

# JIHAD IN THE NEAR NORTH

**Dominic Rolfe** talks to **Sidney Jones** about Islamist movements in Indonesia and other south-east Asian countries



The recently signed security treaty between Indonesia and Australia underscores the importance of the relationship with our northern neighbour. In economic, defence and even cultural terms, strong ties with Indonesia will be integral to future Australian growth and security. However, groups like Jemaah Islamiyah, who were responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002 and suspected of other suicide attacks, have undermined efforts to create a democracy that is also the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world.

Dr **SIDNEY JONES** is a highly-regarded expert on Islamic radicalism, Jemaah Islamiyah and south-east Asian terrorism. She is based in Jakarta and is the South East Asia Project Director for the International Crisis Group, an

independent, non-governmental organisation. Jones has produced extensive research and analytical reports on regional conflicts with a special focus on ethnic, communal and separatist conflicts in Indonesia, such as Aceh, Papua and Poso. She has also worked for Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

The Australian public often sees Indonesia as being the crucible for terrorism and instability in the region—witness East Timor, Papua and Bali. However, the Indonesian archipelago is undergoing significant changes post-Soeharto and the picture is far more complex and nuanced than is sometimes understood. Dr Jones was a guest of The Centre for Independent Studies at its annual Consilium conference in August 2006, where she spoke to *Policy* Assistant Editor **DOMINIC ROLFE**.

**Dominic Rolfe:** What is the current status of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)? You've said the Indonesians have significantly weakened their networks. Is there any evidence that JI are using their flexibility to cope with the better policing and intelligence?

**Sidney Jones:** It is important to recognise that there isn't just one JI any longer. There are several different groups that either have split off from JI or have just lost direction. I don't believe the mainstream JI is a significant threat, because the mainstream JI has never agreed with bombing lesser targets. But we have several splinters that are extremely dangerous, the most important of which is led by Noordin Mohammad Top. I think there is some sense in which they are adjusting to arrests. They are not even trying any longer to get endorsement or approval from a central command structure. They are also becoming completely self-contained. I think they are also adapting in at least thinking and talking about kidnappings and targeted assassinations rather than bombings. So far we haven't seen it, but other groups in Indonesia use targeted assassinations, so it's not unprecedented.

**DR:** If it came from a core of JI, are these splinter groups as a result of policing or is that just splintering within the ideology?

**SJ:** I think it is two factors. Noordin and Azahari Husin, his partner, were part of an old split that goes back to 1999. They were part of the Bali faction based in Malaysia that from the very beginning had taken on the al-Qaeda line; that split goes back a number of years now. It doesn't have anything to do with the arrests per se. But I think we are also seeing JI cells that were part of the mainstream, but no longer have leadership. These guys have to make decisions on their own, and in some cases are making decisions to attack civilians, including in Central Sulawesi on Christians, without any direction or control from above. But I should say that even Noordin, who's split off clearly, is drawing at least in part on the mainstream JI network. He's going around central Java and east Java and using JI networks to get new people into the movement, but it's not just JI that he's bringing in.

**DR:** I imagine the splintering must have also affected the financial supply lines.

**SJ:** I think that there's no question that they are really hurting for funds. If you look at the first Bali bombing, the Marriott bomb and the Australian Embassy bombing, there were some fairly large infusions from outside. There's no indication that there was any outside assistance for the second Bali bombing, and a lot of evidence that they are short of funds, to the point where they have to rob gold stores and mobile telephone stores.

**DR:** Is there much tacit support within Indonesia—particularly within the Indonesian military and police—for some of the terrorist organisations?

**SJ:** Not within the police or the military. A few officers were sympathetic and there were people particularly from the intelligence agency—retired, I should state—who frequently appeared at MMI [Indonesian Mujahedeen Council] congresses and so on. The conspiracy theories sprouted by these groups resonated with some people in the intelligence organisation. But they were individuals and there is no indication of institutional support anywhere in the Indonesian Government machinery.

### Middle Eastern influences

**DR:** How has the conflict in Lebanon affected the organisation of terrorist groups?

**SJ:** While it is too early to tell, what we do know is that the groups that up until now have been virulently anti-Shiite are not saying anything against Hezbollah. Indeed, they supported Sheik Nasrallah to the utmost because Israel is the enemy. For these groups everything that happened in Lebanon is absolute proof of the crusader/Zionist conspiracy that al-Qaeda has talked about since 1996.

I also see events like the war in Lebanon leading to some people in radical student movements trying to join forces with Noordin, or trying to form copycat organisations. Their difficulty will be getting the weapons expertise and strategic planning that have made Noordin so dangerous.

**DR:** Given the links between Damascus and Tehran, and Hezbollah, what does Ahmadinejad's recent visit to Indonesia mean for terrorism in the region?

**SJ:** The interesting thing for me and I don't know the answer to this, is whether Ahmadinejad's visit to

Indonesia and his clear desire for a strong relationship with Indonesia would militate against Iranian support for extremist groups inside Indonesia, but I don't know that for a fact. That is just speculation.

### **Abu Bakar Bashir**

**DR:** The early release of Abu Bakar Bashir, the leader of MMI, was big news over here. Was it big news in Indonesia? In the Australian press, JI is seen as one of the more prominent terrorist threats. Is it seen that way in a domestic political context in Indonesia or is it subsumed by more pressing domestic matters, for example, economic development?

**SJ:** I think that the most telling statistic was that just before the Presidential elections in October 2004, the number of people who believed that terrorism was a priority—not the number one priority but a priority—of the Indonesian Government was 0.5%. Then we had the second Bali bombing and I'm sure the figure has moved up. There is always a difference if you do some kind of survey immediately after one of these bombing attacks than if you wait for a while. But if you look at the fact that Indonesia has coped with one natural disaster after another—the Tsunami in December 2004, a major earthquake in Java, a second tsunami in Java following the earthquake, a big mud flow in east Java that displaced thousands of people, really bad flooding in Sulawesi and Kalimantan—you can't help but have some sympathy with a government that has to contend with all that, let alone democratisation, let alone a decentralisation program, and this huge devolution of fiscal authority, let alone Aceh, let alone Papua. With all of these problems, terrorism is the least of your concerns.

But a word on Bashir—one thing that characterises that whole saga was the disconnect between Australian and American outrage over his short sentence and the legal case against him, which from the beginning was quite weak. There were two trials of Bashir. In the first one there were incompetent prosecutors, but the evidence could have been strengthened immeasurably by access to Hambali [detained leader of JI]. However, the US refused to give the Indonesian Police access to Hambali. In the second trial it wasn't a case of the prosecutors being incompetent. The constitutional court made a ruling that made it impossible to apply the terrorism law to Bashir because the court said that you couldn't apply the law retroactively. I think that the only reason the second case was brought against Bashir was because of

a combination of international pressure and police frustration that they'd gotten such a bad deal on the first round. In the second case they brought against him, they tried to make the case that Bashir was indirectly responsible for the Marriott bombing because of a lecture in the Philippines where he exhorted Mujahadeen in Mindanao to wage jihad and some of the people who listened to him were involved in the Marriott bombing. It is hard to imagine that any court in the world would have accepted that as evidence that he was involved in a conspiracy. And yet the Indonesian court did. That is the amazing thing. They convicted him on the basis of flimsy evidence and it is a miracle that he got even what he did.

I also think that the Australian and American pressure turned Bashir into this symbol of defiance against the West and increased his stature and credibility and popularity by a factor of about 10. It reinvigorated support for Bashir and there's no question that he's become the poster child of the Shariah movement and the Islamisation of Indonesia. But I think people have to distinguish between support for Bashir as an individual and support for terrorists per se. I don't think it's made any difference in that respect.

### **Origins of terrorism**

**DR:** Is economic development and economic growth a big factor in alleviating some of the problems that underlie people turning to terrorism?

**SJ:** No. One of the biggest myths is that poverty breeds radicalism. Around the world the Islamists who join jihadist movements come from a variety of backgrounds. They're not all poor. In fact most of the leadership is middle class to upper-middle class. So you're not going to address the problem through economic development. Economic development is necessary for a range of other reasons. Just as education needs to be supported across the board—both Muslim education and secular education. But nobody should believe, at least in Indonesia, that assistance to education will somehow solve or mitigate the jihadist problem. There is one caveat to this notion of economic development, though. Where insurgencies have their roots in grievances against the central government because of discrimination or economic

and political neglect, economic development becomes a solution. Economic development could play a major role in the Southern Philippines or Southern Thailand, but those are two very different kinds of situations.

**DR:** Where do you think the genesis of an individual's terrorist tendencies lie?

**SJ:** I don't think there is a single factor, or that you can say that it's simply exposure to radical ideology and that is enough. If we look at Indonesia we can see four or five different streams into the jihadist movement. We see people in West Java continuing the tradition of their fathers or uncles or grandfathers who were involved in the 1950s insurgency to establish an Islamic state. We see some people who were brought into religious discussion centres at a mosque and were completely captivated by a charismatic orator. We find children of JI leaders who are going into JI, creating a second generation of JI. We also find people who were inspired by international developments, but that hasn't really been a large proportion of the movement; up until now international factors haven't been that important. One other thing that was really important—if you look at the timing of it—was the communal conflicts that led to the deaths of large numbers of Muslims in Ambon and Poso. This was unquestionably the single biggest recruiting factor. And that was the period of maximum growth of JI and other jihadist groups from 1999 when that conflict broke out until the Bali bombs.

### **Anti-terror measures**

**DR:** How far do you think the rights of individuals should be curbed by anti-terror laws both in Indonesia and the wider world?

**SJ:** In countries that face a real serious threat, there may be some justification for loosening of rules of evidence. There may also be some justification for changing the threshold of what's incitement and what's not. But I don't think that under any circumstances torture is justified. I don't believe that under any circumstances secret detention that is completely incommunicado is justified. And I don't believe that indefinite detention is justified. There have to be set limits. There may be some point at which you increase the period before someone can be charged. Even there, you've got to be really, really careful because it's precisely ill-treatment

and violations of liberties of these kinds that can lead to the further radicalisation of the people that you want to try to draw away from the groups they belong to.

**DR:** Do you think Australia can help with counter-terrorism measures in Indonesia, beyond law enforcement and intelligence?

**SJ:** Yes, but I think they have to be careful about doing it. I think their biggest contribution, and it's been enormous, has been on the law enforcement front, and I think we wouldn't have seen half the successes that we have seen had it not been for the kind of assistance that was given. And it wasn't only the aid per se—it was the way in which it was provided which was just wonderful. But I think that as Australia learns from its own Muslim communities about how to prevent recruitment, as it learns lessons about how to identify possible signs that something is afoot that needs to be stopped, or if it succeeds in developing counter-measures to the kinds of jihadist teachings that go on in Muslim communities, then that kind of thing could be enormously useful for Indonesia, even if you're dealing with different cultures.

### **Cross-border matters**

**DR:** Given that terrorist groups are transnational and transcultural in nature, and thinking more widely than just JI in Indonesia, how effective do you think that individual states' counter-terrorism measures can be, and do you think that there is any sort of appropriate forum, such as the ASEAN forum, for building a counter-terrorism network or taskforce?

**SJ:** I am not convinced that ASEAN per se is the appropriate forum. I'm not sure that ASEAN institutions have functioned particularly well. That said, I think that there are a couple of institutions that have now been built, like the centre in Samarang where people from ASEAN train together, discuss counter-terrorism and so on together, is useful, especially for sharing of information. Sharing of information, sharing new techniques and so on is not only desirable, it is necessary. I think that there also has to be much better sharing and cooperation across agencies, not only in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, but probably Australia and the United States. There isn't a single country I know where that works well.

If you look at all the countries in the region, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia have done the best by far, especially compared with Thailand and the Philippines. Malaysia has been particularly effective in increasing the efficacy of its marine patrols to interdict people who are going back and forth between Malaysia and the Philippines.

**DR:** Do unstable countries provide more and safe places to train or to meet because the security institutions are weakened, for example, in Thailand?

**SJ:** It doesn't seem to be happening outside of Thailand. For me the interesting thing is that while some of the insurgents in Thailand fleeing across the border to Malaysia has been seriously problematic for Thai/Malaysian relations at the highest level, it hasn't affected police cooperation at a lower level; they are still taking place quite well. There is also a real concern on the part of the Malaysian Government that, if they return jihadists or insurgents who have fled across the border, these people will end up dead because of the policies of the Thai Government, which could have domestic political ramifications.

**DR:** I think perhaps when you're living on one continent, like Australians are, it's hard to conceive the complexity of the interaction between different cultures and different religions.

**SJ:** One of the other things that I find really interesting is that there's been a lot of intermarriage between Indonesian jihadists and Malaysians and Singaporeans. Maybe because they are all Malay, but maybe because of the way JI grew up—in fact I'm pretty sure that's the bigger factor, because one of the ways of maintaining security was actually to ensure that you married in the group. So you have a lot of arranged marriages by commanders, basically suggesting to their protégés that they marry x, y or z. But you have very little intermarriage between Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans, and Filipinos. There are a couple of examples but very, very few and I don't know of any between Thais and anybody else in the region. Maybe there are some examples of Thai/Malay intermarriage but I'm just not aware of it. But it is interesting that despite all of the training in the Philippines, there was never a Filipino member of JI. This was because they didn't want to dilute the effort, they didn't want to be seen as poaching people from MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front] or Abu Sayyaf.

But why they didn't intermarry to strengthen alliances, I don't know.

**DR:** What do you think of the relaxation of the arms embargo that the United States had on Indonesia?

**SJ:** There I've taken a slightly different view. All the years I was at Human Rights Watch I was a very strong supporter of the embargo, even though its practical consequences, in terms of improving the behaviour of the Indonesian armed forces or in pursuing any kind of change was, as far as I could tell, nil. But, because of a lack of any kind of systematic foreign training, the army had become xenophobic. When I arrived in Indonesia in 2002 I was convinced that as long as you didn't sell training in terms of turning the Indonesian army into 'goodniks' who were all of a sudden going to become champions of human rights, it actually was a useful thing just to get them to have some exposure to a different set of individuals. It is even better to get Indonesians involved as much as possible in UN peacekeeping operations, because the people who were involved in those, both civilian police and the military, were people whose attitudes changed by having taken part. That's a very different experience than going for training in Australia or the United States.

**DR:** Do you think the idea of a war on terror has created a false sense that this is a unified global challenge rather than a series of smaller, more local conflicts?

**SJ:** Yes. I think there are a lot of problems with the idea of a war on terror. It does tend to suggest that there is a single problem with a single set of responses. But it also suggests that if it is a war, a military response is what's needed and I think that because of the complexity of the terrorism problem, it is really dangerous to think that way. I think a military response may be in order if you are dealing with terrorism that blends into insurgency as you had with the IRA, and as you have with the Tamil Tigers or the Thai situation. Indonesia is clearly a law enforcement problem and the military should stay out. I think that is even more the case when what you are trying to do in the democratisation programme is ease the military out of its internal security role and attempting to ensure that it doesn't worm its way back into politics.

**DR:** Thanks for your time.