreds of thousands of refugees.
6. J. Solomon & R. Hindryati, 'Indonesian Radicals Rally in Support of bin Laden—Western Agencies Suspect Organizational Ties', *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 21 September 2001.
7. T. Dodd, 'Megawati risks Muslim rage', *Australian Financial Review*, 29 September 2001.
8. *ibid.*
9. 'Indonesian clerics warn of jihad', *CNN.com*, 25 September 2001.
10. T. Dodd, 'Megawati faces Muslim backlash', *op. cit.*
11. Personal communication with Dr Greg Fealy, Australian National University, and T. Dodd, 'Megawati risks Muslim rage', *ibid.*
12. D. Harsanto & H. Abu, 'Militant groups rally outside US embassy against attacks on Afghanistan', *The Jakarta Post*, 9 October 2001.
13. 'Indonesian protests turn violent', *BBC Online*, 9 October 2001.
14. 'Terrorists Operate Freely in Surakarta', *The Jakarta Post*, 24 September 2001.
15. 'Top Muslim leaders stress aid, not violence', *The Jakarta Post*, 2 October 2001.
16. 'Mega slams radicals for anti-US threats', *The Straits Times*, 3 October 2001.
17. T. Mapes, 'Indonesia's US Ties Stir Militant Opposition—Groups Threaten to Attack American Interests', *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 2001.
18. 'RI expresses concern, urges US to limit strikes', *The Jakarta Post*, 9 October 2001.
19. J. McBeth, 'The Danger Within', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 September, 2001, p. 20.
20. *ibid.*
21. T. Dodd, 'Megawati faces Muslim Backlash', *op. cit.*
22. L. Murdoch, 'Bin Laden 'funded Christian-haters'', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 2001.

23. Many Indonesians are also thought to have joined the Mujahadeen struggle against the Soviet Union, see 'Waiting for Osama's Blessing', *Tempo*, no. 03/11, 25 September 2001.
24. Thalib has stated that bin Laden struck him as a jetsetter when he met him in Pakistan in 1987 during the Mujahadeen struggle against the Soviet Union, and has taken a vastly different interpretation of Islam to the Laskar Jihad, see R. C. Paddock, 'Indonesian Extremist Backs Terror Southeast Asia', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 September 2001.
25. Harold Crouch of the International Crisis Group is quoted as questioning reports of *mujahadeen* in the Malukus due to the lack of casualties with Middle Eastern appearance, see S. Mydans, 'Militant Islam Unsettles Indonesia And Its Region', *New York Times*, 21 September 2001.
26. 'Waiting for Osama's Blessing', *Tempo*, no. 03/11, 25 September–1 October 2001.
27. 'No global terrorist link in RI', *Jakarta Post*, 22 September 2001.
28. Dr Greg Fealy of the Australian National University urges caution when assessing these claims of guilt, as the Indonesian Police have been known to frame suspects in the past and little motive has yet been produced for the attacks, personal communication.
29. S. Mydans, 'Militant Islam Unsettles Indonesia And Its Region', *op. cit.*