

BOOK REVIEWS

***Terrorism and Violence in Southeast Asia: Transnational Challenges to States and Regional Stability.* Edited by Paul J. Smith.** Armonk, New York & London: M.E. Sharpe 2005. Softcover: 262 pp.

This edited volume adds to the post 9/11 glut of books on terrorism without offering significant new insights on the problem as it relates to Southeast Asia. It falls also between two stools: readers interested in the details of groups like Jemaah Islamiyah or the Abu Sayyaf Group will find better, more accurate, and more up-to-date information from other sources, including from some of the same contributors to this book, and readers interested in the strategy and tactics of counter-terrorism will find the Southeast Asia material thin.

The volume is divided into three sections: the first two cover transnational and regional perspectives on terrorism in Southeast Asia, while the third examines the enabling environment that facilitates terrorist activities. The first section is the weakest, in part because of odd interpretations or factual errors that appear — errors which the authors would probably not make if they were writing their chapters today.

Chalk, for example, writes, “It is still not clear [...] whether the real masterminds behind the Bali attacks were renegade elements within the armed forces (rather than JI) seeking to institute a strategy of tension in order to bolster the military’s declining grip on political power in Jakarta”. He cites interviews in Sydney and Canberra as his source, but it is hard to believe, given all the evidence emerging from the trials of the Bali bombers, that the military-as-mastermind theory is credible. He also says that “Currently, there is no conclusive

evidence to support the U.S. assertion that the ASG is actively associated either with Al-Qaeda or JI”, whereas hard evidence of JI-ASG cooperation did become available after some arrests off the coast of Malaysia in late 2003. Analyses that might have been state-of-the-art at the time they were written lose much of their value after a one or two-year wait.

The same problem of outdated information bedevils other chapters. Abuza refers to Al-Qaeda as JI’s “parent organization”, whereas there is strong evidence to show that JI grew out of a rupture within the Indonesian Darul Islam movement and is very much an independent organization, even if some of its members had close working relationships with men like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Thayer, in an otherwise useful critique of some of the sensationalist assessments of Al-Qaeda’s penetration of Southeast Asia, writes that Abu Bakar Ba’asyir “has no reported direct links with Al-Qaeda or bin Laden” whereas information coming out of more recent interrogations and trials suggests a stronger personal connection.

Abuza suggests that the now-defunct Laskar Jihad organization received covert assistance from Al-Qaeda (p. 55), that its disbanding was a “PR tactic” and that Laskar Jihad and Al-Qaeda share a similar worldview (p. 56). Studies published in 2004 showed that a major ideological gulf separates the leadership of the two organizations, and the disbanding was the result of serious internal rifts.

Some of the useful information in the chapter is undermined by mistakes that a good fact-checker could have picked up. The Jakarta mall bombing was in August 2001, not July 2000; the bombing of a train station in Yala was April 2001, not 2000. Laskar Jundullah was not a paramilitary arm of JI — none of its members were part of the JI organization. The ferocity of fighting in the Moluccas was not due primarily to “a shared sense [with bin Laden] that never could the radical Muslims allow an Islamic state to be broken up” (p. 54).

The objective of the book, says the editor, is “to provide the critical knowledge necessary for effective policy responses”. But when the information itself is problematic, the value to policy-makers plummets. The book is best when not focusing on extremist movements per se. Anthony Smith has a balanced chapter on the political context in Indonesia, stressing that “Indonesia’s Muslims do not, by and large, constitute a fertile landscape for even mild versions of Islamist governance, let alone violent theocratic movements like Jemaah Islamiya” (p. 117). Chapters by David Capie on the small arms trade and Paul Smith on border security provide good nuts-and-bolts overviews of problems that have ramifications far beyond terrorism and yet, if seriously tackled, could hamper the ability of groups like JI to

operate. It is probably no coincidence that the most useful parts of the book are those least dependent on the constantly expanding information available about regional jihadist movements.

Many of the chapters cover the same ground: the story of the 1995 Bojinka plot in the Philippines is told in one way or another by Chalk (pp. 20–21); Abuza (pp. 42–3); Thayer (p. 87); and Rodell (pp. 32–3), with a brief reference by Gunaratna (p. 71). There are even more retellings in different places of the escape of JI operative al-Ghozi. While use of the same examples may be warranted in different contexts, the overall impact is one of unnecessary repetition and in some cases, inconsistency (different death tolls for the same incident, different derivations of the same word, and so on).

The book is also marred by idiosyncratic transliterations and misspellings. The word “daulah”, the Arabic word for state, appears throughout as “darulah”. JI is written as “Jemaah Islamiya”, for some reason dropping the last “h”, when in fact both words end in the same Arabic letter. The Indonesian cleric writes his own name as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, not Bashir. The Thai organization appears correctly as Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani in one chapter and wrongly as “Guragan” Mujahideen Islam Pattani in another.

Terrorism and Violence in Southeast Asia was intended to be more descriptive than prescriptive. But when contributors venture into analyses of government policies or policy recommendations themselves, they often stumble. The chapter by Ramakrishna makes important points about how to design a strategy to restrict the space in which terrorists can operate. But it also has a section on “Helping Moderate Islamists Win the Battle for the Soul of Islam”. There is no reason to believe that the infusion of funds into “moderate” schools and organizations, while useful on its own terms, will have any impact whatsoever on the strength of violent jihadism in the region, or that the crux of the problem lies in a failure to get a moderate message across. The factors leading individuals to join organizations like JI are as much historical and political as they are religious, and unless the recruitment process is better understood, a Western embrace of one group of Muslims at the expense of another could do as much to reinforce the radical fringe as to weaken it.

This is a book that had worthwhile objectives and good contributors. The final product, unfortunately, is disappointing.

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