

It's the *Story*, Stupid: Developing a Counter-Strategy for Neutralizing Radical Islamism in Southeast Asia

Kumar Ramakrishna*

It is increasingly accepted that real progress in the current global war against radical Islamist terrorism requires more than just application of military and law enforcement measures against individual terrorist cells, their leaders, their funding and logistics pipelines, as well as their immediate support network. Over and above these important, real-time, immediate counter-terrorist approaches, there is also a pressing need to neutralize the overarching radical Islamist ideology that animates both terrorist networks of militants, leaders and operational support cells, as well as the wider constituency of relatively less active sympathizers who more or less buy into the ideology driving the active terrorists. Failure to neutralize this ideological “Story” or mobilizing meta-narrative, would mean that terrorist networks could suffer losses at the hands of security forces, but still replenish their ranks with ideologically committed fresh recruits from the wider “constituency of hate”. The threat of radical Islamist terrorism would therefore be self-sustaining. In recent weeks implicit recognition of the need to develop counter-strategies for targeting the radical Islamist Story has been evidenced by the apparent shift in official US terminology utilized to characterize the current conflict. Instead of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), it seems that certain circles in Washington now prefer the term Struggle against Violent Extremism (SAVE). We may be tempted to suggest that US strategic planners finally seem to be shifting from a “direct”, operationally-focused counter-terrorist grand strategy against Al Qaeda and associated radical Islamist terror networks, toward an “indirect”, broader-based counter-terrorism grand strategy seeking to drain the ideological wellspring from which Al Qaeda and similar networks sustain their movements.

This essay lauds the apparent shift in US grand strategic focus, and attempts to articulate how a SAVE campaign may be devised for application to the so-called “Second Front” in the war on terror: Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, as is well known by now, not merely straddles some of the world’s most important waterways, but is home to more than 200 million Muslims, or 20 per cent of the global Muslim population. In addition, Southeast Asian Islam, impelled by the circumstances of history to be overwhelmingly progressive and tolerant, has long been seen as an excellent example of how 21st century Muslims may successfully mesh Islamic traditions with secular, pluralistic, capitalist modernity. Nevertheless, as recent

CSRC discussion paper 05/48

September 2005

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events have shown, Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, has also been the site of radical Islamist terrorist attacks, perpetrated by networks like the Al Qaeda-associated al-Jemaah al-Islamiyah (JI). In addition, an ongoing Islamist insurgency in Buddhist Thailand's largely Muslim south, although thus far not apparently fomented by JI, nevertheless seems ripe for exploitation by external jihadi elements, either from JI or even further afield. This essay argues that as elsewhere, the key to counter-terrorism success in the Southeast Asian theatre lies in targeting the JI/Al Qaeda "Story" of a global Islamic community under attack by a nefarious "Jewish-Crusader Alliance" – a euphemism for the US, Israel and allied regional governments – both Muslim and secular.

The essay develops the argument in the following fashion: the first section unpacks more systematically the assertion that it is the radical Islamist ideology or Story that represents the true centre of gravity of the terrorist threat both within Southeast Asia and elsewhere. The second section then attempts to shed light on the diversity of Southeast Asian Islam, identifying, more or less, the point at which the Islamic faith per se becomes transmuted into a politically driven if religiously-garbed ideological Story, which in some extreme cases can become further transmogrified into the violent jihadi Islamism reminiscent of JI and Al Qaeda. The third section proposes a comprehensive counter-strategy for neutralizing radical Islamism in Southeast Asia. It essentially argues for the systematic articulation of a *Counter-Story* that both delegitimizes the Al Qaeda/JI meta-narrative whilst simultaneously – over time - promoting the idea that Muslims in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere for that matter) can practise their faith, authentically and in an unfettered manner, within secular, pluralistic political systems. An effective Counter-Story, it will be seen, would need co-ordinated reinforcement from "propaganda-minded" policy actions in other spheres as well.

It's the Story, Stupid

To understand why the heart of broader, medium-to-longer term counter-terrorism approaches (as opposed to shorter-range, real-time counter-terrorist methodologies) requires targeting terrorist Stories, it is necessary to look again at the old topic of the "root causes of terrorism". To be sure, the phrase – despite its frequent appearances in both academic treatises on terrorism as well as in policy discourse - is generally over-used and in danger of losing its analytical utility. In fact some may even argue that the phrase never had any utility at all. However, it may be possible to rescue the concept of root causes by thinking in terms of a hierarchy of causes. Before doing this, however, it is necessary to more systematically unpack the phrase "root causes of terrorism". First we need to look at "terrorism" in some detail. What would be a useful "working definition" of this phenomenon? I would suggest the following: "the use or threat of use of extranormal violence against non-combatants for political purposes". The basic and irreducible essence of terrorism is, as Lenin put it long ago, "to terrorize": to create a climate within a specific community, of paralyzing, extranormal, extraordinary fear (one thinks of in this respect the gruesome beheadings of civilian hostages in Iraq), a level of fear and anxiety so great that it disrupts the normal everyday functioning of society; a level of fear so great that people are too scared to do the things they need to do on a daily basis, such as sending their children to school and to take the train or bus to work. Moreover, it would be fair to assert that, especially in today's context of religiously motivated terrorism, terrorists also generally seek to create such a level

of fear and suspicion that people begin to treat others from different ethnic or religious origins *abnormally*.

Ultimately, terrorism succeeds if and when it atomizes the community, decomposing it into its discrete units, into the individual families and clans of religious or ethnic groups living in mutual suspicion of one another; where the level of overarching social linkages across cultural, ethnic or religious lines are reduced to minimal to non-existent. If a terrorist network can attain this state of affairs and in the process induce economic paralysis - always a function of social paralysis - then that terrorist network can be said to be successful. In short, that is what is meant when it is asserted that the essence of terrorism is to “terrorize”. But there is more. If the essence of terrorism is to terrorize, then the means or methodology by which terrorism terrorizes has to be via communication, in particular, political communication. Ultimately, terrorism is a form of political communication. It is political because it represents an attempt by a terrorist network, purporting to act on behalf of the wider community it emerges from, to compel another community or target audience to change its behaviour in ways consistent with the interests and objectives of the terrorist network. Paraphrasing the German war philosopher Clausewitz, the terrorist network seeks to *impose its will* on the target audience or community.

Some elaboration is in order. A terrorist network may want, for identity reasons, to liberate a geographical region from centralized administrative and/or bureaucratic control; or perhaps a terrorist network may seek greater control over educational, linguistic and cultural affairs within a region. Perhaps the terrorists want to seize political power and replace the incumbent regime and engineer a change in relative distribution of wealth and status between different communities. Or perhaps the terrorists seek to set up a state based on a religious or ideological agenda. The point is, regardless of the actual economic, religious, ethnic, nationalistic or ideological reasons a terrorist network may have for engaging in terrorist behaviour, the ultimate motivating dynamic, or root cause, is always political. Again, paraphrasing Clausewitz, terrorism, like war, is always a continuation of politics by other means, because it is all about political communication; it is about compelling the other side to change its policy and behaviour in ways the terrorist organization wants. Terrorist networks remain intrinsically political entities even today, despite the religious/ideological veneer that seems to characterize the likes of Al Qaeda and JI.

If it is accepted that all terrorism is at root a political exercise, then, advancing a step further, it could be suggested that there probably exists a hierarchy of root causes of terrorism. Politics, defined in the classic Clausewitzian sense as the desire to impose one’s will on the other party, would be the first-order root cause par excellence: terrorism, to reiterate, despite surface appearances, is always in the end about compelling a target community to change its mind and its behaviour in ways the terrorist wants. In other words, it’s about power. But that’s not all. There also exist two more tiers of root causes, it could be said. The second-order root cause relates to what we have termed the “Story”. To recapitulate, the Story may refer to those mobilizing metanarratives or ideologies that enable terrorist leaders to offer potential recruits an explanation for their felt grievances, as well as a programme of action to ameliorate those grievances by restructuring society in accordance with a normative vision of what the “just society” ought to be. To this end a Story-as-Political-Ideology really ought to have three elements: first, a diagnosis of why society is suffering. The diagnosis may be materialistic, as in the

case of communism, which emphasized class inequalities as the wellspring of societal injustices. Or the diagnosis may be nationalistic (eg “we are not in control of our own affairs and our destiny - this is bad”). Or the diagnosis may be religious (“this society is in trouble because we have deviated from God’s path”). Second, the Story must identify a *scapegoat*: the party on which one can blame society’s ills. For the communists it was the capitalist owners of the means of production; for the Nazis it was the Jews; for the Christian Identity movement it has been the allegedly Jewish-dominated US government and for Al Qaeda and JI it is the “Jewish-Crusader Alliance”. Having a scapegoat is extremely functional as it represents an “evil” enemy against which drastic action, even terrorist action, is seen as both politically necessary and morally justifiable.

It is in this connection that the study of religious cults is so valuable, in light of today’s context of religiously inspired terrorism. Cults are very effective in generating the “us-versus-them” binary worldview that fuels radicalized ideologies and ultimately, in extreme cases, even terrorism. Religious cults foster a powerful Story of cosmic war in three ways. First, they are usually led by charismatic leaders who meet the regressive need of many people for an idealized “superparent” figure to offer guidance and meaning in life. It is telling in this regard that the Singapore government white paper on JI asserted that some JI detainees had found it “stressful” to be critical, evaluative and rational, and had relied on their JI *ustaz* to show them the path to be better Muslims. Second, religious cults insist on blind obedience to the leader’s interpretation of truth and suppress dissent. Dissenters are ostracized and precisely because cults offer their followers psychic relief through the provision of structure, certainty and social bonding with other members, it is very unlikely that dissenting voices can gain ground; they are far more likely to be smothered by a combination of intense peer pressure and groupthink processes. Third, religious cults tend to devalue outsiders. Their members tend to isolate themselves from the religious mainstream. For instance, in the Singapore JI case, members tended to meet in homes rather than mainstream mosques and they exhibited a sense of exclusivity that they alone had knowledge of the true Islam. Similarly, Christian Identity militias in the United States tend to stay in remote rural locales, aloof from the wider community and society. Physical isolation expedites the construction of an alternate reality - the Story, in short.

If the desire to compel the other party to comply with one’s agenda is the first-order root cause of terrorism and the existence of a Story justifying terrorist behaviour is a second-order root cause, what would be the third-order root cause? There are in fact third-order root causes. These would be the various, familiar grievances that many analysts have identified as drivers of terrorism in various localized contexts: relative socioeconomic deprivation; political repression; perceived ethnic and religious marginalization; revenge; and US foreign and security policy. This list is by no means exhaustive. Basically at the level of third-order root causes a multitude of factors can cause people to think that “Something is not right”, or “I am not happy” or “Things just cannot go on like this” or “Life is so unfair”. What is important to recognize is that these individuals could come from a wide cross-section of backgrounds, which makes profiling a real problem: unemployed or underemployed urban and rural workers as well as professionals, engineers, academics and other relatively well-heeled groups. What, however, ties these individuals together is that they tend to be found in a state of profound soul-searching. What in particular sparks this intense introspection is well nigh impossible to pin down. There is no such thing as the *main reason* why somebody

would become restless, dissatisfied and upset. Maybe these individuals have never been vocationally successful; maybe they are angry at the injustices they witness the members of their ethnic or religious community endure daily; maybe they can no longer stomach the subtle and not-so-subtle racism and discrimination of the workplace and the wider social milieu; maybe they feel guilty about having lived dissolute lives and now desire a “closer walk” with God. Any combination of these factors could produce the intense soul-searching and consequent emotional vulnerability.

The point is, there are many possible third-order factors that may render individuals vulnerable to the attractions of the second-order root cause: the Story. Following terrorism expert Walter Laqueur, in other words, ideology and psychology go together. And in today’s context, once these unhappy, unsettled individuals get sucked into the closed circle of the religious cult that has developed a political agenda and has religiously legitimated terrorist methods in pursuit of that political agenda (one thinks in this respect of Al Qaeda and JI), a line would have been crossed. The process of transformation of some of these individuals from relatively ordinary members of society into religiously motivated terrorists capable of killing non-combatants as well as engaging in suicide attacks would have got underway. Central to this process would be the Story. The Story, in other words, remains the centre of gravity. Clausewitz held that the centre of gravity of the enemy is always “the hub on which everything depends”. If, like some military analysts, it were accepted that what Clausewitz meant by this was that the centre of gravity refers to the focal point of a system – the point which holds the entire system in place, then it is not hard to see that it is in fact the Story – our second-order root cause - that holds terrorist “systems” of leaders, recruits and constituencies of support together. Once the Story is delegitimized and discredited, the terrorist system loses its internal coherence and disintegrates into its component parts. Paraphrasing Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign slogan, we could therefore say that in counter-terrorism the most important thing to remember is that: “It’s the Story, Stupid”.

Typologies of Southeast Asian Islam

Thinking in terms of the radical Islamist Story that animates the likes of JI in Southeast Asia signals the importance of being sensitive to the types of Islam that exist in the region. It has to be reiterated at the outset that there is no such thing as a monolithic Islam in the world today and not all Muslims are terrorists. By the same token, while most Southeast Asian Muslims are tolerant, there is a very small minority who may pose a security problem to regional states and Western interests, not so much because of the acts they may or may not have committed but because of the Story they believe in. What follows is an attempt to make sense of the various categories of Muslims resident in Southeast Asia, distinguished according to the personal religious beliefs, or on the other hand, ideological Stories, they hold about Islam. In discussing each category, one has to keep in mind that these are Weberian ideal-type analytical constructs to aid analysis. In real life, it is not impossible that, say, a Liberal Muslim may well hold similar opinions to National Jihadis on for instance the US invasion of Iraq. This does not mean that the Liberal Muslim is at all to be equated to the National Jihadi and regarded as a security threat. In fact, as we shall see, the Liberal Muslim, among others, is probably part of the long-range solution to radical Islamism in Southeast Asia.

The operating assumption here is that radical Islamist terrorism is rooted in Islamist ideology (or Story) rather than Islam per se. While all Islamists are Muslims, not all Muslims are Islamists. Islam, like all great faiths, seeks to transform the individual. Islamism, like all political ideologies/Stories, seeks the capture of state power as the prelude to transforming entire societies. This is a crucial distinction. Based on this analysis we can identify six more or less analytically distinct ideal-type categories of Muslims in Southeast Asia, strung out along a continuum, from non-conservative to ultra-conservative/extremist: Nominal Muslims, Liberal Muslims, Salafi Muslims, Islamists, National Jihadis and Global Jihadis. Nominal Muslims in Southeast Asia refer to those whose religion does not really define who they are. They eat pork without any problem, smoke and drink, may or may not fast during Ramadan and mix very easily across ethnic and religious lines. A good example of Nominal Muslims would be the so-called *abangan* Muslims, the largest group of Muslims in Indonesia. Nominal Muslims come from all class backgrounds and politically they tend to support secular political parties such as Golkar and PDI-P in Indonesia and UMNO in Malaysia. Nominal Muslims have no problem living within a secular political framework, cheek by jowl with people of other faiths and backgrounds. Nominal Muslims may even consider religious Muslims with some bemusement and the relative narrow-mindedness of the jihadis with contempt.

Moving further to the right of the continuum, we come across Liberal Muslims. In contrast to the Nominal Muslims, Liberal Muslims would consider Islam as an important part of their identity. Accordingly they would fast during Ramadan, avoid eating pork and drinking alcohol, and may dress conservatively. However, some Liberal Muslims would argue that religion is a private affair and should not be imposed on others. More than that, they would argue that Islam should be contextualized and adapted to local conditions. In this vein, Abdurrahman Wahid, more popularly known as Gus Dur, former Indonesian president, Islamic scholar and one-time leader of the rural-based and largest Muslim mass organization Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), has called for an Indonesianized Islam, and dismissed the whole notion of an Islamic State as an alien concept originating in the Middle East. Gus Dur believes that Islam and liberal democracy are compatible, and co-existence with other faiths is entirely possible. In fact, NU's Central Leadership (PBNU) recently argued that interfaith prayer was perfectly permissible, and that a "large section of NU followers and a section of its ulamas" have engaged in this activity with members of other faiths.¹ What is forbidden, in the PBNU estimation, is for Muslims, during interfaith prayer sessions, to "pray in the name of a god of another religion".² Liberal Muslim intellectuals, moreover, like Ulil Abshar Abdallah, lobby for an Islam that is dynamic, many-textured and adaptable to a variety of local contexts and even earned the ire of Islamists for promoting the idea that "Islam has many colours". Liberal Muslims, who would be considered *santri* (devout) in Indonesia, the biggest Muslim country in the world, incidentally, would vote for political parties like the NU-linked PKB in Indonesia and UMNO in Malaysia. Liberal Muslims would encourage Nominal Muslims to have a more serious attitude to Islam but they would heavily criticize the Islamist and jihadis for their rigid, dogmatic approach to Islam.

Moving even further to the right of our continuum, we would come across the Salafi Muslims. These would be Muslims whose faith is the primary determinant of their identity. In contrast to Liberal Muslims, Salafis would argue that under the concept of *tawhid* or unity of God, there is no sacred and secular divide and God's sovereignty extends to all spheres of life. They would be considerably conservative

in diet and dress (generally but there can be exceptions) and observance of rituals. In subtle contrast to the Liberal Muslims, Salafis would be relatively more attentive to policing of identity boundaries. Thus while they would interact socially with non-Muslims, there would be more of a social distance between them and non-Muslims than would be the case with Nominal Muslims and Liberal Muslims. A good example of this would be dining with non-Muslims. Salafis, more than Liberal Muslims and Nominal Muslims, would insist on using separate utensils and *halal*-only cuisine. This may prompt in some cases separate dining arrangements between Salafis and non-Muslims. Salafis, moreover, would take a sterner stance on interfaith worship than Liberal Muslims. The Salafi-oriented quasi-governmental Indonesian Islamic Council or MUI, for example, pointed out recently that in regard “to faith and religious worship, the Muslim community is obliged to adopt exclusive attitude [sic] in the sense of being forbidden to mix the faith and religious worship of the Muslim community with the faith and religious worship of other religious followers”.³ However, while Salafis emphasize the preservation of identity purity in relation to other faiths, this is not taken to extremes. Hence MUI did stress that “in regard to social problems that is [sic] not connected to faith and religious worship, the Muslim community shall adopt [sic] inclusive attitude, in the sense of engaging in social relations with the followers of other religions insofar as this does not incur mutual disadvantage”.⁴

Salafis, in a technical sense, would be considered neo-fundamentalists. That is, on balance they would emphasize personal piety rather than articulate a political programme for restructuring society according to any normative vision. In short, to Salafis, on balance Islam would still largely be constructed as a personal faith rather than an ideological Story diagnosing society’s ills, identifying a scapegoat and putting forth a political programme for remedial action. A good example of a Salafi Muslim leader is the Indonesian Muslim intellectual Nurcholis Madjid. While he calls for an Islamized Indonesia, his Islam-as-personal faith-rather-than-political-ideology standpoint was well encapsulated in his well-known slogan: “Islam Yes, Islamic Parties, No”. The Salafi movement in Indonesia would be represented by the urban-based Muhammadiyah mass organization, the second-largest Muslim mass organization in Indonesia. Politically, Salafis would vote for parties like PAN, which is affiliated to Muhammadiyah. Salafi Muslims can also be found amongst the relatively more religious right wing elements of UMNO in Malaysia. A more controversial example of a Salafi-oriented political party would be the increasingly popular PKS or Justice and Prosperity Party, led by urban middle-class university-educated professionals who, instead of calling for an Islamic State, lobby instead for “clean government” and a more morally pure society.

It is to the right of the Salafis that we encounter arguably the first stirrings of concern. This is where we encounter the Islamists: those Muslims who articulate a political agenda for restructuring society according to a normative vision they have extracted from the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. While Salafi Muslims call for greater personal piety and over time the gradual Islamization of society from the bottom-up, Islamists, while accepting, practising and endorsing the call for personal piety, would go a step further and call for the setting up of an Islamic State, so as to Islamize society from the top-down. Even more than the Salafis, moreover, Islamists exercise a great concern for policing identity boundaries with other faiths; and the social distance with non-Muslims would be considerably more in evidence. Islamists, such as Abu Bakar Bashir (or Baa’syir) of the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), it should be recognized, would hold that Muslims can only practise their faith authentically under Shariah Law, and the latter requires

the existence of an Islamic State.⁵ Similarly, in Malaysia the Islamist political party PAS has declared publicly that “establishing an Islamic government is as important as establishing the daily rituals of Islam”.⁶ This does not mean that Islamists are necessarily violent, though. In Indonesia, for example, Islamist mass organizations such as MMI in Java and KPSI in Sulawesi lobby for an Islamic State but through *dakwah* (proselytisation) means such as rallies and publications. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is, like the PKS, growing very fast in urban centres of Indonesia, and espouses radical ideas such as democracy and the nation-state as un-Islamic and the need to restore the global Islamic caliphate. HTI however remains non-violent.

While the Islamists may seem at first glance to be unproblematic because they are non-violent, the argument here is that it is precisely the Stories they espouse that raise concerns. What the Islamists possess, in far greater measure than Salafis, Liberal Muslims and Nominal Muslims, is a binary worldview dividing the world into the Darul Islam (House of Islam) and the Darul Harb (House of War). In this construction the Muslims (Us) are always to be separate from non-Muslims (Them). Worse, interfaith relations, though non-violent, would not necessarily be cordial. MMI and incidentally (and tellingly) alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir’s binary worldview in this respect is of interest. He once declared during a sermon:

God has divided humanity into two parts, namely the followers of God and those who follow Satan...God’s group are those who follow Islam, those who are prepared to follow his laws and struggle for the implementation of sharia law...Meanwhile what is meant by Satan’s group are those people who oppose God’s law, who ...throw obstacles in the path of the implementation of God’s law.⁷

Bashir was emphatic in declaring that there was no hope of conciliation between true Muslims who believed in the complete implementation of the Shariah and those that opposed this:

We would rather die than follow that which you worship. We reject all of your beliefs, we reject all of your ideologies, we reject all of your teachings on social issues, economics or beliefs. *Between you and us there will forever be a ravine of hate and we will be enemies until you follow God’s law* (emphasis mine).⁸

Rigid, binary worldviews such as the ones encoded in the Islamist Story tend to lend themselves to what social psychologists call the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE): we (Muslims) are always more righteous in relation to them (non-Muslims). Precisely because the Islamist Story lends itself to the FAE dynamic a pathway from rigid if non-violent Islamism to rigid and violent jihadi Islamism opens. This is thus the problem: Islamists today may well, in certain circumstances, become the jihadis of tomorrow.

And this is why to the right of the Islamists in Southeast Asia we naturally find the relatively small number, region-wide, of Jihadi Islamists. The latter can be divided into National Jihadis and Global Jihadis. National Jihadis have developed the Story that this process of Islamizing society and defending Islamic interests can only be attained through willingness to use force. Some National Jihadis, such as

the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) in Indonesia, therefore use force to "morally cleanse" society from social ills such as gambling, alcohol and vice. Other National Jihadis employ force to defend Muslim constituencies who are being attacked by Christian militias, such as Laskar Jihad, Laskar Jundallah and Laskar Mujahidin in the Maluku and Sulawesi conflicts in eastern Indonesia of 1999-2002. Yet other National Jihadis have sought to set up national Islamic regimes by force, such as the historic Darul Islam movement in Java, South Sulawesi and Aceh, Indonesia between 1949 and 1962 - and more recently the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Aceh province in Sumatra, Indonesia; the Pattani United Liberation organization (PULO) in southern Thailand and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the southern Philippines.

Much more recently, National Jihadi organizations seeking Islamic regime change include the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization in the Arakan region of Myanmar. It is to the right of the national Jihadis that we find the Global Jihadis: Jihadi Islamists who have developed the Story, through direct or indirect participation in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s, that local Southeast Asian jihads should be part of the overall Al Qaeda-led cosmic struggle against the "Jewish-Crusader Alliance", led by the US, Israel and their putative allies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. National Jihadis generally target the so-called "near enemy" of government and security force personnel - or Christian civilians attacking Muslims. In contrast, Global Jihadis, such as those within the Mantiqi (Region) 1 faction of JI, as well as the Mindanao-based and Al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), target Christian and Western civilians in bars, shopping malls and other public places in relatively indiscriminate fashion. It was a Global Jihadi Story that motivated the Al Qaeda attacks against the American "far enemy" on September 11 2001; it was a similar Global Jihadi Story that motivated the JI attacks in Bali (October 2002) and Jakarta (August 2003 and September 2004) in which scores of civilians, Western and non-Western, were killed. The current ASG/JI threat to urban centres in the Philippines stem from a Global Jihadi Story as well.

In sum, when one looks at Southeast Asian Islam from a counter-terrorism standpoint, it is important to know which constituencies pose the threat. While some analysts may focus attention on the overtly violent National and Global Jihadi categories of the continuum that has just been outlined and fleshed out, it is argued here that that would be too limiting. If one were to accept the premise that in counter-terrorism, the key task is to attack the Story, then one has to enlarge the analytical focus to start with the non-violent but not less problematic Islamists. This is because the rigid, binary, us-versus-them worldview embedded in the Islamist Story represents the true initial pathway from non-violent to violent extremism. Devising a counter-strategy for neutralizing radical Islamism in Southeast Asia must thus start with a Counter-Story to attack the ideological meta-narratives emanating from not just National and Global Jihadi constituencies but even the Islamist milieu as well.

The Counter-Story: Devising Strategic and Tactical Information Campaigns

It may be useful at this juncture to reiterate a few key points in the argument. First, it is crucial to distinguish Islam the great Faith from Islamism the political ideology. In our terms, Islam the Faith is not to be equated with Islamism the

Story. More than that, the thrust of the argument here is that as far as the Southeast Asian theatre is concerned, it is probably the case that apart from Nominal Islam, Liberal Islam and Salafi Islam (which is on balance, still more Faith than Story) offer the form of Islams that are worth cultivating and forging inter-faith linkages with. As a corollary, it is probably important to recognize that not just violent Jihadi Islamism, but rigid and exclusionary Islamism, despite its ostensibly non-violent veneer, can also be problematic. Muslim communities in Southeast Asia should hence be encouraged to delegitimize politics-driven Islamist Stories in all their permutations. In short, Southeast Asian Muslims should be encouraged by their own community leaders to be better Muslims, not better Islamists. To this end, it is suggested that to counter Islamist and Jihadi Islamist Stories, energy and resources should be poured into helping Southeast Asian Muslim communities develop a Counter-Story with two components: a strategic information aspect and a tactically-oriented, psywar aspect as well. The aim of the strategic information component of the Counter-Story would be to promote Liberal Islam and especially neo-fundamentalist, Salafi Islam as the “legitimate” forms of Islam endorsed by the Prophet.

While progressive Liberal and Salafi Muslim leaders and NGOs should take the lead in putting their message across, they could well be assisted to spread their message in ways that would be authentic to the urban centres and rural hinterlands of Southeast Asia. Technical and financial assistance could be channelled to friendly Southeast Asian governments and/or Muslim NGOs to set up websites and newspapers as well as producing inexpensive VCDs and DVDs containing attractively and authentically crafted messages and sermons that would strike a chord amongst audiences in urban and rural mosques, madrassas (religious schools) and pesantrens (religious boarding schools in Indonesia) as well as secular university campuses, especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand and the southern Philippines. Moreover, content analysis could be done of the exclusionist rhetoric of not just the overt Jihadi movements but also even Islamist parties and mass movements such as MMI and HTI, as well as other secular university campus-based student movements. While this may not sound politically correct, the *iron logic of the binary worldview* compels us to the conclusion that long-term success in the Struggle Against Violent Extremism requires taking the ideological battle to not just the violent extremists but the non-violent extremists as well. This is why it is imperative to close down the public space for not merely Jihadi Islamism, but Islamism in all its manifestations.

A particularly important aspect of the strategic information campaign would be not so much inter-faith but rather intra-faith dialogues between Islamists/Jihadi Islamists and Liberal/Salafi Muslims, something that is already occurring to an extent in Indonesia. Intra-faith dialogue can be very important in neutralizing the construction of binary worldviews that tend to be propagated in, for instance, certain pesantrens linked to JI, such as the Pondok Pesantren Al-Mukmin school, founded by JI spiritual leaders Abu Bakar Bashir and the late Abdullah Sungkar in the early 1970s. While the relatively cloistered Al-Mukmin teaches a curriculum that has both Islamic and secular subjects, it is the informal curriculum, or “general culture” of the pesantren, that, in combination with the general aloofness of its students from the wider community, breeds the us-versus-them worldview that lays the groundwork for future radicalization of some (if not all) graduates. Visiting journalist Tracy Dahlby, for instance, shed light on the highly xenophobic culture of the pesantren simply by glancing at students’ sandals:⁹

When we reached the front steps of the school and I bent down to remove my shoes as custom required, I couldn't help but notice that the dozens or so pairs of cheap plastic sandals scattered around the base of the stairs all had interesting little pictures or symbols of some kind etched in ballpoint pen on their insteps. When I took a closer look, however, my heart gave a thump – the little symbols were in fact crude renditions of the Holy Cross and the Star of David.

Dahlby's guide explained: "So students can always step on them".¹⁰

Hence what is needed, as Al-Mukmin alumnus, the *Jakarta Post* journalist Noor Huda Ismail argues, is greater institutionalized exposure of the members of cloistered constituencies such as Al-Mukmin to difference. This injunction translates into exposure to different interpretations of key concepts such as jihad through curricular reform, or by visiting *ustaz* (or religious teachers) from other *aliran* (theological streams); dialogues with alumni that have become successful in the secular world; and in general greater contact with and more access to information about the outside world.¹¹ The basic point in dealing with specific, physically isolated religious schools, especially boarding schools, would be to open up the vistas of its members by humanizing the Other. When Christians and Jews are seen more as fellow human beings than "disembodied" abstractions, the potential for radicalism and ultimately terrorism is decreased.¹² Comparative religions scholar Charles Kimball correctly argues that at the heart of healthy religion is the willingness of teachers and followers to ask questions, and to challenge dogma. Absolute truth claims and blind obedience are two signs of corrupted religion.¹³ Corrupted religion can easily generate Stories that encourage the insular, parochial hatred that animates National and Global Jihadis.

Strategic information campaigns designed to discredit the Islamist, National and Global Jihadi Stories by promoting Liberal/Salafi understandings of Islam as a personal faith rather than a political Story need supplementing by more tactical psywar techniques as well. To this end it would be useful to emphasize the contradictions between the words and deeds of Jihadi Islamist leaders. An excellent psywar opportunity in this connection was presented by the public trials in Jakarta of JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir in mid-2004. To aid the state prosecution, Singaporean and Malaysian authorities provided video testimony by JI militants who had been detained under each country's internal security regulations. While the testimony itself was later seen as not very useful in the case against Bashir, what seemed to be missed by analysts was the sense of betrayal on the part of the detainees. They responded with dismay to Bashir's refusal to acknowledge his ties with them, and many of them wept on tape, lamenting that they had been used and then discarded by Bashir once they were captured. Such material could and should be used by local Muslim community leaders to warn their flocks against the dangers of joining networks like JI, which have political rather than religious agendas.

Another potentially powerful psywar weapon, again emphasizing the contradiction between Jihadi Islamists' pious rhetoric and the horrifying reality of their actual operations, would be extensive publicity of the civilian, especially Muslim civilian, casualties of jihadi attacks. In this connection, it is well known that the August 2003 Marriott and September 2004 Australian embassy JI attacks in Jakarta killed more Indonesians than Westerners. This, according to Indonesian police, has led

to internal dissension within JI ranks.¹⁴ At the time of writing, two Malaysian JI bomb makers, Azhari Husin and Noordin Mohammad Top, who were intimately involved in these two attacks, are on the run in Indonesia. It is possible to exploit psywar techniques to drive a wedge between Azhari and Noordin, who are motivated by a Global Jihadi Story that tends to encourage wanton targeting of innocents, and many rank and file Indonesian JI militants, who hail from historic Darul Islam backgrounds and are motivated by National Jihadi Stories that are comparatively more focused on government and security force regime targets.

Supporting the Counter-Story: Indirect Domestic Grand Strategy

As mentioned earlier, a SAVE campaign in Southeast Asia must be fashioned as an indirect grand strategy. In the classic formulation as suggested by Andre Beaufre in the mid-1960s, while in a direct strategy military means would be the primary instrument of national policy, in indirect strategy non-military measures would be the primary instrument, with military measures playing an important but supporting role. In other words, while GWOT represents a direct counter-terrorist grand strategy, SAVE, with its emphasis on countering extremism rather than extremists, would represent a relatively more indirect counter-terrorism grand strategy. With this conceptual understanding in hand, it is possible to recognize that while articulating a systematic, well-conceived Counter-Story with its strategic and tactical information elements is key to the neutralizing radical Islamism in Southeast Asia, the Counter-Story cannot be applied in a grand strategic vacuum. It needs reinforcement by orchestrated policy activity in other domains. In the domestic domain, the credibility and authenticity of the Counter-Story in the eyes of local Muslim communities needs shoring up by appropriate “propaganda-minded” activity in both narrowly focused counter-terrorist operations as well as broader domestic governance.

It is very important that within national jurisdictions, counter-terrorist operations involving law enforcement and military personnel are conducted with one eye on their potential political impact on the wider Muslim community. This is in essence what is meant by the term “propaganda-minded”.¹⁵ In countering the radical Islamist terrorism that motivates the likes of Al Qaeda and JI, it would be wise to avoid a firepower-heavy military strategy that is likely to cause significant civilian casualties, despite the “smartness” of one’s high-technology weaponry. This is because radical Islamist ideology makes the point that one reason why terrorism against Western civilians is justified is because Western military powers appear to consider the blood of Muslims as “cheap”. To quote from a radical imam’s sermon in a Sydney mosque, someone who apparently influenced the Australian JI militant Jack Roche:

Brothers and sisters - what are you living for? What are we doing here? What’s happening in the world? Go to Iraq today and see your brothers and sisters...Their heads are being blown off, their legs are being amputated, their arms, their bodies, their meat is being thrown off their bodies...We’re too scared to go to jihad. What are you living for?

Hence any inadvertent civilian casualties from counter-terrorist operations in the region would generate what we may term political oxygen that can be exploited by eager radical Islamist ideologues to empower the Story of an Islam under siege and

having no choice but to fight back using all available means. When actual, felt experience seems to confirm the binary, zero-sum, National or Global Jihadi Story, it would not be surprising to see Nominal, Liberal and Salafi Muslims, as well as Islamists, swing well over to the extreme end of the continuum, tip over the brink and fully embrace the “logic” of Jihadi Islamism, be it National or Global. This possibility compels one to conclude that there can be no such thing as a purely military-operational solution to radical Islamist terrorism. The political dimension, in the sense of the impact of military operations on popular Muslim perceptions of national governments, must always be considered. In this connection, it should not be surprising that part of the reason why the current radical Islamist insurgency in Thailand’s south remains very serious is precisely because it has been partially fuelled by military excesses during counter-terrorist operations. In particular the heavy-handed April 2004 attack on the historic Krusik mosque as well as the deaths in security force custody, six months later, of scores of detained Muslim protestors who had been fasting during Ramadan, all constituted political oxygen that inadvertently empowered the insurgent Story of a hegemonic, Buddhist central government in Bangkok intent on keeping southern Thai Muslims marginalized economically, socially and politically. Little wonder that the insurgency seems to show no sign of abating, and worse, even seems “ripe for foreign exploitation” by Global Jihadis.¹⁶

Propaganda-mindedness is important not merely in the conduct of counter-terrorist operations aside, but even the attitudes and behaviour of non-Muslim security force personnel in direct daily contact with Muslim communities. Non-Muslim police and military should recognize that what they say or do could have wide-ranging political effects. As an example, it has been said that at times the behaviour of Israeli sentries toward Palestinians at checkpoints in the Occupied Territories tends to generate resentment and ill will. There is one documented case in February 2002 where a 20-year old Palestinian woman from al-Najah University in Nablus – Darine Abu Aisha - who felt humiliated at such a checkpoint later became a suicide bomber. Propaganda-minded military behaviour on the ground may thus be one way of avoiding “blowback” of this sort.

The credibility and authenticity of the Counter-Story relies not just on propaganda-minded counter-terrorist operations and security force behaviour, but also imaginative, propaganda-minded governance as well. The question here is how seemingly unrelated policy activity in a range of public policy domains may willy-nilly provide the mindsets and grievances (read third-order root causes) that can be securitized by skilful Islamist ideologues through integration into the Story, thereby transforming disaffected individual Nominal, Liberal and Salafi Muslims, as well as Islamists, into National and/or Global Jihadis. In this regard, propaganda-minded governance is needed to forestall the onset of grievances and states of mind that serve as meat and drink to charismatic radical Islamist ideologues. Hence propaganda-minded governance in support of the all-important Counter-Story would have to be pretty wide-ranging. It would involve ensuring, *inter alia*, the provision of broad-based universal education to foster not just the technical, professional expertise to encourage industrial development and economic growth but importantly, a liberal, critical-minded slant of mind, quite able to challenge absolute truth claims in any social sphere. Propaganda-minded governance would also involve the provision of adequate social welfare nets to encourage strong families and *eo ipso* the well-adjusted, psychologically balanced children that grow up into well-adjusted, psychologically balanced and relatively cult-resistant adults. It would require effective social redistribution programmes that maintain an

equitable distribution of wealth and public goods amongst the various ethnic/religious groups in society. It would also involve well-conceived cultural policies that safeguard the language and customs of the various communities, thereby forestalling the possibility of ideological entrepreneurs exploiting, systematizing and crystallizing widely held if inchoate community perceptions, of Muslims being “second-class citizens in their own country”. It is worth reiterating that serious shortcomings, singly or in combination, in any number of these domains could well be securitized by skilled agents provocateurs showing how these grievances or third-order root causes fit snugly into the Story. It is at precisely this point that the journey of some disgruntled individuals toward becoming terrorists begins. Care must thus be taken to ensure that as far as possible, grievances and mindsets that empower the radical Islamist Story are neutralized at source.

Supporting the Counter-Story: Indirect International Grand Strategy and Enhanced Public Diplomacy

In a globalized, wired-up world shrunken and rendered virtually real-time by satellite news television channels such as CNN and Al Jazeera, it should not be surprising that the credibility and authenticity of a Counter-Story designed to neutralize radical Islamism in Southeast Asia would be affected, sometimes seriously, by events and occurrences outside the Southeast Asian theatre. This is precisely why the injunction to be propaganda-minded has to apply not merely to Southeast Asian governments and their security forces, but also to the allies of these governments, in particular the target of radical Islamist invective and terrorism: namely the US and Israel. This would imply, for example, the importance of propaganda-minded counter-terrorist operations in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. That the “collateral damage” arising from US military strikes in these countries has deadly implications for Southeast Asian security was clearly evinced by convicted Bali bomber Imam Samudra. Samudra, when asked for reasons why he had helped plan and execute the attack that killed 202 civilians in Bali, mainly Australians, replied that it had partly been in response to the thousands of Afghan civilian deaths that had been caused by Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001. Samudra, echoing the stock Global Jihadi Storyline that the “American terrorists and their allies” must learn that the blood of Muslims is by no means cheap, pointed out later in his memoirs published at the end of 2004, that if the US military and allied forces kill Muslim civilians, then American and allied civilians in Southeast Asia would be targeted and killed too – and as we have seen, very frequently, Southeast Asian citizens get killed as well.

In general, propaganda-minded US foreign and security policy in the wider Muslim world would go a long way toward strengthening the Counter-Story campaign within Southeast Asia. At the moment this does not seem to be happening. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal that broke out in Iraq in 2004 is a case in point. The political fall-out from that terrible case of command failure will, according to even President Bush’s political advisor Karl Rove, take a generation to dissipate. The fall-out from Abu Ghraib was so global that apparently Muslims even in embattled southern Thailand were talking about it.¹⁷ In addition, soon after the April 2004 Krusik mosque attack by Thai security forces, VCDs of jihads in conflict zones like Chechnya, Palestine and Bosnia were found to be circulating in the Thai south. This author himself witnessed an Al Qaeda videotape in Arabic, found in circulation in the Thai south, employing visuals of the 12-year old Palestinian boy Mohammad

Dura who was killed along with his father in a fire fight between Israeli forces and Palestinian gunmen in 2000. It should be noted in this respect that JI often uses atrocity propaganda to empower its Global Jihadi Story and recruit new militants. It is thus vital that the extra-regional sources of political oxygen that can be used by Southeast Asian Global Jihadi networks to empower their Story be choked off. In this regard any effort by the international community, especially the US and Israel, to secure a just settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict; the political stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the settlement of open sores such as Kashmir and Chechnya, may well have salutary effects on the balance of influence between the progressive Muslim Counter-Story and the radical Islamist Story.

Finally, the Counter-Story in Southeast Asia can also be strengthened by more sophisticated and nuanced public diplomacy efforts by Washington, designed to showcase how millions of Muslims have integrated well into secular, pluralistic political systems worldwide, especially in Southeast Asia itself; as well as the myriad, genuine ways in which the West has assisted Muslim peoples in the past, viz. the Camp David accords of 1978 that paved the way for peace between Israel and Egypt; the 1995 Dayton accords that saved thousands of Bosnian Muslim lives; the NATO humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999 that saved thousands of Kosovar Albanian Muslims; and most recently, the liberation of Afghanistan from the oppressive, medieval Taliban regime.

SAVE-ing Southeast Asian Islam: The Four-Step Counter-Strategy for Neutralizing Radical Islamism in Southeast Asia

In sum, in the spirit of the apparent new US grand strategic thrust of SAVE, devising a counter-strategy for neutralizing radical Islamism in Southeast Asia requires four key steps: first, recognizing that of the Southeast Asian Muslims, the problem arises from those variants that represent more of a political ideology than a personal faith, which means that both non-violent Islamism as well as violent Jihadi Islamism ought to be stigmatized and marginalized by wider Muslim communities in the region. Second, precisely because the radical Islamist Story represents the centre of gravity of radical Islamist terrorist “systems” in Southeast Asia, what is needed above all is an indirect grand strategy that constructs a powerful Counter-Story emphasizing the relatively greater legitimacy of Liberal and Salafi Islam. In short, the Counter-Story should promote Islam-as-faith rather than Islam-as-political-ideology. Third, in order for this progressive Muslim Counter-Story to gradually gain credibility with regional Muslim audiences and thereby take root over the medium to long term, “propaganda-minded” real-time, counter-terrorist operations as well as more general governance within national domains in Southeast Asia are essential. Fourth, and finally, propaganda-minded counter-terrorist operations and foreign policy on the part of the international community toward the wider Muslim world, particularly on the part of the US and Israel, would, along with enhanced and nuanced public diplomacy campaigns showcasing the ways in which America and the West have tried to be Islam’s friend rather than the adversary caricatured by the Global Jihadis, would have salutary effects. In the final analysis, the success or failure of the SAVE campaign against radical Islamism in Southeast Asia will depend on the degree to which the progressive Muslim Counter-Story trumps the radical Islamist Story amongst regional Muslim communities. Paraphrasing Sun Tzu, this campaign will be won by wisdom, not just force alone.

Endnotes

* Kumar Ramakrishna is Head (Studies) and Associate Professor, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; email: iskumar@ntu.edu.sg. The views expressed here are personal to the author and do not represent any official position of the Institute.

¹ KH A. Hasyim Muzadi, NU Central Leadership Reaction to MUI Fatwa, 5 Aug. 2005.

² Ibid.

³ MUI Fatwa no. 7/MUNAS VII/MUI/II/2005 on “Religious Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism”, 29 July 2005.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Speech by Ustaz Abu Bakar Bashir, 1 Aug. 2003.

⁶ *The Islamic State Document* (Bangi, West Malaysia: PAS, 2004), p. 11.

⁷ Cited in Neighbour, *In the Shadow of Swords*, p. 1.

⁸ Cited in Neighbour, *In the Shadow of Swords*, p. 2.

⁹ Dahlby, *Allah’s Torch*, p. 229.

¹⁰ Dahlby, *Allah’s Torch*.

¹¹ NH Ismail IDSS Talk.

¹² J. Harold Ellens, “Revenge, Justice, and Hope: Laura Blumenfeld’s Journey”, in Ellens, *The Destructive Power of Religion, Vol. 4: Contemporary Views on Spirituality and Violence*, ed. by J. Harold Ellens (London and Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 227-235.

¹³ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 41-99.

¹⁴ A point made during a counter-terrorism seminar held between 15-16 August 2005 in Wellington, new Zealand.

¹⁵ The term “propaganda-minded” was coined by A.D.C. Peterson, the Director-General of Information Services, Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, in 1952, at the height of the insurrection of the Communist Party of Malaya against the British colonial government of the time. See Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948-1958* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002).

¹⁶ A point made to the author by a veteran Thai politician in Singapore, 20 August 2005.

¹⁷ A point made by an IDSS researcher who had been undertaking fieldwork in southern Thailand in early 2005.