

Radical Madrasas in Southeast Asia

By Scott Atran, Justin Magouirk and Jeremy Ginges

SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS in the United States, United Kingdom and France, among other countries, have repeatedly voiced concerns about the threat to world security posed by Islamic schools that allegedly teach hate and murder. In 2005, Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey published an op-ed with the *New York Times* on “The Madrassah Myth,” where they argued that most *madrasas*, or Islamic boarding schools, are moderate and are not associated with terrorism and political violence. After examining some high-profile attacks, they surmised that:

While madrassas are an important issue in education and development in the Muslim world, they are not and should not be considered a threat to the United States. The tens of millions of dollars spent every year by the United States through the State Department, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the Agency for International Development to improve education and literacy in the Middle East and South Asia should be applauded as the development aid it is and not as the counterterrorism effort it cannot be.

In an extension of this argument in *The Washington Quarterly*,¹ Bergen and Pandey conclude that we must eliminate the “assumption that madrassas produce terrorists capable of carrying out major attacks” in order to “shape more effective policies to ensure national security.”

Overall, this analysis is a welcome respite from the rash rhetoric that often characterizes responses to terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and the 2005 London Underground bombings. Yet, in attempting to rectify the typical hysterical media responses to *madrasas*, the argument may go too far.

1 Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, “The Madrassa Scapegoat,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29 (Spring 2006): pp. 117-125.

The Role of Radical Madrasas in Terrorist Attacks

It is true that most *madrasas* are peaceful and serve a constructive role in societies where education is often a privilege rather than a right, and where, as in Pakistan, the state has increasingly released mass education and student welfare to *madrasas* as it continues to spend many times more on the military.² Yet this overlooks the fact that elsewhere, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, *madrasas* such as al-Mukmin, Lukman al-Hakim and al-Islam have been vitally important in furthering the mission of some of the most volatile terrorist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), in efforts to attack American, Australian and other Western-related interests. In fact, the majority of JI terrorist attacks—including the Christmas Eve bombings of 2000 and Bali I in 2002, as well as the Jakarta Marriott bombing in 2003 and the Australian Embassy attack in 2004 (which involved JI members but were not institutionally JI)—have been staffed and led by individuals associated with radical *madrasas*.

To explore these competing claims and to address the *madrasa* question systematically, data was recently analyzed from the ongoing Global Transnational Terrorism (GTT) Project.³ Overall, the findings demonstrate that attendance and other forms of association (teaching, socializing or attending lectures) with JI-linked radical *madrasas* are correlated with both participation and role in JI terrorist attacks. By using aggregate level data on Indonesian education rates, it is clear that JI-linked *madrasa* attendance rates of the jihadists that took part in the Bali I, Marriott and Australian Embassy bombings are 19 times greater than the highest estimated rates of the general population. Using an ordered logit statistical analysis of 75 jihadists involved in the same operations, we

2 Even before September 11, the ratio of defense spending to health and education spending in Pakistan was 239:1. See Stephen Burgess, “Struggle for Control of Pakistan,” in Barry Schneider and Jerrold Post eds., *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing Company, 2004).

3 Undertaken in collaboration with Marc Sageman and Dominick Wright, and under the auspices of the Air Force Office of Scientific Research.

found that JI-linked *madrasa* attendance is associated with a greater role in JI terrorist operations, decreasing the probability that a jihadist will take a low level role on a terrorist operation by more than 19% and increasing the probability that a jihadist will play a major role by 16%.⁴

Data was also analyzed from structured interviews with more than 100 students in four Indonesian *madrasas* (*pesantren*, or boarding schools) to attempt to explain these associations, and striking correlations were found between unusual belief systems and radicalization. Two of the schools, Darussalam and al-Husainy, are associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), or Revival of Islamic Scholars, a mass movement that had originally played a key role in the fight for independence against Dutch rule and which is associated with a traditional and non-dogmatic Indonesian form of Islam influenced by Balinese Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufi mystical beliefs. One school, Ibnu Mas’ud, is funded by the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), or Council of Indonesian Holy Warriors, an Islamist coalition whose goal is to convert Indonesia into a strict Sunni state ruled by Shari’ah law.⁵ The remaining school, al-Islam (in Tengulun, East Java), was established in 1992 by the father of three of the main Bali bombing plotters (Ali Imron, Amrozi and Mukhlas) and modeled on the famous al-Mukmin school in Ngruki (Solo, Central Java) created by JI founder Abdullah Sungkar and his colleague Abu Bakr Ba’asyir. After Sungkar’s death in 1999, Ba’asyir became al-Islam’s patron and officiated at graduation ceremonies. After the Bali bombing, Ba’asyir said that he believed the victims of the bombing would go to hell,⁶ and that the bombers and plotters were heroic mujahidin.⁷

After exploring attitudes toward Islam and other religions, no significant

4 Justin Magouirk, “Connecting a Thousand Points of Hatred,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:4 (2008).

5 MMI is led by Abu Bakr Ba’asyir and has a membership that overlaps with but is broader than JI.

6 Cited in Indira Lakshmanan, “Islamic Leader Warns Indonesia,” *Boston Globe*, October 17, 2002.

7 Cited in Scott Atran, “The Emir: An Interview with Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, Alleged Leader of the Southeast Asian Jemaah Islamiyah Organization,” *Spotlight on Terrorism* 3:9 (2005).

differences between the NU and MMI schools were found, whereas al-Islam stood apart on a variety of measures.⁸ At al-Islam, 91% of the students (compared to 35% of students at the other *madrasas*) believed that it was their duty as Muslims “to fight and kill non-Muslims such as Christians.”⁹ At al-Islam, 74% of the students (compared to seven percent of the students at other schools) believed that all people “were born evil but some learn to become good.”¹⁰ Across all schools, students who believed people are “born evil” were about 11 times more likely to believe it was their duty to kill non-Muslims.¹¹

Students were also asked to imagine what would happen if a child born of Jewish parents were adopted by a religious Muslim couple. While 83% of students from other schools thought that the child would grow up to be a Muslim, only 48% of students at al-Islam shared that belief.¹² This essentialist belief that a child born of another religion could never fully become a Muslim was strongly related to support for violence. Students with this belief were about 10 times more likely than other students to believe that it was their duty to kill non-Muslims.¹³ Note that the difference between al-Islam and the other schools cannot be attributed to different levels of religiosity, or even different levels of agreement with political Islam. Fewer students at al-Islam (71% compared to 82% of students at the other schools) believed it was “very important...that a good government implement the laws of Shari`a” (not a significant difference statistically, $P > 0.4$).

Another finding is that radical *madrasas* in Southeast Asia are important not only as tools of indoctrination, but also as “focal points” to draw like-minded

radicals together, a point often missed by terrorism analysts. Association with a JI-linked radical *madrasa* is a strong predictor of a jihadist’s role in terrorist operations in Southeast Asia. For example, both the spiritual guide of the Bali operation, Mukhlas, and the field commander, Imam Samudra, attended or associated with JI-linked radical *madrasas*, and built their financial, logistical and operational network around *madrasa* ties. The same is true for Dulmatin and Azhari Husin, the main bomb-makers in the operation. The study found that association with Lukman al-Hakim, a radical JI *madrasa* in Malaysia, increases the probability that a jihadist will play a major role by more than 23%. Based on this analysis, it can be surmised that JI-linked radical *madrasas* are both production sites and service centers for jihadists.

The following page shows a social network diagram of the 2002 Bali bombing that illustrates the connections between the different jihadists that took part in the bombing. Note that 16 of the 27 jihadists either attended or were associated with the radical *madrasas* Lukman al-Hakim or al-Mukmin,¹⁴ including most of the leadership, planners and operators.

After the Bali I operation, most of the individuals who helped hide Ali Imron, one of the bombers, were students at or were associated with al-Islam, where he was a teacher. For instance, Hamzah Baya (class of 1999), Eko Hadi Prasetyo (1998), Sukastopo (met Imron at al-Islam), Sofyan Hadi (1998), Imam Susanto (2001), Sirojul Munir (parent of al-Islam student), Ilham bin Abdul Muthalib (2001), Muhammad Rusi bin Salim (1998), Azhari Dipo Kusuma (teacher at al-Islam at the same time as Ali Imron), Sumaro (1997) and Abdullah Salam (1999) were all arrested (and released in 2006) for hiding or helping Imron flee after the bombing.¹⁵

14 Node size is based on the reputation of the individual. Reputation is derived from a mathematical algorithm that addresses both organizational role and attack history.

15 Thanks to Sidney Jones for providing this information. The al-Islam supporters were clearly not terrorists in the sense that the bombers were. Most of them were members of KOMPAK, an Islamic charity linked to JI (as well as other militant Islamic groups), but not part of JI. In his new book, Ali Imron deeply regrets getting them

Two others were tried in district court on charges of aiding Ali Imron, one of which was a relative of Ali Imron and the other a parent of a former student at al-Islam. The 2002 Bali operation is not unique.

Implications for an Anti-Terrorism Policy

From this data, a number of implications for an effective anti-terrorism policy can be drawn. First, allied governments should hone their focus on a small subset of radical *madrasas*. There is no evidence that *madrasas* in general spawn, or are even correlated with, terrorism; nevertheless, our research shows that, at least for Indonesia and Malaysia, there is strong statistical evidence that radical *madrasas* are correlated with terrorism and support for violence against those who hold different beliefs. These radical *madrasas* preach a jihadist version of *takfiri* ideology. *Takfiris* view contemporary society as antithetical to Islamic values and consider the killing of fellow Muslims to be justified in their cause to purify the community of alien influences. *Takfiri* jihadists reject standard Salafist teaching, which proscribes the killing of fellow Muslims and the overthrow of states ruled by Muslims because this would produce division and discord (*fitna*) in the community. In fact, the strict Salafist schools are generally the most virulent opponents of jihadism in Indonesia and elsewhere. Within JI there has been a debate over whether attacks are legitimate on Indonesian soil and, if so, whether the killing of Muslims is allowed.¹⁶ It is clear from the data that the role of radical *madrasas* concerns only the *takfiri* wing of JI, which allows both attacks on Indonesian soil and the killing of Muslims as well as foreigners for the sake of jihad.

Radical *madrasas* have provided operatives for every major JI attack outside of the strictly local conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Ambon and Poso.¹⁷ Most of the Bali attackers and planners either attended

into trouble. See *Ali Imron, Sang Pengebom* (Ali Imron, the Bomber) (Jakarta: Republika Press, November 2007).

16 International Crisis Group, “Indonesia Background: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don’t Mix,” September 13, 2004.

17 There were more attacks in Poso between 2003 and 2006 than in the rest of Indonesia combined. None of the perpetrators there went to JI schools.

8 Median age at NU schools was 16, and 18 at the other schools. Females comprised nearly half of the student body at the NU schools, five percent at al-Islam and none at the MMI school. Questionnaires were distributed only to males. Interestingly, at al-Islam 71% of respondents said they joined the school through pre-existing social networks of friends, whereas 70% of respondents at the other schools were sent there by their family.

9 Chi-square = 43.01, $P < 0.0001$.

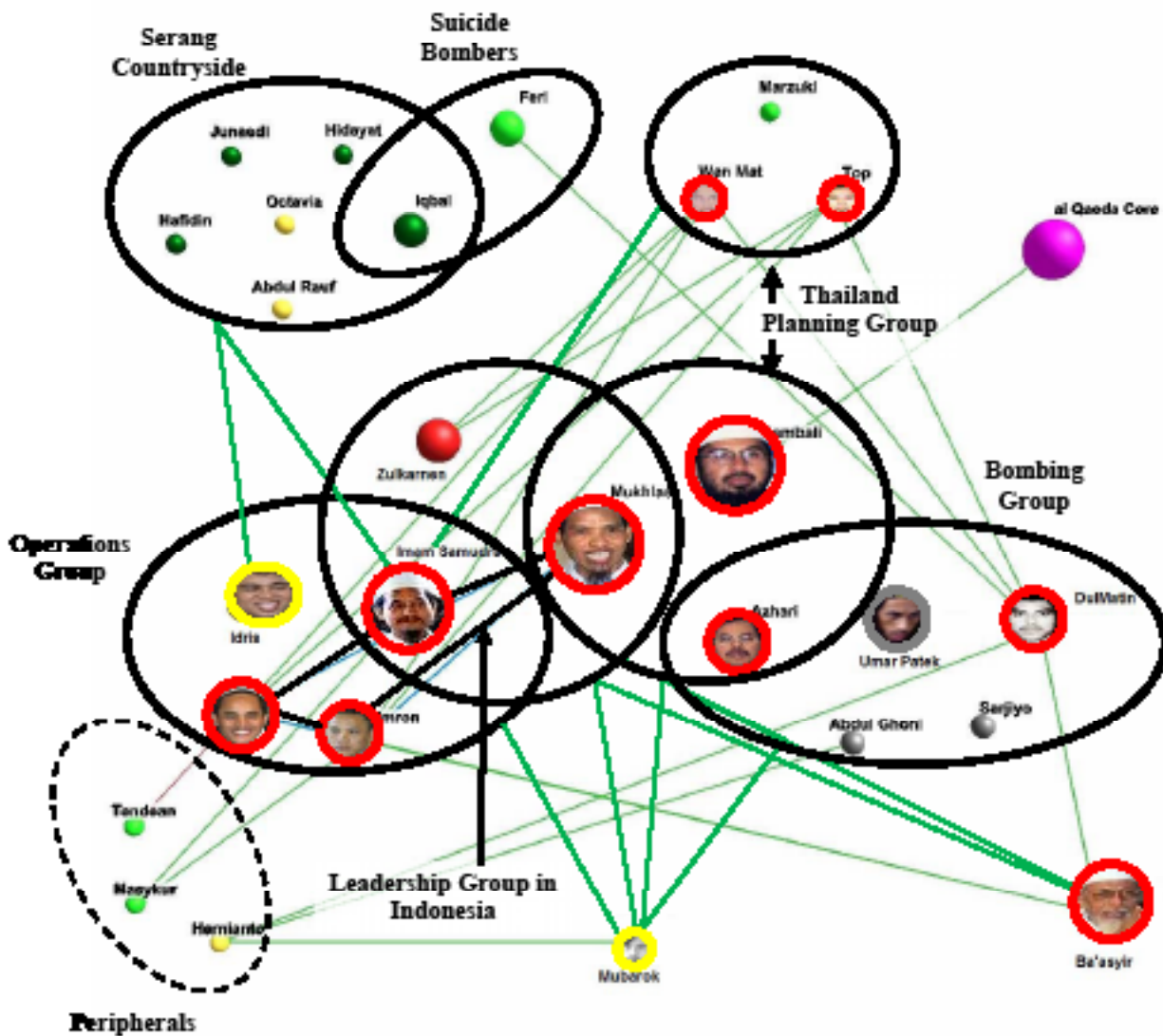
10 Chi-square = 38.39, $P < 0.0001$.

11 Wald = 13.042, 95% CI for OR = 2.98-39.73, $P = 0.0003$.

12 Chi-square = 36.166, $P < 0.0001$.

13 Wald = 9.139, 95% CI for OR = 2.3 - 49.7, $P = 0.003$.

Bali Network 2002



LEGEND			
● (Red)	= Lakman Group	○ (Dashed)	Group
● (Grey)	= Afghan Ties	○ (Solid)	Completely Linked Group
● (Yellow)	= Al-Muhajirin Ties	---	Weak Tie
● (Green)	= Other Serang Ties	---	Medium Tie
● (Light Green)	= Misc. Other Ties	---	Family / Strong Tie
● (Purple)	= al Qaeda Core		

or were associated with one of three JI-linked radical schools—al-Mukmin, al-Islam or Lukman al-Hakiem—and similar radical *madrasa* representation in other JI attacks indicates that the radical *madrasa* factor is not an isolated phenomenon or one restricted to “unimportant” regional conflicts.

Second, governments should focus both foreign aid and counter-terrorism funding on combating this small but important group of radical schools. There are numerous social entrepreneurship organizations, such as Ashoka, that act as venture capital firms and fund innovative education programs in places like South and Southeast Asia, where education is often a privilege for

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the affluent. The effectiveness of such programs should be considered, whose “soft power” to wean away potential and future candidates for terrorism reliably produces wider and longer lasting results than direct diplomatic pressure or “hard power” alternatives that often backfire or cause blowback. It may not be possible to dissuade the small group of hardcore jihadists that hold unyielding beliefs on the sanctity of their missions¹⁸; however, the number of jihadists that hold such unyielding beliefs prior to their association with radical *madrasas* or other focal points is relatively small. Accounts of the key Bali bombers show that radicalization occurred through association and attendance at radical *madrasas* and through militant training in Afghanistan and the Philippines.¹⁹ Disrupting the radical *madrasa* source through competition could eliminate key radicalization centers for young

males.²⁰

Efforts should also focus intelligence gathering on radical *madrasas* that repeatedly produce terrorists. By focusing on a select group of radical *madrasas*, anti-terrorism efforts may be able to disrupt networks that form the basis for future attacks. This includes neutralizing the hardcore group of jihadists such as Bali bombers Mukhlas and Imam Samudra, who are most often part of these networks. This is a realistic mission for two reasons. First, the number of radical *madrasas* that preach *takfiri* ideology is quite small—our estimate is that under five percent of Indonesians attend radical *madrasas*. Second, within the small pool of radical *madrasas*, it should be possible to focus specifically on those that have direct ties to JI, as these are the schools that have funneled recruits to terrorist operations from 2000-2005.²¹ Sidney Jones, Southeast Asia project director for the International Crisis Group, counts 30 such schools in Indonesia (out of about 14,000, or 2/10 of a percent).²²

By focusing government aid and intelligence gathering on a small group of radical *madrasas*, lives and interests could be saved, with little if any effect on the network of moderate *madrasas* that provide masses of people with needed education in parts of Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

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18 Scott Atran, “Global Network Terrorism,” NSC briefing, White House, Washington, D.C., April 28, 2006.

19 See Sally Neighbour, *In the Shadow of Swords: On the Trail of Terrorism from Afghanistan to Australia* (Sydney: HarperCollins Australia, 2004).

20 The Bali examples support evidence that jihadists tend to radicalize each other when they are isolated away from family and mainstream society. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

21 JI could start to recruit from non-JI affiliated *madrasas*, and if this occurs the counter-terrorism focus would have to change. Although Noordin Top, the current attack leader of JI, has successfully enlisted operatives from outside the JI cadre of jihadists, he has still shown a strong tendency to rely on JI-affiliated *madrasas*. Accordingly, this small group of *madrasas* still presents a good place to commence counter-terrorism efforts.

22 Personal interview, Sidney Jones, January 18, 2008.