

COPING WITH THE THREAT OF JEMAAH ISLAMIYAH –
THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

by

Mohamed Bin Ali*

Introduction

The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist organization has a long history since Darul Islam, which was formerly headed by the late Abdullah Sungkar. With connections to Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups worldwide, JI has become the largest and most dangerous terrorist organization in South East Asia. Based in Indonesia, its network is regional, with cells in Malaysia, Philippines, Australia and Singapore. Though many of its members have been arrested and its network crippled, JI remains resilient. Effective counter measures against them demand firstly, an accurate understanding of the threats, secondly reappraisals of existing counter terrorism strategies and thirdly, if necessary, the formulation of new ones to meet the evolving threat. This paper will focus on Singapore's experience with Jemaah Islamiyah in an attempt to analyze the threat and to discuss the effectiveness of counter terrorism measures used to meet the threat.

Nature of Threat

Jemaah Islamiyah belongs to a new group of religiously motivated terrorist organizations. Unlike their more conventional counterparts, these terrorist organisations use violence not just to achieve worldly aims, but also as a fulfillment of “a sacred duty in direct response to a theological demand or imperative.”¹ Jemaah Islamiyah shares its religious ideology with Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups worldwide, forming a global network. This ideology, which is based upon a gross misreading of Islamic religious texts, aims to destroy the US and its Western allies and to establish pan-Islamic caliphates. As former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in his speech to the Council of Foreign Affairs in Washington on the 6th of May 2004, “....*Terrorist organizations such*

¹ Hoffman, Bruce. 1998 (168, 88). *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press

as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or ETA in Spain are only of local concern. The virulent strain of Islamic terrorism is another matter altogether. It is driven by religion. Its ideological vision is global. It is most dangerous. The communists fought to live, whereas the jihadi terrorists fight to die and live in the next world.”²

Another feature of the new religiously motivated terrorist groups is its sophisticated operational and technical capabilities, amounting to increasingly lethal attacks with catastrophic outcomes. Al-Qaeda and its subsidiary groups, have repeatedly shown this capacity by being able to mount multiple, well-coordinated strikes, while inflicting maximum casualties. There is also growing concern that the terrorist groups will employ weapons of mass destruction. In a recent speech, Singapore’s Defence Minister, Teo Chee Hean warned, *“The threat of terrorism is amplified by the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”*

How Southeast Asian Countries Respond to JI

In general, there has been increased regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism. In the July 2002 ministerial meeting, ASEAN Ministers agreed on a new anti-terror pact to share intelligence, increase police cooperation in order to "prevent, disrupt and combat international terrorism and to cooperate in stemming the flow of funds to terrorist groups. South East Asian states have also signed an agreement with the United States on ways to curb terrorist activity in the region.

Australia has signed Memorandums of Understanding with several Southeast Asian countries. The most recent with Thailand builds on the existing strong links between Australian and Thai law enforcement, defence and security agencies. The increasing evidence of the terrorist activities in Thailand, particularly in the south, has forced the Thai government to acknowledge the gravity of this issue. Thailand has been instrumental in the capture of Hambali, JI’s top link to Al-Qaeda. Trial proceedings for the Thai JI suspects are in progress.

² Speech by Prime Minister Goh to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington on 7th May 2004 accessed from <http://www.mfa.gov.sg>

Indonesia has enforced new terrorism laws to counter the terrorism threat and at a national level, there is the anti- terrorism desk at the office of the Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security. In August 2003, suggestions from the Minister of Defence, Matori Abdul Djalil to enact an Internal Security Act has been roundly criticised by Indonesian parliamentarians and academics who argue that the spread of terrorism was not due to weak legislation but to weak intelligence.

On inter-state cooperation and intelligence sharing, Singapore Defence Minister said that Thailand and Singapore will continue to pursue cooperation as terrorism is a trans-national problem that cannot be tackled by any one country. He also mentioned that Singapore works very well with Malaysia and with Thailand on the matter. Already, Singapore and Australia have struck an agreement for armed marshals on flights. They have already been deployed on selected SIA and Silk Air flights.

Under Malaysia's Internal Security Act, the authorities have arrested at least 69 alleged JI members. Some of them were arrested even before the attacks of September 11, 2001. In February 2002, the Malaysian government announced that it is drafting a law to prevent private religious schools from being used as training grounds for religious extremism. In 2003, Malaysian authorities announced the suspension of state-funding for more than 500 religious schools in the country, accusing the schools' authorities of breeding hatred of the government among the students.

JI in Singapore – A Case Study

Singapore, which has been virtually free of domestic terrorist threats until recently, no longer has that immunity. Singapore made its first arrest of the 13 JI members in December 2001 and a second arrest was made on another 18 JI members in

August 2002. At the time of arrests, members of this group had been planning a series of bomb attacks in Singapore that would have had catastrophic consequences.³

Management of the JI threat

Although the Singapore JI branch has been neutralized, the external threat remains significant. Furthermore, with the arrests of its Singapore members and Singapore's strong support for the U.S, JI has a strong motive to retaliate and attack Singapore. To deal effectively with the new face of terrorism, the Singapore government has adopted an integrated approach to its national security programme, structured around the Prevention, Protection and Response domains.

In the prevention domain, measures involve an integration of effective diplomacy, good intelligence work and strong border controls. Among the border control introduced include sophisticated screening facilities at border points and at ports and airports, use of x-ray machines to scan containers; deployment of 'sniffer' dogs; naval escorts for tankers and other high value and vulnerable vessels; new laws to forbid dealing in terrorists' funding and property.⁴ A Singapore biometric passport will be issued from October 2005 onwards. In the region, an intelligence liaison network between ASEAN countries was formalized during the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism in May 2002.

Singapore also established the Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Anti-Terrorism under the authority of the Attorney General and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law. The task force brings together senior officials from various ministries, the Attorney-General's Office, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), and the Commercial Affairs Department of the Police Force to update existing law so that it implements international legal instruments and to improve coordination between the various national government authorities in the fight against terrorism.⁵

³ White Paper, The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests And The Threat of Terrorism published by Ministry of Home Affairs, Republic of Singapore, 7th January 2003.

⁴ Mr Mark Hong, Senior Fellow, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies – "Jemaah Islamiyah : The Threat and Responses"

⁵ Report to the Counter-Terrorism Committee on Singapore's Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001)

Singapore responded to the UN Security Council Resolution 1373 of 2001,⁶ which, according to Minister for Foreign Affairs Prof S.Jayakumar, was “a landmark resolution which dealt comprehensively with counter- terrorism”, providing “a legal basis for all states to take action against terrorists and their supporters.”⁷It also signed the UN convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism in December 2001, ratifying it the following year.

With the hardening of military and diplomatic targets, terrorists are expected to shift to economic and religious targets and population centres. To reassure the public and deter terrorists, heavily armed officers have been patrolling public areas since 1st November 2004. There are plans to extend the patrol units to MRT stations and trains, to complement the security measures implemented by train operators like the enhanced use of CCTV’s and unarmed security guards at MRT stations. Police are also exploring to enhance their CCTV with intelligent software capable of automatically identifying pre-defined suspicious behaviour and to expand the usage of CCTV to other parts of Singapore.

Protective Measures

Among the more significant protective measures taken include protection against sabotage or contamination of water supplies; plans to protect Singapore’s IT, telecommunications and financial sectors; measures to maintain morale and racial harmony; increased protection for key installations; public education to help people remain alert and look out for suspicious parcels and behaviour. At the policy and regulatory level, Singapore is developing a Building Protection Network as a target hardening measure in all buildings in Singapore.

Response

⁶ Ibid

⁷ The Fight Against Terror accessed from <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/NSCS/FightAgainstTerror.pdf>.

The Homefront Crisis Management System (HCMS) was formed to coordinate between government agencies, forming a structure flexible and scalable to meet the full spectrum of threats Singapore is likely to face.⁸ At the operational level, all government agencies work together to prepare contingency plans to address various threat scenarios, and run emergency preparedness exercises to ensure smooth inter-agency coordination and operational readiness.

The Home team, SCDF and Police have also enhanced their ability to handle a wider spectrum of emergencies. SCDF officers and vehicles have been fully equipped with decontamination capabilities to handle chemical, biological and other hazardous agents.⁹ All Police cars are equipped with Bomb Suppression Blankets. Police have also developed a post blast investigation capability to handle investigations into bombing incidents.

Counter Ideological Measures

Terrorism occurs when ideological motivation meets with operational capability. The way in which a terrorist group shapes its radical worldview and disseminates it to audiences worldwide plays an important role in the public interface between the group and its target audience. Using terrorist propaganda, a group can successfully indoctrinate public into terrorist sympathizers, mobilize terrorist supporters, and recruit terrorist members.

To counter terrorism effectively, a multi-pronged approach is needed. Any effective blueprint for an ideological response to the “war on terrorism” should conceptualize counter terrorism not only as a military “shooting war” or law enforcement operation, but as a “war of ideas” as well. Measures to disrupt and degrade a terrorist group’s military and economic infrastructure should be supplemented with measures targeting the terrorist group’s political apparatus. If left unchecked, this apparatus will

⁸ Response given by the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng at the Committee of Supply Debate on the Ministry of Home Affairs, Thursday, 3 March 2005

⁹ Ibid

continue to harvest political support, transform it into logistical assistance, and eventually generate a new pool of terrorist recruits.¹⁰

Singapore's Unique Counter Ideological Programme

At the Committee of Supply Debate on the Ministry of Home Affairs, 3rd March 2005, Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng was also asked about efforts made on the ideological front to deal with terrorism. He said that the Government's approach has been to encourage the Muslim community to police itself against ideological attacks by terrorist groups such as JI as they are in the best position to ensure that its own members are ideologically inoculated against wrong and dangerous religious teachings.

There is also a dedicated group of Islamic leaders and teachers, who are providing religious counseling for JI and MILF members detained or put on Restriction Orders under the ISA. It is part of ISD's overall religious rehabilitation programme instituted for the JI detainees and their families. This group of Muslim organizations and a few local mosques has also extended their contributions towards the welfare of the detainees' families. Apart from the house visits made, educational assistance for the children, upgrading courses were offered to the families to ensure that they are able to cope with the situation emotionally, socially and economically.

Generally, there are 4 types of rehabilitation that was carried out for the detainees namely:

- 1- *Family Support* – By keeping their families informed and in contact with them. This is also done through family integration and emotional support.
- 2- *Financial Support* – For the spouses and children of the detained JI members
- 3- Psychological Counseling

¹⁰ Muhammad Haniff Hassan, Key Considerations In Countering Terrorist Ideology & Sample of Responses, Interntaional Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies

4- *Religious Counseling* – This is mainly aimed to explain the true concept of *Jihad* (struggle), *Ummah* (Islamic Community), *Bai'ah* (Pledge of Allegiance), *Daulah Islamiyah* (Islamic State) etc.

Religious Counseling for the Detained JI Members

With the arrest of the JI detainees and investigations by the Internal Security Department (ISD), it was found that JI's terrorist plans were the result of their religious ideology. Religion was being used by the JI members as a tool for terrorism while Jihad is actively promoted as a religious duty for the purpose of committing acts of terror. JI's misinterpretation and misunderstanding of certain religious concepts has led them to believe that they are actually in the right path even though their actions would lead to the destruction of public properties and infrastructures; causing disturbance, anarchy and even loss of human lives. This would then lead to the socio-economic instability of the country. These misunderstandings have culminated to a dangerous level and it has to be addressed in order to save our country from any upheavals. The actual meaning of *Jihad* needs to be defined and put to its proper perspective and a religious rehabilitation plan needs to be developed for its intended audience.

Religious counseling will assist the JI detainees to uncover misinterpretations and areas where the JI had gone wrong in its religious doctrine which shaped the detainees' belief system. Failure to correct their misconceptions especially their belief that "Jihad" is war and that it is "*Fardu Ain*" or compulsory for all Muslims, will render them a potential time bomb when released. The JI detainees' belief system needed to be addressed as part of their rehabilitation to ensure that they do not return to their violent ways and pose a future threat to the Islam and Singapore in general. To achieve this, it is critical that Jihad needs to be defined and placed in its proper perspective. Thus, the detainees must be inoculated and this can be achieved by sharing with them a better perspective and understanding of Islam, a religion of peace and harmony.

Religious counseling sessions in Singapore were conducted for to 3 groups of people, which are the detained JI member, JI members placed under Restriction Order

(ROs) and their family members .Under a new condition laid out by ISD, the detainees and the ROs are required to undergo a programme of religious counseling by a group of local volunteer religious counselors. The counselors provide the detainees with a clear understanding of the religious concepts which they had misinterpreted. The counseling sessions conducted had helped these detainees to realize the destructive path they had undertaken and also overcome their feeling of betrayal to fellow JI members when they opened up to ISD during the investigation.

Assessing the Success of Counter Measures

In view of the transnational nature of the JI threat and limited resources, the cornerstone of Singapore's National Security strategy lies in a strong and robust inter-agency network .¹¹ Terrorism expert, Dr Rohan Gunaratna, believes that “unprecedented cooperation, coordination and collaboration between different branches of government, between the government and other sectors, private security industry, hotelier, other businesses, transportation industry and ports” provide a way to reduce the threat.¹² The current organizational challenge of national security will be to mobilize, coordinate and lead government agencies, business community and the general public to make Singapore better prepared, more secure and more responsive to an array of threats.

The public in particular needs to be engaged in the fight against terrorism. While there is evidence that Singaporeans take the threat of terrorism seriously, as implied by the increase in the number of calls about suspicious activities, 513 calls in 2004 compared to 212 calls in 2003, there is also a tendency to be complacent. In a recent Feedback Unit poll done after the London blasts, more than one third of the respondents felt that the task of safeguarding Singapore from possible terrorist attacks should be left to security agencies and personnel. Fewer than half of the respondents were familiar with the emergency procedures in the event of a terrorist bomb.¹³

¹¹ Dr Tony Tan, The Fight Against Terror: Singapore's National Security Strategy

¹² Talk by Dr Rohan Gunaratna, “The Global Threat of Terrorism – Can We Win?”, York Hotel, Singapore, 8 Apr 2005

¹³ Ibid

The public has to be made to realize the importance of heightening their vigilance reducing the threat, says Dr Rohan Gunaratna, as an alert public will make it very difficult for terrorists to mount especially a big attack, as it involves a higher risk of exposing their significant number of terrorists operatives and resources, to the public eye.¹⁴ While the current government's strategy of targeting selected sections of the community, like grassroot members, taxi drivers or hotel industry personnel¹⁵ can be seen as a step in this direction they also need to aggressively assert the importance of constant vigilance in each and every Singaporean individual. The momentum and level of anti-terrorist activity should be sustainable over the long run as the threat is a prolonged one.

Singapore's resilience as a nation has been successfully tested especially during the SARS period. This resilience needs to be nurtured and improved as a preparation to prepare for future disasters. Addressing parliament on 14 March 2003, Minister for Home Affairs Mr Wong Kan Seng said, *"...no one can guarantee that a terrorist attack will not happen here. Our approach must be to make it difficult for the terrorists to carry out its evil deeds while at the same time, be well prepared and ready to deal with the repercussions if such attack does happen."* His views are echoed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day message on Monday, 8 August 2005, *"...The bombings in London and in Egypt remind us that the war on terror continues, and despite the tightest precautions, the terrorists sometimes get through. We must be psychologically prepared for this, so that if they ever strike here we will be resolute and indomitable, refusing to be cowed by the terrorists and staying one united people."*¹⁶

Law enforcement and intelligence officers should "proactively target not only terrorist cells but also supporter cells that carry out the propaganda, fund raising, recruitment drive and indoctrination..."¹⁷. In view of this, the law should be constantly

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Speech by Mr Wong Kan Seng, Minister for Home Affairs at Home Team National Day Observance Ceremony, 5 Aug 2005

¹⁶ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Message on 8 Aug 2005 accessed from <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/nationalday/message>

¹⁷ Talk by Dr Rohan Gunaratna, "The Global Threat of Terrorism – Can We Win?", York Hotel, Singapore, 8 Apr 2005

reviewed to ensure their relevance. There have been calls to do away with Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) but the Singapore government feels that it has been instrumental in uncovering and dismantling a Singapore JI cell in 2001.¹⁸ In fact, Singapore's Minister Mentor, Mr Lee Kuan Yew believes that Indonesia's ability to fight terrorism is hampered by the lack of a Singapore-style Internal Security Act. He said, "The Indonesians are saying that we don't have the Internal Security Act, we can't do anything. They wait for the bomb to go off, then they investigate the crime and they capture the people who did the crime and they prosecute them. And then there's the next bomb and the next bomb."¹⁹

Indonesia's lack of political will and effective security legislation is a concern for the region, as it enables JI and its infrastructure to thrive. While the Indonesian police are continuing to pursue JI members, there is no formal ban on JI; hence it will be difficult to convict anyone solely on the grounds of belonging to it or holding a leadership role in it.²⁰ Ms Sidney Jones, the Southeast Asia Project Director, International Crisis Group, said "JI still has many fertile recruiting grounds in the region, including Indonesia, retains a strong support network in parts of Indonesia and still have access to training camps like Mindanao where it continues to train the next generation of terrorists."²¹ She added that, "As long as Azhari remains at large with some of the leftover explosives from the Marriott bombing, the threat of another bomb attack remains very real."²²

JI operational tactics is constantly evolving hence the constant need to upgrade research and intelligence capabilities. For instance, there is now an emerging trend among terrorist organizations to decentralize its operations by linking up with other terrorist groups in the region. This shift towards a more network oriented structure is a concern for those tasked to manage threats as they are dealing with a loose network of terrorist organizations, which operate independently but share a common ideology. Hence, disrupting one terrorist organization is not likely to impact on the operational

¹⁸ Agence France Presse, February 1, 2005 accessed from <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw05/050201a2.htm>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Sidney Jones, Indonesia : The Continuing Threat of Jemaah Islamiyah, Trends in Southeast Asia Series: 2(2004),

²¹ Sidney Jones, Indonesia : The Continuing Threat of Jemaah Islamiyah, Trends in Southeast Asia Series: 2(2004),

²² Ibid

capabilities of the others. In particular, counter-leadership strikes would be less effective against organizations lacking centralized command and control procedures.²³ Sharing doctrines, strategies and technologies have also enabled allied militant groups to carry out attacks with a high level of coordination, like in the case of the attacks in Manila and two cities in the southern Philippines, resulting in the death of 11 people and injured nearly 130 people.²⁴

The Religious Rehabilitation Program should be a continuous & ongoing effort, with a view towards sharing it with other nations in the region. This is because unlike an ordinary detainment procedure, the religious counseling component of the programme strikes at the core of the problem, that is the religious ideology of the JI members. These sessions aim to eradicate the radical ideology based on a gross misunderstanding of Islam and to replace it with correct Islamic teachings. It is partly due to the success of these counseling sessions that ISD had the confidence to release several detainees and RO members. Extension of the counseling sessions to their families is hoped to break the cycle of indoctrination and prevent JI regeneration processes. It is also important that the Muslim community proactively focus on providing the future generation with the correct understanding of Islam, so that they would not fall victims to a deviant understanding of Islam and terrorists agendas.

There is also an urgent need to engage the Singaporean Muslims in the war against terrorism. One of the government concerns should the build-up of resentment even among moderate Muslim communities everywhere over US invasion. This resentment, could be easily tapped by the terrorist camp to campaign for funds and recruits among the Singaporean Muslims.²⁵ The Singapore government has to realize these sensitivities and address their concerns accordingly.

Conclusion

²³ Arquilla, John, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini. 1999. Networks, Netwar, and Information Age **Terrorism**. In *Countering the New Terrorism*, ed. Ian O. Lesser, Bruce Hoffman, John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini, 39-84. Santa Monica: RAND

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Talk by Dr Rohan Gunaratna, "The Global Threat of Terrorism – Can We Win?", York Hotel, Singapore, 8 Apr 2005

As the face of terrorism is changing and with new threats and new technology, we need to adopt a multi-pronged response, multi dimensional, multi-national and multi agency response²⁶ to fight this kind of new terrorism. To reduce the threat effectively, Singapore needs to work overseas, unilaterally and with partners to develop a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. This strategy must be one that disrupts the support base, ideology and appeal of the terrorist group. It is therefore important to be aware of the threat and to take intelligent and reasonable steps to protect government facilities and the people.

Its Singapore network may have been crippled but JI will continue to present a long-term security threat to Singapore. Though Singapore has put into place multiple anti-terrorism measures, the real challenge is to sustain the momentum and level of activity in the long run. Furthermore, the evolutionary nature of some of these security measures means that it will need time before their effectiveness can be proven. There is a pressing need to engage the public to reduce their complacency and heighten their vigilance capabilities. Finally, there is an arsenal of increasingly sophisticated technologies to aid counter terrorism work but we also need to employ good common sense and logic to counter the threat.

**Mohamed Bin Ali is an Associate Research Fellow at The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*

²⁶ Speech by Dr Rohan Gunaratna during a presentation on “Political and Security Outlook 2003: Terrorism in Southeast Asia: What to Expect” which was delivered on 7 Jan 03 at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.