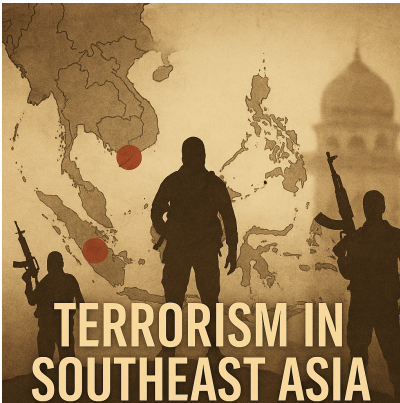




Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Networks, Field Research, and New Updates 2025

Description

Introduction: Southeast Asia as a “Paradise for Terrorists”

The focus of this study is Southeast Asia, which some experts say is a paradise for terrorists (Ramakrishna and Tan, *Is Southeast Asia A ‘Terrorist Heaven’?* 2003; Sidel, 2003). However, the most active countries in dealing with this issue are Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, Southeast Asia received international attention, especially for how America developed the paradigm of war against terrorists in each country and convinced them that terrorists exist in Southeast Asia. So, after the American government launched the war on terror, the situation in Southeast Asia changed completely, specifically related to the issue of terrorism. In other words, the size of the relationship between countries in Southeast Asia is measured more by the level of seriousness in dealing with terrorists (Niksich 2003; Boyce 2004; A. L. Smith 2003; TAF and USINDO 2002). Some terrorist targets in Southeast Asia are always associated with symbols of America and its allies. Bombs that explode, especially in Indonesia, sometimes serve as a symbolic message to America to change the government’s attitude towards Muslims (Sunstein, 2005). However, until now, according to official news, only two terrorists have been arrested in Southeast Asia by the United States government, namely Hambali and Omar al-Farouq (Conboy, 2004). Both are suspected of linking al-Qaeda cells in Southeast Asia.

[Update 2024–2025: Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin) remains detained at Guantánamo Bay. Omar al-Farouq, although captured in Indonesia in 2002, escaped custody and was later killed in Iraq in 2006. Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI) officially declared its disbandment on June 30, 2024, according to Indonesia’s National Counter-Terrorism Agency.]

Jemaah Islamiyyah and Regional Terrorist Networks

The key to understanding terrorist networks in Southeast Asia is Jema’ah Islamiyyah. This organization is believed to be a veteran of the War in Afghanistan during the Cold War and has carried out several acts of terror over the last ten years. However, several Islamic organizations are strongly suspected of

being part of the Jemaah Islamiyyah movement at the state level. This study no longer aims to determine the accuracy of this movement; instead, it seeks to explore how the influence of this war veteran in Southeast Asia has enabled the recruitment of multiple brides to carry out acts of terror in the region. Again, this does not want to mention that the public is directed at the Al-Qaeda movement at the international level.

In contrast, at the Southeast Asian level, it is mainly blamed on Jemaah Islamiyyah. However, the relationship between al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyyah is always linked if there is a discussion about terrorist movements in Southeast Asia (Abuza, 2004; Abuza, 2002). In each country, there are still “operators” in the form of organizations such as KMM in Malaysia, MMI in Indonesia (Ahnaf 2004; Awwas 2003; Awwas 2001; Zada 2002), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the Abu Sayyaf movement in the Philippines (Gutierrez and Borrás 2004; Santos, 2005), and the conflict in Southern Thailand has even been drawn to the part of the terrorist movement in South East Asia (Abuza, 2005; ICG 2005; Tan-Mullins, 2006; Yusuf, 2007). As for Singapore, the name JI is still seen as more appropriate as the “operator” of the terrorist movement (Desker 2003; Gee, 2002; Sebastian, 2005; Ministry of Home Affairs Singapore, 2003).

Abu Sayyaf continues kidnappings and extortion in the Sulu archipelago, although weakened by Philippine military operations. The insurgency in Southern Thailand remains deadly; since 2004 more than 7,600 people have been killed and over 14,000 injured. In Malaysia in 2025, authorities arrested 36 Bangladeshi migrant workers linked to an Islamic State-inspired online cell.

Reform, Separatism, and the Rise of Radical Movements

So, over the last ten years, Southeast Asia, especially after the crisis in 1997, has experienced a history of the war on terror. It must be admitted that during the last year, several heads of state in the region, especially Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, have also experienced changes through the reform movement. In this regard, Indonesia follows actual examples of the emergence of post-reform Islamic movements, such as Laskar Jihad, MMI, HTI, FPI, etc. Not a few socio-religious movements emerged that demanded a regime change to establish their government by demanding independence from the parent country, such as in Indonesia (Aceh, Papua, and East Timor), Thailand (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat), and the Philippines (Mindanao). Likewise, the turmoil of inter-religious conflicts such as in Maluku, Ambon, and Poso was not a little bit linked to terrorist networks in Southeast Asia. Some Islamic movements consider these three areas ‘fields of jihad’ because Muslims are in a position to be attacked. If in Indonesia the ‘field of jihad’ is between Muslims versus Christians, then in Thailand, there is a clash between Muslims and Buddhists. Meanwhile, in Mindanao, conflicts continue to occur between Muslims and the Manila government, which is predominantly Christian.

[Update 2025: Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) was formally banned in 2017, although sympathizers and online networks remain. In Mindanao, the 2019 peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, reducing major conflict. Still, splinter groups like BIFF and pro-Islamic State factions continue violent activities. Peace talks in Southern Thailand mediated by Malaysia remain stalled into 2025.]

Terrorism, Global Conflicts, and the Caliphate Narrative

The issue of terrorism in Southeast Asia is also fertile when there is internal conflict and the influence of conflicts in the Middle East, especially during the Cold War. And Arab states' conflicts with Israel. The roots of this conflict meet in one interest, namely establishing the Islamic Caliphate and destroying the symbols of Western power represented by the United States, which means that the war on terror itself has become an arena for conflict at the international level by combining it with issues that are the historical legacy of Islamic relations with the West (Chau, 2008; Glassman, 2005; Noor, 2006; Ramakrishna, 2005; Tang and Ramakrishna 2004; Vaughn, 2004). Therefore, this study tries to review how these issues have met within the framework of the terrorist problem over the last ten years in Southeast Asia. Strictly speaking, this study wants to pick and choose a meeting of issues, starting from the emergence of the terrorist issue itself to the many young Muslims who committed suicide bombings, as happened in Indonesia.

The Global Terrorism Index 2025 notes that while deaths in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan have declined, the lethality of attacks in Africa and in parts of South and Southeast Asia has increased. Small Islamic State-inspired cells and online propaganda now represent the main threat in Southeast Asia, replacing large-scale coordinated bombings.

Fieldwork and Research Journey

Over the last ten years, this research has been prepared. To obtain data, in addition to national and international publications, the researchers also visited several regions to “feel” the influence of the terrorist issue in Southeast Asia. In 2001 when the United States government proclaimed the war on terror, I was in Yogyakarta and Malaysia. After that, I continued my master's studies at the University of Malaya, concentrating on Islamic Politics in Southeast Asia. During my time as a student in Kuala Lumpur, I took the opportunity to continue exploring various data on the Islamic movement and the issue of terrorism on the global stage. In 2002-2003, I returned to Indonesia to become an extraordinary lecturer at the Syar'ah Faculty of IAIN (now UIN) Sunan Kalijaga. Apart from teaching, I followed this development to produce the book *Satu Dasawarsa The Clash of Civilizations* (Bustamam-Ahmad 2003).

In 2004 I also turned my study into a comparative analysis of Islamic law in Southeast Asia to prove whether it is true that those who apply Islamic law are related to the issue of terrorism or radicalism. At that time, I took the case study of Aceh and Kelantan. The results of this research were later published in 2007 and 2009 (Bustamam-Ahmad 2007, 2009). During those years, I continued to collect materials from various sources to study the Islamic movement in Southeast Asia. The search for this material continued until 2005, when I became a teaching staff at one of the campuses in Southern Thailand, namely Walailak University (Bustamam-Ahmad 2007). The development of turmoil in Southern Thailand follows this. During my time at La Trobe University, I had the opportunity to interact with numerous scholars focusing on Islam and conflict in Southeast Asia. They got information on understanding the problems in conflict areas. In the region, researchers often listen to Malays from Southeast Asia to understand their reasons for rebelling against the Thai government and their desire to avoid being labeled as terrorists due to their demand for independence. They feel more like Malays than Thais.

While there, I continue to focus on studies of Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, with a particular emphasis on Malaysia (Bustamam-Ahmad 2009; Bustamam-Ahmad 2007). My assumption is that Malaysia plays a crucial role in the conflict in Thailand and the terrorism issue in Indonesia. From

several interviews with those involved in the conflict in southern Thailand, it was concluded that Malaysia played an active role in arousing Malay sentiment in the region. Although this is an off-the-record interview, I have no reason for another. Several Thai intelligence personnel were arrested in Malaysia when they were about to report activities that harmed Thailand in Malaysia. Likewise, one of the lecturers from Pattani told how the involvement of family parties had influenced Malaysia in the conflict in Southern Thailand. All the data, of course, cannot be re-verified by the Malaysian government. Therefore, I consider this assumption to be proven rather than claiming it.

After being in Southern Thailand in 2006, I moved to Melbourne, Australia, to pursue doctoral studies at La Trobe University. In my early months on campus, I spent hours researching literature and reading works on terrorism and, at the same time, watching several recordings of foreign journalists' coverage of terrorism in Southeast Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. These materials ultimately could not be used in Southeast Asian studies because of constraints on research ethics regulations in Australia, which require researchers not to conduct research that "harms" either the researcher or the respondent. However, the collected data is finally stored in the database. Therefore, if there are many references or international journals in this draft, all of them are obtained because of the library facilities on this campus. In searching for data, it is attempted to look at sources that have been published, not terrorist testimonies, as is widely used by some terrorist researchers or the results of intelligence investigations in Southeast Asia.

I combined the data obtained in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Southern Thailand to complete the field study with my field research for 14 months. They did not study terrorism but conducted ethnographic research on an Islamic transnational organization, the Tablighi Jama'ah (Mandaville, 2009). In this study, several things were obtained that became the primary material for writing a dissertation report. However, data that is not related to the dissertation topic that has been found during this research is stored neatly. For example, a group of retired special soldiers in Malaysia have practiced making bombs in Russia. Similarly, I met several veterans of the war in Afghanistan. In addition, there is an underground network of several Islamic activists who use the Tablighi Jama'ah to later settle in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

[Update 2025: The conflict in Southern Thailand continues, with annual casualties reported. Negotiations between the Thai government and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) remain deadlocked. Since 2004, more than 7,600 people have been killed and more than 14,000 injured.]

[Update 2025: Security agencies continue to report infiltration of radical elements within tabligh circles, though the vast majority remain non-political. Some individuals have used the movement as cover for travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan.]

[Update 2025: Libyan and Afghan training links remain part of investigations into Aceh and Mindanao networks. In 2024, Indonesian police arrested Islamic State supporters who were recruited online and sought to train abroad.]

Doctoral Research and Data Collection

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Aceh and the 2010 Jalin Training Camp

After that, I come back to Aceh. Indirectly, they became spectators of several important events in Jakarta, such as the bombing, and Aceh, when the terrorist network was uncovered with an ambush at the training camp in Jalin Aceh Besar village in February 2010. All events were indeed related, from Afghanistan to Mindanao, from Pamulang and Pemalang to Aceh. The last point of the issue of terrorists in Indonesia stopped in Aceh when there was a shootout between security forces and terrorist groups on February 22, 2010. It can be said that the journey of the terrorist issue in Southeast Asia is almost like the journey of the issue of radicalism to separatism. In this situation, sometimes we become spectators or see if there is a comprehensive explanation of all the journeys of this issue in Southeast Asia. As far as is observed, the explanation that often appears in terrorism studies is that there is a strong relationship between Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, and Pakistan. However, countries like Libya have also contributed a lot to the spirit of resistance in Southeast Asia, especially when they provide training to separatist groups, especially in Aceh and Mindanao, not so much in the study of terrorists but more in the study of separatists.

[Update 2025: Libyan and Afghan training links remain part of investigations into Aceh and Mindanao networks. In 2024, Indonesian police arrested Islamic State supporters who were recruited online and sought to train abroad.]

Intelligence Games and Research Dilemmas

n addition, the issue of terrorism is not far from the issue of intelligence games, both on a regional and international scale. The process of agent infiltration in the body of the Islamic movement can also be well observed. Although this then leaves several questions, such as how the spirit of terror was cultivated to become a big problem over the last ten years in Southeast Asia (Abduh 2003; Junaedi 2003; Maulani 2003; Maulani 2003b; Dreyfuss 2005; Ridwan 2008). This is where the position is quite a dilemma for researchers of the Islamic movement. The issues experienced are very challenging, but security forces in several countries constantly monitor safety and movements. This report is indeed surprising when, for example, there are foreigners who understand very well how things work in Southeast Asia. Likewise, my name “appeared” at the headquarters of the security forces in Indonesia because I had tried to interview several GAM leaders while conducting research on the issue of separatism in Aceh in 1999. Therefore, in conducting this quite challenging research, sometimes we do not know whom we deal with or interview unless there is other information indicating who they are. Over the past ten years, traveling in several countries has proven that this issue of terrorism should not be understood in black and white.

[Update 2025: Counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia now includes AI surveillance in Singapore and Malaysia, while Indonesia has expanded digital deradicalization programs. Intelligence agencies still control most primary data, and researchers continue to rely on secondary sources such as IPAC, RSIS, and ICG.]

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Sources, Data, and the Problem of Trust

Regarding the quality of data or data that can be trusted, I am in a dilemma because in the study of terrorists, if you write too much detail, then the data may be obtained due to the investigation into the network. In addition, the researcher may be accused of obtaining data or information from the intelligence service. Therefore, until now, information about terrorism networks is still controlled by the intelligence services. The data may be given to researchers or terrorist experts who write about terrorism networks. Likewise, if too many refer to groups that prioritize conspiracy theories, then the point of analysis will never be far from America versus Islam. In this case, data on terrorism, especially some confessions of terrorists during interrogation, have been owned by several countries, such as the United States, the Netherlands, Australia, and Singapore. I try as much as possible to be “balanced” in viewing the data, both published and unpublished. In this case, I will primarily refer to published data, ranging from books, journals, research results, magazines, newspapers, and personal notes that the public can access.

All of the above data is used as an analytical tool because there must be “misleading” or “disinformation in the scattered data.” For example, a person who is the most radical in writing or analyzing must be seen who is behind him and why he is too harsh and has never been touched by the security forces. Likewise, some prominent figures in the Islamic movement are fighting for their religion and the interests of their country. For example, the result of Sidney Jones’s research through ICG (*International Crisis Group*) is considered the most qualified by the international parties (ICG 2003, 13). Meanwhile,

the aggrieved parties dismiss Sidney's data as "garbage" (Awwas 2003, 45–47; Junaedi 2003, 57–62). But in the study of Southeast Asian terrorism, the names Sidney and ICG have never been lost in the researcher's footnote. In the "footnote," it is noted that Sidney and ICG sometimes receive substantial information from the security forces, either directly or indirectly, or through interviewers assigned to investigate terrorists in a specific area; similarly, Nasir Abas, who had "converted" to the Jema'ah Islamiyyah movement, was regarded as a traitor by his friends. However, he is considered a "hero" by the security forces. Nasir wrote a book and criticized his comrade, Imam Samudra. Here, the data they display may be intact, but the context of their interest may not be complete anymore.

[Update 2025: Reports from IPAC, RSIS, and ICG remain central references internationally, but they continue to be criticized locally as reflecting the perspectives of security agencies.]

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