

The Bali Bombings: Impact on Indonesia and Southeast Asia

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Jihad in the Malay Archipelago

President Bush has described Southeast Asia as the second front in the global war on terror. This classification is not surprising given the fact that many countries in the region—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines—featured prominently in al-Qaeda’s most ambitious plans, including the targeting of the USS Cole in October 2000 and the September 11, 2001 attacks. For al-Qaeda, Southeast Asia is also the second front in global jihad. Even prior to 9/11, Southeast Asia was becoming the hub of global terrorist activities. The region has served as a host to several homegrown Islamist terrorist groups. Many members of these groups received training and waged jihad in Afghanistan. Since the early nineties, al-Qaeda’s influence spread across the region, developing extensive and well-entrenched networks. This process was facilitated by Southeast Asia’s large Muslim population, porous borders, failed societies, and weak governance.

Al Qaeda co-opted Islamist militant groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines and with their help established an extensive training and support infrastructure. It also infiltrated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian Islamist group, and developed it as a regional network spanning East and Southeast Asia and Australia. However, until the January 2002 arrests of JI members in Singapore, very little was known about this highly clandestine and well-coordinated regional network and its mission. JI’s principal objective is to establish a pan-Islamic state (*Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara*), which would include Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei. The testimony of arrested JI cadres and the discovery of a damning videotape by US forces in Afghanistan have confirmed al-Qaeda’s connection with JI plots against western and regional interests in Southeast Asia.

Why Bali?

In June 2002, Omar al-Faruq, a key al-Qaeda leader in Southeast Asia, was arrested in West Java in Indonesia. His interrogation revealed evidence of joint al-Qaeda/Jemaah

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Islamiyah plans for large-scale attacks against western interests in the region, coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the September 11th attacks. Al-Faruq also revealed that in early 2002, senior JI leaders decided to attack “softer targets” such as tourist sites frequented by Westerners. This was in keeping with al-Qaeda’s strategy of shifting from hardened targets like embassies to soft targets such as resorts and schools.

But Bali was not specifically considered as a target until the JI leadership experienced difficulties in attacking other targets such as the Dumai fueling station and ExxonMobil installations, for which logistics were found to be quite daunting. In contrast, Bali was attractive because it was a “soft target” with very limited security; it was a prominent tourist destination, especially for Australians and Americans; and most importantly, the possibility of collateral damage to Muslims was low as the island’s local population is predominantly Hindu.

Justifying Bali bombings¹

In a book entitled, *Aku Melawan Teroris* (“I am fighting for Terrorism”), Imam Samudra, the mastermind of the Bali operation, offers several justifications for choosing Bali as a target. His rationale is heavy in religious arguments and keeps in line with al-Qaeda’s global jihadi agenda.

Imam Samudra argues that the main targets of the Bali bombing is the United States and its allies, namely England, France, Australia, Germany, Belgium, China, India, and Orthodox Russia. Samudra accuses these states of attacking and oppressing the Muslim *umma*. Indeed, Samudra invokes the Quran by referring to these “colonial powers” as the *musyrikeen* (“polytheists”). He considers these countries guilty for attacking “the helpless and the innocent, including children,” such as in Afghanistan in 2001. Samudra mentions that the Australians are targets “due to their efforts to separate East Timor from Indonesia.” In response to these provocations, Samudra contends, Muslims must wage retaliatory jihad against these countries and their citizens. He notes that every Muslim has a responsibility to take revenge for the deaths of thousands of Muslims by the “Crusaders, the Jews, and the Hindus,” and again invokes the Quran by stating:

“...And fight against those all together—just as they fight against you...”

Globalization of Conflicts

According to Imam Samudra, those who claim that the Bali bombing was illegitimate in Islam because it was committed in a Muslim country are naïve. In response, he states that these opponents do not understand the rapidly changing and globalized nature of the world. Samudra argues that globalization has changed the character of the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, with America and Israel being the main protagonists. He contends that this attack on Islam is not limited to specific areas or zones of conflict. Rather, the Imam states, Islam is currently being attacked on a global scale. Therefore, Muslim responses to this hostility should be in kind, and not be restricted to the occupied territories such as Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, or Iraq. Samudra suggests that this position is divinely supported, exhorting Muslims to:

“Slay those wherever you may come upon them, and take them captives and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place.”

On Targeting Civilians

Imam Samudra acknowledges that it is forbidden in Islam to kill women and children, the elderly and devout Muslims; it is also forbidden to destroy property. However, he asserts that this proscription only applies when one’s enemies do not commit similar transgressions. In defence of the Bali operation, the Imam contends that the United States and its allies are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Muslim civilians. In addition, Samudra argues that in the case of Bali bombing, the definition of the term “civilian” does not apply to the victims because they were: conscripted military personnel; citizens of countries such as the US, Australia, Singapore and Thailand, and thus are guilty of voting for and paying tax to governments that actively prosecute wars against Islam and Muslims; or nationals of “colonialist countries” which have caused the deaths of thousands of Muslim civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya and other locations. Finally, Samudra argues that the victims were unlikely to be civilians at all since they had traveled to Bali in spite of well-publicized threats by Islamist groups. Samudra contends that the chances of American “tourists” visiting Indonesia were unlikely given previous terrorist bombings. Rather, Samudra states, the Americans present in Bali were clearly operating on behalf of the American government.

Samudra argues that the precedent for targeting civilians had been set by a number of incidents, including: the 1991 trade embargo on Iraq initiated by the US through the UN that resulted in the deaths 600,000 babies and a total of 1.5 million Iraqis; the thousands of civilian deaths that resulted from the American embargo of Afghanistan during the Taliban rule from 1994 until 2001; Israeli attacks on civilians using American military and financial support; and the post-9/11 US attacks in Afghanistan, which Samudra argues were driven solely by vengeance and hostility. The Imam then argues that Muslim reciprocation is justified since the West has transgressed the limit as stated in the Quran. Samudra offers his justification according to the following statement:

“..Thus, if anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you...”

To Samudra, targeting civilians is merely a matter of “tipping the scales” in order to attain equilibrium—blood for blood, life for life, and civilian for civilian. He argues that this contention is supported by the words of the Prophet:

“Hence, if you have to respond to an attack, respond only to the extent of the attack levelled against you...”

Thus, according to Imam Samudra, the Bali bombings were a response by Muslims in defence of self-respect. He argues that these attacks were directed against America and its allies. He further states that such jihad has to be carried out even if only a small number of Muslims participate in it. Geographical considerations in this jihad are moot. The only

requirement is to attack Western and “crusader” interests. Samudra offers this Quranic verse as justification:

“And slay them wherever you may come upon them...”

Maximization of Effect

A second consideration was to maximize the effect of the attacks. To this end, Jemaah Islamiyah displayed a preference for a single devastating attack rather than multiple attacks with relatively minimal outcomes. According to Imam Samudra, the intent of the attack was to target a location with as many Westerners and as few local inhabitants as possible. In addition, he argues that the targets (Sari Club and Paddy’s Pub) were “places of vice,” with no value in Islam, thereby justifying their destruction.

Impact of the Bombings

The Bali bombings had a significant negative impact on the local and regional economies. Bali is heavily dependant on tourism, which plummeted in the wake of the attacks. Indeed, while some analysts have argued that the economic impact of the bombings was negligible given that the contribution of tourism to Indonesian GDP was only 4 to 6 percent. However, the impact of the bombings on the livelihood of everyday Balinese cannot be easily dismissed.

In addition, the attackers reject arguments that the bombings had adverse economic consequence for Bali. Samudra argues that any business activities which involve the consumption of alcohol and the encouragement of sexual promiscuity—activities the targets certainly condoned, he argues—are impermissible in Islam. Samudra also contends that even businesses which only obliquely profited from the nightlife industry, such as handicraft stalls, were illegitimate. He states that the proprietors of such businesses are guilty of associating with “un-Islamic” activities. With these arguments as justification, Samudra suggests that there was no significant harm done to Bali by the bombings. Indeed, Samudra expressed his hopes that Allah would replace lost businesses with more legitimate and “Islamic” ones.

Impact on State-Society Relations

In spite of Imam Samudra’s arguments, the impact of the bombings was far-reaching. State-society relations throughout the region were significantly affected as a result of the attacks, especially in Indonesia. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the mainstream Muslim intelligentsia in Indonesia were not inclined to accept that there could be radical elements among them prepared to condone the deaths of innocent civilians in pursuit of a pan-Islamic caliphate. For example, *Nadhatul Ulama* (NU), one of Indonesia’s largest Muslim groups and a mostly moderate organization, accused the US of resorting to “unethical political maneuvers” to pressure Indonesia, and warned Washington not to antagonize Indonesia with “propaganda tricks.” However, after the perpetrators were arrested and put on trial, they publicly accepted responsibility for the attacks.

The bombings also sparked the recognition of the threat posed by terrorism in the security strategies of Southeast Asian governments. This acknowledgement resulted in increased law enforcement coordination and intelligence sharing within the region. This cooperation may not have eradicated radical networks, but it certainly weakened them.

Suicide Terrorism

Bali also brought the spectre of home-grown suicide terrorism to Southeast Asia for the first time. Even though there had been a previous “martyrdom operation” in the region, it was conducted by a Middle Eastern national. The use of Southeast Asian suicide bombers has significant regional implications. The tactic could well be mimicked by other radical groups in the region. Reportedly, Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group have recently planned coordinated suicide terror operations. There were also reports indicating that Thai Muslim youths have received paramilitary and terrorism training from *madrasas* in Indonesia in order to carry out attacks in Thailand.

Impact on Jemaah Islamiyah

The Bali bombings led to the disintegration of Jemaah Islamiyah due to the subsequent arrest and killing of the group’s top leadership. Additionally the high number of Muslim deaths in later attacks led to a schism within the group. A debate within the group currently rages over the benefit of attacks on Indonesian soil. Group members have expressed opposition to the fratricidal nature of such attacks, and also stated concern that urgent day-to-day concerns of Indonesians, such as unemployment and corruption, are being sidelined in pursuit of a global Islamist agenda.

However, disintegration has not made the group less dangerous. As subsequent operations demonstrated, Jemaah Islamiyah retains the capability to carry out deadly suicide attacks. There are indications that dissatisfied Muslims in the region are becoming increasingly radicalized, and readily embrace global Islamist concerns. This trend represents a distinctly negative development for the future security of Southeast Asia.

¹ For a detailed discussion about Imam Samudra’s justification of Bali Bombings, see Mohammad Haniff Hassan, “Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra’s Justification for the Bali Bombings, Peace Matters.” Singapore. 2006.