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Southeast Asia and the Brotherhood of Terrorism

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Throughout Asia there are terrorist organizations, insurgencies, and revolutionaries of all kinds. However, what sets terrorist groups operating in Southeast Asia apart is the intimate nature of cooperation among groups. Although insurgent groups in Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood do not share the same goals, their cooperation across national boundaries creates an economy of scale for logistics, training, and safe havens. For example, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) have trained with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in camps in the southern Philippines; GAM smuggles weapons with the Thai terrorist group Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and many terrorists use regional connections to move from country to country.

Many groups in Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood, such as GAM, PULO, Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP), Kampulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Laskar Jihad, Indonesian Islamic Liberation Front (IILF) and the MILF, do not appear on the U.S. State Department's or the United Nations' list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO). This oversight has implications for the effectiveness of anti-terrorist strategies in the region because current policies attack only a portion of the terrorist network.

Countries in Southeast Asia and the broader international community must identify the full magnitude of the terrorist system and apply anti-terrorist policies toward destroying the entire network. The U.S.

Talking Points

- Although insurgent groups in Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood do not share the same goals, their cooperation across national boundaries creates an economy of scale for logistics, training, and safe havens.
- To better contain the Southeast Asian brotherhood of terrorism, the international community should initiate the process to place all of Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood on the lists of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.
- Additionally, the international community should increase regional cooperation by the governments of Southeast Asia and their allies. Regional governments should also support efforts to suppress insurgent groups. .

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government should correct this oversight by updating the FTO to include all of Southeast Asia's terrorist groups and indicating the close links between these organizations.

The Terrorist Bond

Originally there were little or no connections between Southeast Asia's terrorist organizations. Therefore, the roots of these groups are varied. The Indonesian founders of JI, for instance, were inspired by anti-government rebellions in the 1950s. GAM began its insurgency against Jakarta in 1976. Both Abu Sayyaf and MILF originated from Moro groups that fought in the Philippines during the days of Spanish colonialism. The Pattani United Liberation Organization traces its history to Pattani, an independent Malay kingdom that Thailand conquered and occupied in the 17th century.

Many senior members of today's Southeast Asian terrorist groups were introduced and formed an alliance during the Afghan war against Soviet occupation. The camaraderie militants formed during battles against the Soviet Union still infuses their relationships today. After defeating the Soviet Union, many militants returned to Southeast Asia inspired by the success of their struggle—and motivated to bring jihad home to Southeast Asia. These radical leaders maintained their relationships through communicative channels (such as al-Qaeda) and freely trained members of their militant groups in Afghanistan until the American occupation in 2002.

Following Afghanistan, the second most important jihad bond for Southeast Asian terrorists was the battle against Christians in the Moluccas islands of Indonesia. Although the islands were evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, in 1999 sectarian violence exploded, sparking nearly three years of vicious fighting. By the time peace was re-established in 2003, more than 5,000 people had died and another 350,000 people were displaced. The sectarian conflict attracted Islamic extremist groups from across Southeast Asia, including Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, Laskar Jihad, and Jemaah Islamiyah. The fight against the Moluccas Christians gained many new recruits and

produced a new generation of regional leaders with shared combat experience.

Another unifying element was the government of Libya, which trained and financed many of Southeast Asia's terrorists. For example, between 1986 and 1989, GAM sent an estimated 5,000 military cadres to train in terrorist camps in Libya. There they associated with a wide cross-section of international terrorist groups. Libya also acted as a conduit for ransom payments and "aid" money (sometimes called "livelihood projects") for Abu Sayyaf and other Filipino Muslim groups.

Additionally, there was an indigenous effort to assemble various Islamic terrorist groups in the region. At the International Islamic University in Malaysia in 1999, Abu Bakar Bashir organized a meeting to establish the Mujahidin Coalition, which brought together the MILF and JI, as well as other groups from across the region. The Mujahidin Coalition has met at least three times since then and its existence is an indicator of the intimacy of the regional relationships.

Lastly, the composition of Southeast Asia's terrorist groups is multi-national, but the members share the same religion and Indo-Malay language family. Pattani Thais speak a Malay dialect, as do most of the terrorist groups across the archipelago. In the Philippines the MILF and Abu Sayyaf speak a language related to Malay (which is not to say that they are mutually intelligible).

The groups' affiliation with Islam, however, is the most unifying element. The clearest example of religion uniting the groups can be seen in MILF cooperation with GAM—a Muslim organization in Indonesia that has a liberation agenda completely unrelated to MILF's.

Southeast Asia's terrorist participation in the September 11 attacks was limited to serving as a venue for pre-attack meetings among the 9/11 hijackers and their interlocutors. Nevertheless, when the United States declared war on terrorism, Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood was already trained, equipped, and prepared for the global struggle. Southeast Asia's terrorists eagerly allied themselves with al-Qaeda and adopted the United States as a new enemy.

The Case Against GAM and MILF

Southeast Asia has many terrorist groups, but GAM and MILF are the largest and most sophisticated of the groups not on the FTO list. Al-Qaeda's contact with MILF and GAM is limited by the groups' divergent goals. GAM and MILF are independence movements, while al-Qaeda and its Southeast Asian affiliate organization Jemaah Islamiyah, want to create a pan-Islamic state. This difference of opinion is the reason why most countries do not associate al-Qaeda with either GAM or MILF and why Western countries have ignored GAM and MILF separatist activities. Nevertheless, GAM and MILF behave like terrorist organizations at home and, although they generally avoid attacks against Americans, they do cooperate with other terrorist groups in the region that wish to attack the United States.

The State Department's 2003 Human Rights report for Indonesia specifically criticized GAM, stating that "GAM rebels also carried out grave abuses including murder, kidnapping and extortion."¹ The State Department's reports on MILF in the Philippines detail many of the same crimes as GAM—such as murder, kidnapping, and extortion. Despite American acknowledgment of GAM and MILF terrorist activities, the U.S. State Department classifies the two organizations as separatist groups rather than as terrorist organizations. Consequently, neither GAM nor MILF is on the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organizations list, even though their activities meet all three criteria for inclusion. These criteria are:

- The organization is foreign;
- The organization engages in terrorist activities; and
- The terrorist activity threatens the security of the United States citizens or the national security of the United States.

GAM

In Aceh, approximately 10,000–20,000 people, mostly civilians, have perished since the Free Aceh

Movement began its struggle for independence in 1976. Although the Indonesian armed forces' activities account for many civilian casualties, GAM has also committed violence directed against civilians, including murder, arson, and intimidation. Between the years 2000 and 2002 alone, an estimated 50,000 civilians were forced from their homes in Aceh by GAM. Additionally, GAM is notorious for burning schools. Since 1989, GAM has burned over 1,000 state schools and killed more than 60 teachers.

American interests and American citizens have been targeted by these organizations. GAM has targeted Exxon-Mobil's Arun natural gas facilities and is allegedly responsible for firing at Exxon-Mobil aircraft, hijacking their trucks, burning buses, and planting landmines along roads to disrupt oil transport.

Expanding its terrorist portfolio, GAM is frequently linked with acts of maritime piracy against international shipping in the Strait of Malacca. To date, GAM pirate attacks appear to be economically motivated, but GAM pirates are better armed and organized than their criminal counterparts. Stealing ships' stores and kidnapping crews for ransom is GAM's most frequent offense. Among their victims are the numerous oil and gas tankers that sail through the straits.

The biggest fear in the region is that GAM may choose to make a political statement or assist another group in the terrorist brotherhood—such as Jemaah Islamiyah—by setting fire to or detonating an oil or liquefied natural gas tanker in a port or heavily trafficked portion of the Malacca Strait. Because of its considerable length and narrow breadth, an attack could temporarily close the strait or important adjacent ports, such as Singapore. Closing the Malacca Strait, even briefly, would substantially affect the American economy. Fifty thousand ships sail through the Malacca Strait every year, moving about 30 percent of the world's trade goods and 80 percent of Japan's oil.

1. U.S. Department of State, "State Department Releases 2003 Human Rights Country Reports," press release, February 25, 2003, p. XXVI, at usembassy.state.gov/chennai/wwwwhpr040226b.html (September 21, 2004).

Although GAM generally limits its terrorist activities to Aceh and its adjacent waters, it is an active link in the worldwide terrorist underground. GAM sent fighters to Libya to train in Muammar Qadhafi's terrorist camps; it smuggles weapons together with Thai terrorist groups; GAM leaders have met with al-Qaeda and JI leaders; and GAM recruits train in Moro Islamic Liberation Front camps in the Philippines. Although GAM's political agenda is domestic, it is a terrorist organization with global ties.

MILF

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front has enjoyed immunity from the terrorist label and from government assault because of its unique political situation. The Philippine government seeks to find a political solution to chronic insurgency. To further that goal, Manila has participated in negotiations with MILF since 1996. In 2000, the government and MILF signed a safety and security agreement that gives almost complete freedom of action to MILF, while preventing attacks from the Philippine security forces.

Despite its participation in "peace talks," MILF has continued its terrorist activities and has become a crucial training ground for terrorists in Southeast Asia. This group attacks civilians. It has burned more than a thousand houses in central Mindanao since 2000 and launched a bombing campaign at shopping malls, airports and inter-island ferries, killing hundreds of innocent people.

More important to the international community is MILF's substantial and intimate relationship with international terrorists. MILF operates training camps in the southern Philippines that train members of Jemaah Islamiyah, GAM, Abu Sayyaf, and other terrorist groups. The camps include permanent structures and six-month-long courses that include weapons training and bomb making. Ever since the fall of Afghanistan and the post-Bali arrests of many JI leaders, MILF terrorist training facilities have become critical to the continued effectiveness

of Islamic terrorists and the creation of a new leadership to carry on terrorism in the region.

Direct MILF links to attacks on Americans and U.S. interests are not strong. Nevertheless, MILF's continued training of active terrorist groups in Southeast Asia and the unsanctioned participation of MILF members in terrorist attacks and maritime piracy, make it both a key member of the terrorist brotherhood and one of the most important targets for anti-terrorist operations in Southeast Asia.

Implications for Regional Anti-Terrorist Policies

Recent developments in the war on terrorism have made Asia—and in particular Southeast Asia—central to U.S. strategy to defeat terrorism. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice described Southeast Asia as "a very important front" in the war on terrorism, because it poses a serious threat to economic prosperity, and stability as well.²

Unfortunately, although terrorists in Southeast Asia work closely together, regional governments do not. Several countries in Southeast Asia have made considerable individual progress combating terrorism, yet cooperation and coordination among Southeast Asian states is generally sporadic. The terrorist brotherhood continues to take advantage of the poor inter-regional cooperation to hide from authorities simply by moving to the country next door.

Terrorist groups have exploited this weakness, seeking refuge where local authorities are least committed to countering terrorism—notably in Indonesia and the Philippines. Although Indonesian officials argue that there is enough political will to crack down on Jemaah Islamiyah, Southeast Asia's major Islamist terror network, convicted terrorists have received light sentences. Former Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri did not deal with the militant Islamic religious schools that have been a major source of JI recruitment. The newly elected President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, has yet to declare JI a

2. U.S. Department of State, "Bush to Focus at APEC on Free Trade, Security Cooperation," International Information Program, October 14, 2003, at www.usconsulate.org/hk/uscn/wh/2003/101401.htm (December 15, 2004).

terrorist group. The weak legal system in Indonesia worsens the situation.

The Filipino government may be the weakest link in Southeast Asia's anti-terrorist efforts. Although there have been hundreds of terrorist arrests since the Bali bombing, disproportionately few have occurred in the Philippines. There is almost no mechanism to effectively enforce the law because there are more soldiers in that country than police. Furthermore, there is no coast guard or maritime police in place to control borders that are weakened by corruption. Finally, the continuing existence of a terrorist haven in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, unmolested by government security forces, permits Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood to plan and train for their next attacks.

Recommendations

Continued effort, commitment, and vigilance against terrorism by Southeast Asian governments are necessary for peace and prosperity to endure. To better contain the Southeast Asian brotherhood of terrorism, the international community should:

- **Initiate the process to place all of Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood on the lists of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.** The FTO list is one of the most effective diplomatic tools

against terrorists. Placement on these lists would subject each organization to sanctions—including the refusal of visas, deportation of members, prosecution of supporters that provide funds, and freezing the organization's financial assets.

- **Increase regional cooperation by the governments of Southeast Asia and their allies.** Southeast Asia's terrorist brotherhood works closely together regardless of different political agendas. Terrorist groups are able to exploit the lack of inter-governmental cooperation in the region and move freely across national boundaries.
- **Support efforts to suppress insurgent groups.** For decades, Southeast Asian governments have largely ignored separatist movements in neighboring countries. This government neglect of regional security has allowed the terrorists to flourish. It is time for Southeast Asia's countries to support their neighbors to defeat violent insurgencies.

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