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After Bali: Southeast Asia Under Threat

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Southeast Asia was identified as the “Second Front” in the Global War on Terrorism, but the resolve of the ASEAN governments has kept the terrorist threat in check. However 10 years after Bali, extremism and terrorism continue to be driven by global developments.

Commentary

SINCE JEMAAH Islamiyah (JI)’s coordinated suicide attacks on Bali on 12 October 2002, the terrorist groups and extremist networks in Southeast Asia have been disrupted but not eliminated. The region has performed much better than South Asia, Middle East and Africa in keeping terrorism in check but more work needs to be done to degrade and dismantle the threat structures.

The threat in Southeast Asia has neither declined nor plateaued. Nonetheless, security and intelligence cooperation and sustained counter terrorism operations by regional governments are keeping the terrorist threat under check. In the coming decade, governments working with Muslim community partners are likely to invest more in developing greater capabilities to rehabilitate terrorists and counter the terrorist message.

The context

The Al Qaeda-funded, JI-coordinated suicide bombings in Bali was one of the world’s deadliest terrorist attacks. On a global scale, less than a dozen terrorist attacks killed over 200 civilians. The attacks by Indonesian suicide bombers killed 202 - 164 were foreign nationals, including 88 Australians and 24 Britons – and maimed and injured 350 Indonesians and holidaymakers from 22 countries.

The joint Al Qaeda-JI attack in Bali was to avenge the US-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan. The attack was planned and prepared by Indonesian members of JI, almost all of them Afghan war veterans. The response of the Indonesian government supported by the Australian Federal Police, Australia’s intelligence community, and other governments was decisive.

Post-Bali developments

In the decade that followed, the Indonesian police, especially its counter terrorism tactical force, Detachment 88, killed and captured nearly 800 Indonesian terrorists and extremists. Furthermore, JI itself transformed into

an ideological organisation and several new splinter groups emerged. They include a dozen operational groups of Al Qaeda in Indonesia such as Lashkar Hisbah, Tawhid Wal Jihad and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT).

Subsequently JI and JAT revisited Bali. Three JI suicide bombers attacked two sites in Bali on 1 October, 2005 killing 26 and injuring 126. Detachment 88 killed five JAT terrorists preparing to mount operations in Bali on 18 March, 2012.

The counter terrorism efforts by Indonesia should be commended. Nonetheless, there is a need for greater political will to fight ideological extremism, the principal driver of terrorism in Southeast Asia. There is a need to arrest the radical preachers, fine the presses that print extremist books and literature, and deter those who threaten and support political violence.

Although the Indonesian legal framework to fight operational terrorism is sound, the framework to fight the terrorists' conceptual and support infrastructure is weak. As such, these threat groups are not legally banned, proscribed, or designated. They continue to disseminate propaganda, raise funds, procure supplies and conduct training, regenerating the next wave of terrorists and terrorism.

Southeast Asia has done exceptionally well compared to the US-led Global War on Terrorism in South Asia (Pakistan-Afghanistan), the Middle East (Iraq-Yemen), and Africa (Somalia-Libya). Although the original Al Qaeda has been degraded and its founder Osama bin Laden killed, a dozen new al Qaedas have emerged, from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to Al Qaeda in Iraq and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Today, the Taliban, Al Qaeda and a dozen other groups on the Afghan-Pakistan border are biding their time for the US-led coalition to pull out of Afghanistan in 2014 before they reestablish their pre-2001 safe haven.

The US invasion of Iraq triggered significant politicisation, radicalisation and mobilisation of Muslim communities. The US pulled out of Iraq without restoring law and order. After US and NATO intervention in Libya, the threat has percolated to the Sahel, destabilising Mali, Chad, Niger, Mauritania and even Nigeria. Although the situation in Yemen and Somalia has improved, terrorism and extremism remain a constant challenge.

Current and Future Developments

The impact of the Arab Spring on Southeast Asia was marginal. Unlike in the Middle East, the Arab Spring did not have an appreciable impact on Muslim countries in Asia where governments are relatively more democratic. Recently Asian Muslim politicians exercised restraint with regard to the release of the trailer "Innocence of the Muslims" which otherwise would have challenged regional harmony.

However in future, like JAT, other threat groups are also likely to operate both underground and above ground. They will continue to infiltrate political parties, social groups and youth organisations and invest in the social media extensively to expand their support bases. Today, the writings of the radical Jordanian cleric Abu Mohamed al Maqdisi, the mentor of Abu Musab al Zarqawi of Iraq, are gaining popularity among the extremist and terrorist circles in the region.

More violent and radical groups in Southeast Asia will fight against non-Muslims ("infidels") and Muslims who do not share their belief ("apostates"). Driven by the false belief that the West is deliberately attacking Islam and killing Muslims, the terrorists attacked Western targets during the last decade. In the next decade, they are likely to expand attacks to include government targets, notably government officials especially judges and law enforcement, and politicians, including leaders. Extremist groups will campaign for replacing the democratic system of governance with Islamic law. More violent and radical groups will campaign for the imposition of Sharia law.

The terrorist attack on Bali on 12 October, 2002 was a wakeup call for Southeast Asian governments. It demonstrated the severity of terrorism. Today, the governments are better prepared to fight terrorism and their leaders better understand the threat posed by ideological extremism.

Today, extremism among Southeast Asian Muslims is not so much driven by domestic and regional developments as by global developments. For instance, the re-creation of Afghanistan as a terrorist sanctuary will have profound implications for the security and stability of Southeast Asia.

More than ever before, the geostrategic developments in the Middle East and South Asia are influencing Muslim thinking. As such the threat of terrorism will not disappear from the Southeast Asian security landscape in the short term.

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