

## **COMBATING ‘TERRORISM’ – NEW CHALLENGE FOR THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES**

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### **Introduction**

It may someday be said that the 21<sup>st</sup> century began on September 11, 2001. On September 11, it became evident that modern societies are vulnerable as never before – vulnerable because both the advanced technologies and civil openness the modern societies have worked so successfully to develop can be used against them. Only after a year, there was another shock – the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002. This incident directed attention to the issue that Southeast Asia is a region conducive to the activities of both indigenous and international terrorist groups. Even now, one year after the carnage of Bali, the region is as vulnerable as ever.

Southeast Asia has frequently had episodes of political violence that have either been explicitly or closely linked to *‘terrorism’*. These have included activities by Communist groups (for example in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines) and activities directed against ruling Communist regimes (such as the bomb attacks in Laos in 2000-2001). Terrorism has also at times been state-sponsored or condoned, as in the case of Christian anti-separatist groups in the southern Philippines (opposing Muslim secessionists) and militias in East Timor, Papua and other parts of Indonesia.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the security threats posed by different terrorist groups in this region and how they can be contained to maintain peace and stability. In this context, first we have to understand the dynamic character of global terrorism.

### **New Faces of Global Terrorism**

The terrorist groups and their networks represent a new and profoundly dangerous kind of organization – one that might be called a *‘virtual*

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*state*'. This state has many characteristics of other states (a trained standing army and intelligence cadre; a treasury and a source of revenue; a civil service and even a rudimentary welfare system for the families of its fighters) but is borderless; it declares wars, makes alliances with other states and is global in scope but lacks a definable location on the map.

According to the United States Department of Defense, '**Terrorism**' is, "the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear: intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological".<sup>1</sup>

Terrorist threats in the present world ranges from the material (such as suicide bombers, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons) to new dimensions such as narco-terrorism, cyber-terrorism, genomic terrorism, agro-terrorism etc. Terrorists on several continents with access to drug profits can obtain advanced conventional weaponry. So, we can no longer ignore the root causes of terrorism – whether they are grievances over access to land and water, frustrations over exploitation of the poor by the rich or simply lack of alternative forms of employment. For anyone who has been studying terrorist tracts for long, there is in 'the famous' Osama Bin Laden's work a certain superficial novelty; there has naturally been great interest in his '*fatwa*' and his terror manuals like the '*Declaration of Jihad against the Country's Tyrants*'. But below the surface are the familiar twisted arguments and misplaced morals of a long line of similar incitements of killing. I think he is just a sophist who labors to make the weaker argument stronger, by punctuating his paragraphs with explosions. The terrorists are not guerillas because though guerilla wars can be sanctioned under international law; it starts by leaving aside civilians while using unconventional military tactics to fight military forces. Therefore, the only endgame that makes sense is to redirect the momentum of terrorism and hit them before they hit us. Unless the projected trajectory of terrorism is capped, we doom ourselves to a future of physical attacks regardless of the security barricades. The most important thing is, 'free societies' that reign now cannot afford to wrap security blankets around its own national celebrations.

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<sup>1</sup> Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia: Evidence & Response, Center for Defense Information Terrorism Project, 2002, p.122.

### **Why is Southeast Asia a Target Area?**

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the Bali bombing incident worsened the security environment. It is a volatile region that acted as a ‘*crossroad*’ from ancient history. It had episodes of political violence that have been explicitly or closely linked to terrorism. Armed extremists and terrorist groups were active in Southeast Asia before September 11 but their activities were considered limited in scope. Now these groups are seen as more extensive and linked in varying ways to widespread regional and international networks. Several factors continue to foster and introduce new elements into terrorism in the region.

*First*, the great majority of Southeast Asia’s estimated 230 million Muslims (20% of the world total) has moderate and tolerant views and has been willing to coexist with other religious groups and secular institutions. However, the more strident and anti-pluralist vein of Islam propounded from areas such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan has had an appeal to a minority.

*Secondly*, the advent of a large-scale and radical Islamic resistance in Afghanistan added a new dimension. Local groups could now gain added inspiration, assistance and funding from prestigious and well-financed international movements.

*Thirdly*, economic hardships since 1997 gave rise to a tendency for radical explanations and solutions. Efforts to attain autonomy by Islamic movements have often either been resisted by central governments or have been implemented ineffectively. The financial crisis had put pressure on regional governments and spending on crucial areas such as education has been restricted. This has increased the attraction of religious schools. Furthermore, well-funded Islamic radical movements offered financial support both to adherents and their families. This has had considerable appeal to those in outlying and economically disadvantaged areas.

*Fourthly*, borders are often porous; weak immigration controls and weak governments with lax intelligence and enforcement institutions offer places of easy access. Moreover, administrative requirements can also be circumvented through corruption. Criminal activities are widespread in the region and can assist resources movement by radical groups.