

Asian Terrorism: Can We Meet the Challenge? By Rohan Gunaratna

The Debate: Gunaratna

After the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in March 2003, the Asian threat landscape changed dramatically. Although Iraq is not Asia, televised images of routine violence and constant suffering have mobilized segments of even the mainstream Muslim population.

IRAQ REMAINS A MAGNET for foreign fighters, most from the Middle East, but it is also a lightning rod for Muslims globally, including those in Asia.

More than Palestine, Iraq today matters to Muslims everywhere. More than any other conflict zone in the world involving Muslims — Chechnya, Algeria, Somalia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, southern Thailand, southern Philippines — the daily news from Iraq hurts. Sectarian killing, maiming and kidnapping have translated into resentment against the US, its allies and their friends. Terrorist and extremist groups are exploiting that anger and rage to expand their local membership and support base.

Before the invasion of Iraq, incidents of political violence in Asia accounted for nearly half the total number of such incidents worldwide.¹ Since the invasion, fatalities and casualties in the Middle East are much higher than in Asia.² Nonetheless, the scale of radicalization within Asian Muslim communities — a factor that cannot be quantified easily — is on the rise.³

Arab defeat on the battlefield by Israel, the occupation of Palestinian land by Israel and the failure of the US to end the conflict radicalized Muslims in the Middle East. With the globalization of communications, the extensive use of the Internet, and the emergence of an alternate Arab media, will the events in Iraq have a comparable impact on Asian Muslims? Will the sympathy and support of Asian Muslims for the suffering of Iraqi Muslims translate into anti-American sentiment? Will this cause a segment of Asian Muslims to become committed to tacit and active support for the global jihadist movement?

THE CONTEXT OF TODAY'S CHALLENGE

With the globalization of terrorism in the 1990s, Asian participation in multinational terrorist

1 *International and National Database on Terrorism* (Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews, Accessed in June 2002).

2 Global Terrorism Report (US State Department, Office of the Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, April 2007).

3 An Asian Muslim taxi driver once told me: "I cannot attack a US target at home, but every day I pray for my brothers fighting the occupation forces in Iraq." This occurred in January 2007, during a casual conversation in a Southeast Asian country.

4 "More Bombings and Beheadings in Thailand's Deep South," <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/53220.html>.

5 Gary A. Ackerman and Sundara Vadlamudi, "The Case of Ramzi Yousef," in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives – Lessons From the Fight Against Terrorism*, James Forrest, ed., Volume 3 (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007): 128.

6 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 63.

7 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 276.

networks has grown significantly. In Central, South and Southeast Asia robust threat groups capable of sustained violence are now active. Moreover, Asians living in migrant or diaspora communities in the West — from Canada to the UK to Australia — have also been influenced by a similar ideology. Western-born youth of Asian heritage have conducted or planned attacks both in their home countries and abroad.

Although the Middle East remains the epicenter of violence, the terrorist threat has dispersed to Africa and to Asia. Ideas, trained personnel, and technologies continue to flow from the Middle East to Asia. For instance, the graphic beheadings from Iraq have now become a common feature in the conflict in southern Thailand.⁴ Either by direct contact or transfer, many Asian threat groups have learned from their Middle Eastern counterparts. Liquid explosives recovered in Manila in 2003, for example, were originally introduced by Ramzi Ahmed

Soviets and the subsequent lawlessness created in Afghanistan provided a sanctuary for Middle Eastern groups on the fringes of Asia. After many Arabs with experience and confidence in Afghanistan returned to Egypt and Algeria after the fall of Kabul in 1992 to the mujahidin, the fighting intensified in those arenas. To quote Gilles Kepel: "Trained to jihadism-salafism in Peshawar, these men now contributed to the radicalizing of the local jihad by applying their international experience."⁷

Afghanistan also created an opportunity for Middle Eastern groups to interact with their Asian counterparts. Over the course of a decade, the Middle Easterners politicized, radicalized and mobilized their Asian counterparts. The legitimacy of their participation in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a campaign supported both by the West and the Muslim world, enabled them to survive as groups. They disseminated the ideologies ar-

In the West, with the dismantling of structured groups, individuals and cells are emerging as the principal threat. These "local" jihadists are self-radicalized but they meet like-minded individuals and members of structured groups on the Internet.

Yousef, the man in prison for life for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, the 9/11 mastermind, to bomb aircraft in East Asia in 1995.⁵

Since 1968, Middle Eastern groups have dominated the international terrorism landscape.⁶ As the international center of terrorist training, the Syrian-controlled Bekka Valley in Lebanon was replaced by Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The fighting against the

ticated by the first generation ideologues and practitioners of the jihad such as Dr Abdullah Azzam, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, Dr Ayman al Zawahiri, and Osama bin Laden.

Although none of these figures is Asian, all of them visited or lived in Asia, notably in Pakistan and Afghanistan, since the 1980s. This included Abu Musab al Suri, who seeded the idea of creating ideologically driven jihadist cells.⁸ For ten years, the world witnessed the

8 Brynjar Lia, "Al-Suri's Doctrines for Decentralized Jihadi Training," *The Jamestown Foundation Part 1*, 5, no. 1 (January 18, 2007).

anti-Soviet Afghan campaign and for another decade Afghanistan became a sanctuary. In addition to the ruling Taliban regime, Al Qaeda and two dozen other threat groups established training camps in Afghanistan. Until the US-led coalition invaded in October 2001, Afghanistan was a terrorist Disneyland, and the dismantling of the terrorist training and operational infrastructure there was a major blow to extremist groups worldwide.

ASIAN THREAT GROUPS

Although Al Qaeda is being hunted, a number of groups that are operationally and ideologically linked to Al Qaeda still function in Asia. In Southeast Asia, the most active is Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a regional group with a significant presence in Indonesia and the southern Philippines. JI remains close to Al Qaeda both ideologically and operationally. In addition to JI, there are three other jihadist groups active in the Philippines: the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Abu Sayyaf and the Rajah Solaiman Movement.

In Indonesia, there are approximately three dozen radical groups with the potential to become violent over time. They include Wahdah Islamiyah, Negara Islam Indonesia and Lashkar Jundullah, all of which are members of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (The Council of Mujahidin of Indonesia), led by Abu Bakar Bashir, the leader of JI who was convicted (and later released from prison) for being the inspiration behind the 2002 Bali bombing. In Malaysia, the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, a group close to Al Qaeda and JI has been severely disrupted. Its counterpart in Thailand is Jemaah Salafiyah, a group that is inactive. The most active of the dozen groups engaged in the fighting in Thailand is the Barisan Revolutionary National — Coordinate. Although they are nationalist,

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they are increasingly developing a jihadist flavor. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and Arakan Rohingya Nationalist Organization, two jihadist groups active in Myanmar, now operate out of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh itself, there are approximately two dozen groups but the most active is Harkatul Jihadi Islami — B (for Bangladesh) and Jamiat-ul Mujahidin Bangladesh, a group that has a presence throughout the country. Several Bangladeshi and Pakistani jihadist groups are operating in India. In addition to the Student Islamic Movement of India, there are a number of radical Indian Muslim groups that may become violent over time. Throughout Pakistan, there are three dozen or so jihadist groups that are close to Al Qaeda operationally and ideologically. They include: Harkat-ul Jihadi Islami, Lashkar e Toiba, Jayash-e-Mohamed and Harakatul Mujahidin. In Central Asia, the most active group is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and its splinters.

In Northeast Asia, there are no resident terrorist organizations, apart from a dozen groups in Xingjiang in Western China, an area that has more in common with Central Asia than Beijing. The group closest to Al Qaeda is the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which also has a presence in the tribal areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

⁹ Mohamed Siddique Khan and Shezad Tanweer, the leader and deputy leader of the 7/7 attacks as well as Ibrahim Saeed, the leader of the 21/7 attacks trained in the Malakhand camp in the North West Frontier Province. "The Global Terrorist Threat," *Global Pathfinder: ICPVTR Database* (Accessed in June 2007).

¹⁰ According to the 9/11 Commission, KSM studied at the North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University, in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he graduated as a mechanical engineer.

¹¹ "Al-Qaida No. 3 says he planned 9/11, other plots", *Associated Press*, MSNBC, 15-03-2007: "I decapitated with my blessed right hand the head of the American Jew, Daniel Pearl, in the city of Karachi, Pakistan. For those who would like to confirm, there are pictures of me on the Internet holding his head."

AL QAEDA AND THE TALIBAN AFTER 9/11

Initially, both the Taliban and Al Qaeda denied their role in the September 11 attacks. Their propagandists argued that Israel or the CIA engineered the 9/11 attacks to tarnish the reputation of Muslims and to justify Western imperialism. Many Muslims, including some of the educated elite, still refuse to believe that 9/11 was an Al Qaeda act. When the US reacted, Al Qaeda and its associated groups attempted to rally Muslims to fight the "invading forces," calling it a jihad. A few dozen galvanized, politicized and radicalized Muslims left for Pakistan to assist the Taliban and Al Qaeda to fight the coalition forces. Pakistan under President General Pervez Musharraf has detained a number of foreign nationals suspected of traveling there to join the jihad. With the difficulty of identifying Pakistanis in the West returning to assist their "Muslim brothers," a few dozen people received training in Pakistan's tribal areas. This included the leaders of the July 7 and 21 attacks in the UK.⁹

The threat facing the West stems largely from networks that have been politicized and radicalized by the virulent ideologies disseminated by groups operating in conflict zones. These groups instill the false belief that the US and its allies are targeting Muslims in a deliberate campaign against Islam. The ideologues of the global jihad claim that every good Muslim's sacred duty is to attack Satan - the US, its European and Australian allies and their friends in the Muslim and non-Muslim world. This is their core set of beliefs, which are instilled, often through the Internet, by preachers of hate, and through televised images from Iraq and other conflict zones where Muslims are suffering. After 9/11, the US-led coalition was determined to hunt down a well-structured threat group with guerrilla and terrorist capabilities, but it has failed to fight

the robust underlying ideology that is the real source of terrorist inspiration.

THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Among the terrorist leaders and operatives of Asian origin that have emerged in the last five years, the best known is Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, alias KSM, alias Mokhtar. The mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, KSM was a Western-educated Pakistani terrorist.¹⁰ If not for KSM — the man who conceived and operationalized the attack at the dawn of the 21st century — Al Qaeda would not be well known globally. Both he and his nephew, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, grew up in Kuwait. Together they planned the February 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and the foiled plan to bomb a dozen aircraft over the Pacific (Operation Bojinka) in 1995. Having grown up in the Middle East, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef and KSM were comfortable operating with both Asian and Arab terrorists. KSM planned several other attacks, such as a second wave against the US in 2002, including plans to strike the Bank of America building in Los Angeles using Southeast Asian terrorists. KSM partially funded the Bali bombing in 2002, and claims to have personally beheaded Daniel Pearl, the first American to be killed in an act of terrorism after 9/11.¹¹

KSM's partner in the Pearl murder was Ahmed Saeed Omar Sheikh, a British born Pakistani educated at the London School of Economics. After joining Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, Omar Sheikh kidnapped Westerners in India in 1994. Released in return for hostages held in the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814, Omar Sheikh lured Pearl, the respected Wall Street Journal reporter, to Karachi, kidnapped him and gave him to Al Qaeda in 2002.

Another Asian terrorist was Muhammad Naeem Noor Khan, alias Abu Talal, a computer

¹² Born in 1971, Dhiren Barot, also known as Bilal, Abu Musa al-Hindi, Abu Eissa al-Hindi, and Issa al-Britani, was an Indian Muslim convert.

specialist serving as the communications coordinator of Al Qaeda. Arrested in Pakistan on July 13, 2004, his laptop contained surveillance profiles of Heathrow Airport in London, the New York Stock Exchange and Citigroup headquarters in New York, the Prudential Building in New Jersey, and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank buildings in Washington DC. A protégé of KSM, Dhiren Barot,¹² the Al Qaeda leader in the UK, had surveilled these targets. Barot envisioned placing 12-13 explosive cylinders inside limousines, and detonating them in underground car-parks to collapse the buildings; he called this the “Gas Limos Project.” He traveled to the US in August 2000 and in March 2001 to study the targets in minute detail and briefed the Al Qaeda leadership on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Barot’s cell members were mostly young British nationals of Pakistani heritage, none older than 31. Although known to the British intelligence community and New Scotland Yard since December 2001, Barot was identified and arrested only in August 2004.

The dominance of Asians in European and North American operations was inevitable. After the 9/11 attacks, it was recognized, even within Al Qaeda, that it was difficult for Arabs to operate in the West. As Arabs were suspect, Al Qaeda relied on its Asian members, including those living in the West, to take charge of its operations. While Europe-based South Asian members who were either trained or inspired by Al Qaeda dominated the threat landscape, there were also Southeast Asians determined to strike the US, its allies and friends. For instance, Encep Nurjaman, alias Riduan Isamuddin, alias Hambali, from Indonesia, working together with KSM, spearheaded the bombing of churches in Indonesia in December 2000, the first Bali bombing, and arranged to house the 9/11 hijackers in Malaysia.

HOMEOWN JIHADISM

In contrast to the threat of traditional terrorism by well structured terrorist groups, the past decade has seen the emergence of homegrown radicalism and violence. In the West, with the dismantling of structured groups, individuals and cells are emerging as the principal threat. These “local” jihadists are self-radicalized but they meet like-minded individuals and members of structured groups on the Internet. More than any other group, Asians feature prominently in homegrown cells. Initially only a few mosques in London preached hatred but gradually it spread to the Thames Valley, Sussex, Surrey and Bedfordshire. On March 30, 2004, New Scotland Yard raided homes in Crawley and a storage space in Hanwell, West London. Making a number of arrests of Asians, police recovered bomb-making materials, including a biscuit tin filled with aluminum powder and 1,300 pounds (600 kg) of ammonium nitrate fertilizer.

In Ottawa, an operation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police led to the arrest of Mohammad Momin Khawaja, a software engineer, who provided the technical know how to assemble the device. They were planning to recruit 30 jihadists to hijack and crash planes, set off explosions in shopping centers, nightclubs, synagogues, and disrupt electricity and gas supplies. They specifically targeted the “Ministry of Sound” nightclub in central London and the Bluewater shopping mall in Kent. As they were homegrown, the UK cell lacked the expertise and the skills to pull off such a spectacular attack. In the periphery of this cell were Mohamed Siddique Khan and Shezah Tanweer, two British nationals of Asian heritage. One year later, they spearheaded the July 7th bombings.

Of the four British nationals involved in the bombing of the London transport system, three-

were Asian. The operational leader, Khan, 30, a community worker, lived in the UK with his pregnant wife and young child. The deputy leader, Tanweer, 22, lived in Leeds with his mother and father working in a fish and chip shop. Hasib Hussain, 18, lived with his brother Imran and sister-in-law Shazia. Germaine Lindsay, 19, of Jamaican origin, lived with his pregnant wife. The bombings killed 52 commuters, injured 700, and disrupted public life.

Many Asians from Europe, including Khan and Tanweer, traveled to the tribal areas of Pakistan to train with Al Qaeda in the use of homemade explosives. In addition to Al Qaeda, Harakat Ul Jehadi Islami and Jamiat ul Furqan use safe areas in Pakistan under their control to train and empower Asian youth from the West in the use of explosive devices.

THE COMING THREAT

Since the anti-Soviet Afghan campaign began in December 1979, Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim threat groups have become ideologically and operationally integrated. With the globalization of terrorism in the 1990s, they have built common training platforms in Afghanistan and elsewhere and they engage in support activities in the West. Since the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, the Asian groups have offered a safe haven for their Middle Eastern allies in Pakistan's tribal areas. Today, Asian and Middle Eastern groups even collaborate outside their own territories. For instance, in North America, Europe and Australia, Middle Eastern and Asian terrorist networks mount joint operations.

Four decades of sustained violence in the Middle East prompted the world to view the region differently. The first thought of a Westerner upon seeing an Arab in traditional garb was: "Is he a sympathizer of terrorism?" Even the edu-

cated believed that Arabs were more prone to joining or supporting terrorism. With the global threat changing dramatically in the past decade, Asians, especially Asian Muslims, will be viewed suspiciously.

Traditionally, Middle Eastern threat groups were considered more extreme and violent than their Asian counterparts. In terms of size, scale of support and intensity of violence, the Middle Eastern groups were well structured, organized and capable. This is no longer the case. Threat groups in Asia and mixed networks in the West are equally capable of sustained violence or conducting spectacular one-time attacks.

Contemporary Asia is not only a laboratory to study Muslim terrorist and extremist groups, but also left wing and nationalist groups. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists), New Peoples Army of the Philippines, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, and the People's War Group (PWF) in India have killed and injured innocent people just like their politico-religious counterparts. Some of them have

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learned and others have contributed actively and tacitly to the growing body of terrorist tactical and technological knowledge.

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At a political level, Asian leaders will need to better understand the nature of the threat. To ensure that they do not over-react, they will need to be guided by specialists and they will need to work even more closely with Muslim community leaders in addition to the law enforcement, security and intelligence services. There is nothing more important than working with the Muslim community, especially formally and informally to educate them that groups such as Al Qaeda are deviant and not Koranic.

Political leaders will need to instill leadership at all levels from the Imam at the mosque to the frontline law enforcement officer. At a strategic level, political leaders must use all the instruments of national power to build a norm and an ethic against extremism and violence — this includes schools, religious institutions, the criminal justice system, mass media, etc. Non-partisan and apolitical platforms to discuss matters of security are central.

At a law enforcement and intelligence level, security professionals must educate their rank and file. As the threat is dynamic and constantly evolving, they must be constantly educated and trained to understand and respond. As the threat is fluid and transnational, intra- and inter-agency cooperation must be encouraged and if necessary enforced by law. As we are confronted with networked terrorism and extremism, it is essential to build common databases, exchange personnel, conduct joint training and operations, and share expertise and resources within and between government enforcement and intelligence services.

At the community level, government must strike private-public sector partnerships. As terrorism and extremism emerge within the community, the government should trust and work with the public. Ideally, the public should be educated and co-opted as the eyes and ears of the

¹³ I would like to acknowledge Clay Edward Shwery, a terrorism specialist at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, for his invaluable research assistance.

state to prevent extremist infiltration and terrorist preparations. As terrorists increasingly attack infrastructure that is not owned or operated by the state, government must work with schools, religious organizations, financial companies, the media and public utility providers along with the private security industry to share knowledge and information. The current wave of terrorism and extremism cannot be fought effectively by governments or their leaders alone.

The threat posed by Asian groups is likely to grow significantly in the coming decade. This includes incidents of terrorism and counter-terrorism (initiated by security forces). In territorial Asia, as well as within its migrant and diaspora populations, there are segments that sympathize with and support violence. In terms of scale, size and influence, they will soon be comparable to Middle Eastern threat groups in the degree of violence they perpetrate. If Asia is to prosper in the 21st century, Asian governments must work together to plan and prepare to fight strategically. Asia must develop a comprehensive approach not only to fight terrorism itself, but its source — ideological extremism.¹³

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