

***The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Terrorists.* By Bilveer Singh. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007. Hardcover: 264pp.**

The word “Talibanization” comes from Taliban, the fundamentalist Islamist movement that misgoverned Afghanistan for five years from 1996. The Taliban regime was eventually overthrown by US forces and the Northern Alliance of the Mujahedeen following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Today, the Taliban continue to wage a protracted guerrilla war against the incumbent government in Kabul. The Taliban have also become a nefarious model for other terrorist organizations to emulate. According to political scientist Bilveer Singh, the Southeast Asian “version” of the Taliban is the *Al-Jamaah Al-Islamiyah*. This group poses a danger to regional security because it has strong links to other terrorist networks in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Colloquially known by its acronym, “JI” (for Jemaah Islamiyah), this Southeast Asian terrorist network has a single long-term goal: to establish a regional Islamic caliphate based on the JI’s questionable interpretations of the Koran. The JI’s imaginary caliphate stretches across Southern Thailand, East and West Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, most of Indonesia and the southern islands of the Philippines. The JI’s *modus operandi* involves underground political violence that is operationalized through assassinations, bombings, hijackings, hostage-taking, demands for ransom and the creation of a climate of fear.

Since the second Bali bombing of 2005, no Southeast Asian terrorist network has claimed a significant victory. Intelligence agencies argue that the reason behind the overall “decline” of terrorism is due to the fact that current counterterrorist operations have identified and anticipated potential problems and solved them before they could take effect. Some analysts also believe that Western counterterrorist operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan have seriously impeded the spread of extremism in this part of the world. This view is not shared by Singh: he predicts a rise in terrorist activity in contemporary Southeast Asia. Certainly if one considers the Mumbai massacre in November 2008 it would appear that the dangers of terrorism are not abating. While the Mumbai attack was not directly related to the JI in Southeast Asia, one cannot rule out the possibility of more JI attacks over the next few years. According to Singh, the balance of political power is shifting in favour of the

Jl in Southeast Asia. The author is pessimistic about the eventual outcome of the war against terrorists. He suggests that it is far more important for states to remain engaged and connected with their domestic Muslim populations rather than ostracizing these communities. Singh also emphasizes the continuing importance of connections between and across terrorist organizations as they share resources, intelligence and operations in Southeast Asia.

Singh's book demonstrates a great depth of knowledge about the political dimensions of Islam in Southeast Asia. This important sub-theme involves the right-wing factions of political jihad in Southeast Asia as they seek a new re-purification of their believers. The implications of such a motif are daunting as they are ominous given the wide range of Islamicist discourses that are emerging among youth groups in the Southern Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Southern Thailand.

Intellectually appealing, the book is a very valuable addition to the analytical work on security studies in Southeast Asia. It will be of interest to those who are following the "war on terrorism" as it unfolds in this part of the world. There are clear and uncompromising facts with important details that describe exactly how this war is being prosecuted and operationalized.

ANTONIO L. RAPPÀ is currently Head, Security Studies, UniSIM, Singapore.