

# Is there an Al-Qaeda connection in Indonesia?

By: **DERWIN PEREIRA**



Recent arrests of Islamic extremists in Singapore and Malaysia have raised the worrying spectre of Indonesia becoming a regional centre for Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Indonesia correspondent **DERWIN PEREIRA** probes the extent of links between the militant groups

**IS THERE** or is there not an Al-Qaeda network operating in Indonesia?

The Indonesian government's official position up until now is that there are no terrorist cells linked to Osama bin Laden in the sprawling archipelago.

American and Indonesian intelligence agencies think otherwise. They point to the ruined remains of a paramilitary camp in the jungles of strife-torn Central Sulawesi as evidence that hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives from Afghanistan had trained there with the help of local extremists.

The truth lies somewhere in between.

In the search for the Indonesian equation in the vast global Al-Qaeda terrorist network, two things are clear:

First: there is growing evidence that the Saudi-born Osama and his lieutenants had worked actively in the past five years to cultivate radical Muslim groups in Indonesia by providing them with training and funds from his war chest to get them to effect his vision of Islamic theocracy in Asia.

Second: their efforts have boosted the military capabilities of some of these groups and hardened their ideological framework.

The implications of these developments are disturbing in that these groups, nurtured by outside sources ideologically and financially, could destabilise the rest of the region through the export of their extremist ideas and their willingness to use



force to accomplish their aims.

What are the indicators that point to an Al-Qaeda connection in Indonesia?

Last October, Indonesian intelligence officers reportedly discovered in Solo, Central Java, a document titled Operation Jihad In Asia, and traced it to the extremist group, Jemaah Islamiah (JI).

The 15-page document, in Arabic, detailed operational plans to bomb United States embassies and installations in Jakarta, Singapore and Malaysia in December.

Indonesian intelligence sources said that it also spelt out clearly that it was Osama who had ordered the covert operations.

A source said: "There was a concerted attempt to attack US allies and destabilise the region during this period." The recent arrests of terrorists in Singapore and Malaysia foiled JI's "grand Asia strategy", he added.

JI has acknowledged the existence of the document but maintains that the initiative to carry out the raids were entirely its own and not the work of Al-Qaeda.

A JI official, who declined to be named and who wanted to be known only as the third-most-senior member of the organisation in Indonesia, told the Sunday Review: "The spies are lying and over-dramatising as usual. JI is not an official wing of Al-Qaeda and we did not get any orders from Osama to kill Americans or Jews.

"We did the document on our own because of a sense of Islamic solidarity we have with Osama and our brothers in Afghanistan who are being victimised by the Americans."

Could this have been more than just solidarity among Muslims? Probably.

Even if the JI maintains that its links with Al-Qaeda are "informal", there are indicators to suggest that some level of cooperation was going on between the two groups.

It was getting funds and training from Osama's group – with no strings attached, the JI source says.

The source told Sunday Review that in the past five years, it received at least 1.35 billion rupiah (\$\$239 million) from Al-Qaeda – 250 million rupiah in 1996, 400 million rupiah a year later and 700 million rupiah in 2000.

Indonesian intelligence believes that the amount of money is much higher and that much of it came through channels that are hard to track.

One can only surmise that given the frequent contacts between the two groups, Al-Qaeda probably had a hand in shaping the Indonesian group's ideological bearings.

There is, after all, much common ground to build on.

The JI, like many other radical Muslim groups in Indonesia, sees itself as the new Darul Islam, a militant outfit that tried to establish an Islamic state in 1949, with a far greater mission than just defending Muslims at home.

The followers of Jemaah Islamiah draw guidance from the 19th century Islamic philosophers Mohammed Abdu and Rahid Rida and also the more puritan Wahabism of Mohamed Abdul Wahab and Ibn Saud.

Middle Eastern influences of a more

20th-century nature are reflected in its views on women, democracy and relations with the West.

Democracy is seen as a flawed Western idea incompatible with Islam. The most obvious influence emanating from the Middle East, however, lies in the generous dose of anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism that pervades JI's rhetoric.

The JI source explains: "We are not a terrorist group. We don't believe in killing civilians. Our targets are only Americans, Jews and those who support them."

Interestingly, several radical Indonesian Islamic groups are ideologically like-minded, making them prime catches for Osama. An opening for Al-Qaeda came with the fall of former President Suharto in May 1998.

The painful democratic transition and economic crisis allowed for suppressed social, ethnic and sectarian conflicts to resurface. At the same time, government inertia and the political benefits of playing the Islamic card gave militant groups the freedom to operate and recruit.

It was in such a setting that Al-Qaeda approached several of these smaller groups directly or through local proxies with offers of financial support.

The Sunday Review understands that these groups included Fisabilillah, Laskar Jundullah, Laskar Ahlul Sunnah Wal-Jamaah and the Front Pembela Islam (FPI).

None of them are reported to have accepted Osama's overtures.

Dr Delia Noor from the Indonesian Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) says Al-Qaeda could have misread the ground, thinking it could win over easily these Muslim groups.

"But these groups were not prepared to give up their independence to foreign elements," he said. Still, a closer examination reveals that several of these militant outfits had at some point or other received money from Middle Eastern countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

It raises the argument: Why would these groups give up the opportunity to get funds from yet another lucrative channel?

It is plausible that while most of them

had nothing to do with Al-Qaeda, a few did and are now bent on detaching themselves from any links with Osama and his Al-Qaeda network after the tragic events of Sept 11.

Analysts believe it would have been impossible for Al-Qaeda to operate alone in Indonesia without some help from local extremists.

They point to the discovery by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of a detailed sketch map of the US Embassy in Jakarta last July in a Middle Eastern country.

This forced the State Department to close the embassy temporarily and issue a travel warning to Americans.

An American analyst with a Jakarta-based international risk consultancy has this to say: “Now what does this suggest? It is doubtful whether Al-Qaeda would be so foolhardy as to send a bearded Afghan with little local knowledge to do a sketch of the embassy.

“The US Embassy would have spotted any of them in a heartbeat. The terrorists must have had Indonesian proxies in place to do the job.”

There are several groups on this shortlist.

The JI would obviously be the prime suspect. But some believe that the bigger militant groups like the Mujahideen Council of Indonesia (MMI) and Laskar Jihad could equally have done it.

Both these outfits have rejected outright any links with Al-Qaeda.

Growing speculation of MMI’s links with the terrorist network has much to do with its leader, Abu Bakar Baashir, who is one of a trio of leaders of 13 suspected Al-Qaeda-linked militants arrested in December by Malaysian police.

Abu Bakar was named as a “directing figure” of the Malaysian militants, whom authorities believe are members of the “second wing” of the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM).

The KMM, like the JI in Indonesia, share similar aims – that of establishing a Daulah Islamiah or an Islamic state made up of Malaysia, Indonesia and the southern Philippines.

The KMM members are also under investigation for links to Zacarias Moussaoui, who is on trial in the US for his alleged role in the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Abu Bakar, a 64-year-old Indonesian cleric, moved to Malaysia in the 1980s and became a religious teacher there after spending four years in an

Indonesian prison for challenging the then Suharto government.

Extremists stay resolute

A Washington Post report said he had written a letter to militant clerics in Indonesia and Malaysia on his return to Solo in 1998, inviting them to prepare for jihad against Americans.

The newspaper also quoted the letter as concluding with an offer to arrange meetings with Osama “through the safest way”.

But the MMI has denied that the group’s leader had written such a letter.

“If that letter really exists, it’s sufficient evidence to arrest him, so go ahead and arrest him. But no one has, yet,” it said. Abu Bakar told reporters last week that he had read books about Osama while in Malaysia. But he insisted that he had never been to Afghanistan and ruled out any links between MMI and Al-Qaeda.

“I haven’t heard of them since returning to Indonesia,” he said. “There have been no talks or meetings with them.”

The MMI leadership has tried hard to portray itself as a domestic force, taking the lead in calls for introducing Syariah or Islamic law in Indonesia.

Despite protestations of not having any international links, well-placed sources in Solo said that the 50,000-strong MMI was seen as a “valuable tool” by Al-Qaeda, given its grassroots reach and access to the different militant groups that make up this ad hoc coalition.

Not obvious to many is that several MMI members use as reference in religious teachings a Pakistani-published book on political Islam, translated into Indonesian with an introduction by Osama.

Furthermore, Abu Jibril, an MMI member on the run from Malaysian police, is suspected to have been the “point-man” for the group’s links with Al-Qaeda.

Sources revealed that he played a key role in arranging meetings for Al-Qaeda representatives with several groups here, including the Laskar Jihad.

Laskar Jihad’s leader, Mr Jaafar Umar Talib, said that he turned down the offer of money and training facilities after being approached by Al-Qaeda in 2000 to wage a religious war in the Maluku islands in eastern Indonesia.

“I rejected their offer and after that I never saw any of them again,” he insisted.

A few months after that incident, Mr Jaafar saw fit to send 200 militants to the Maluku islands to fight its Christians.

Sources said that the group, which has 10,000 to 15,000 members had received financial backing amounting to over 200 million rupiah in the initial stages of the clashes from militant outfits in several countries, including Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Afghanistan.

Laskar Jihad’s international connections have come under increasing scrutiny since the Sept 11 terrorist attacks.

The most worrying links, of course, have been that with Afghanistan.

Mr Jaafar himself fought with the Afghan mujahideen between 1988 and 1989 and studied at the Mawdudi Institute in Lahore, Pakistan.

Both shaped his view of Islam as well as the Islamic struggle in Ambon and Indonesia as a whole.

Informal ties continued unimpeded for the last decade with Taleban and Al-Qaeda trainers having aided the group, a number of Afghans allegedly volunteering to fight in the Maluku islands, and the Laskar Jihad receiving arms from the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, a known member of Al-Qaeda’s network, political observers and Western diplomats said. Such international exposure has had a crucial bearing on the Laskar Jihad’s organisational structure.

The paramilitary outfit is divided into four battalions, all named after the Prophet Muhammad’s companions – Abu Bakar, Umar Bin Khattab, Usman Bin Afan and Ali Bin Abu Thalib, sources said.

In addition, there are special forces, intelligence and logistics units. Its weapons include homemade guns and bombs as well as mortars captured in raids on Indonesian military arsenals in Ambon. More recently, arms have also been flowing into Ambon from the Abu Sayyaf.

Unlike the Jemaah Islamiah, however, the Laskar Jihad ideological framework is essentially homegrown. It is the product of a very specific Indonesian situation – the conflict in Ambon, and the threat it poses, is still confined within Indonesian borders.

But that could easily change in the long run if international terrorist networks make further inroads into the country. The seeds of international terrorism have been sown in Indonesia and risk growing beyond its borders if extremists are allowed to export their ideas to neighbouring countries.

What is worrying is that groups like JI have developed a network outside Indonesia even as they go about penetrating other Islamic groups back home to shape their thinking in the hope that a common ideological platform could emerge in the long run.

The JI told the Sunday Review that while the detention of its members in Singapore and Malaysia would force other members to go further underground, it was not going to break their resolve to wreak havoc on “American and Zionist conspirators” and build a region-wide Islamic republic.

#### TERROR: Links

\* Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Baashir (right), head of the Mujahideen Council of Indonesia (MMI), is one of the leaders of 13 suspected Al-Qaeda-linked militants arrested last month by Malaysian police.

\* MMI member Abu Jibril (left) is on the run from Malaysian police and is suspected to have been the “point-man” for the group’s links with Al-Qaeda.

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