

Taking stock of terrorism

Dr Greg Barton

Terrorism is a reality for Australians in a way it never used to be before the attacks of 11 September 2001. In the year that followed those attacks, there was restless speculation about the extent to which al Qaeda-style radical Islamist terrorism had penetrated South-East Asia. By the end of October 2002, after the Bali bombing, this speculation had given way to a series of increasingly disturbing revelations about the degree to which this was a problem for our part of the world.

So, two years on from the horror of watching the twin towers collapse, how has our part of the world changed? Should we be 'alarmed' as well as 'alert', or can we safely assume that the worst has now passed?

Like most truly important questions, there are no simple or conclusive answers to these questions. The best we can do is take stock of what we do know and accept that if things are not as good as we would like them to be then they are also not as bad as they could be.

The following points may help to give us a feel for the underlying issues that need to be considered:

- Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, radical Islamist terrorism has not enjoyed mass support anywhere in the Muslim world.

This probability was resoundingly reinforced in Indonesia after last October's bombing in Bali. Over the past year it has become clear that support for radical Islamism has fallen significantly, certainly in Indonesia, as ordinary Indonesians, horrified by the indiscriminate violence of the bombings, have become much less inclined to accord radical Islamists any 'benefit of the doubt'.

On the other hand, however, there are disturbing signs that the Indonesian authorities are feeling uneasy about dealing systemically with terrorism, presumably for fear of provoking a social or political backlash in the run up to the April 2004 general elections.

Clearly it is one thing to sentence the likes of Amrozi and Samudra to death by firing squad but quite another to take on Abu Bakar Bashir, his (above ground) organisation Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, and his Jemaah Islamiah-linked pesantren and its graduates. How else can you

explain the fact that Indonesia is the one country in the world where Jemaah Islamiah (JI) is not officially banned—the very nation that has suffered most from JI's indiscriminate terrorist violence?

- The attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US, 12 October 2002 in Bali and the August 2003 bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta have raised awareness about the scale of the threat presented by radical Islamist terrorism.

In Indonesia, and across South-East Asia, information that has emerged from interviews with dozens of arrested JI operatives has provided an extraordinary picture of the extent and nature of a threat previously ignored or dismissed.

At the same time, however, lingering denial persists, especially among the political elite of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, where resurgent nationalism and a weakness for blame-shifting conspiracy theories threaten to dangerously sap political will for decisive action at a time when it is most needed.

- In the year since the bombing in Bali there have been unprecedented police advances and encouraging evidence of fruitful interregional cooperation.

Nevertheless, incidents such as the escape in August of JI's master-bomber Fathur al-Ghozi from a supposedly 'high-security' cell in Manila, and the continuing operation of substantial terrorist training camps a little further south in the Philippines, are reminders of the extent of security concerns in the region.

Semi-dysfunctional states and incompetent and corrupt security institutions provide ideal conditions for terrorist groups to operate in.

- Good initial police work in Bali has led to the rapid dismantling of JI.

However, we still have no way of knowing how large JI is and what proportion of its operatives have been detected and arrested.

What we do know is that the situation today looks much worse than we imagined it to be before the 12 October 2002 attack. Not only does JI's network now appear to be more extensive and sophisticated than previously thought, its capacity to regenerate remains completely unknown.

- There has been extraordinary global cooperation in the past two years, but we continue to face difficult and dangerous circumstances and influences across the globe.

What has become clear is that such issues can no longer be considered in isolation. Radical Islamist terrorists are just as effective at exploiting globalisation as any Fortune 500 corporation, a reality that has been overlooked for too long.

- The 21st century needs to be Islam's democratic century.

We are fortunate to be living in the day of democracy, and in our lifetimes we can expect to see great advances across the world and especially

in those nations where most of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, largely poor and often downtrodden, are struggling for democratic reform of their own societies.

Unfortunately, at this moment, we are also living in the hour of radical Islamist terrorism. It will pass, but a struggle lies ahead. ✽

Dr Greg Barton is a senior lecturer in politics in the School of Social and International Studies at Deakin University in Geelong and the author of the biography: 'Abdurrahman Wahid, Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President: A View from the Inside', University of NSW Press, 2002. ♦

Conference Calendar

ADA members and other *Defender* readers may be interested in the following public conferences scheduled over the next few months:

Chief of Army Conference 2003
'Land Forces, Ways in War and Future Coalition Operations'
Adams Hall, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra
1–2 October 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6265-9624

Royal United Services Institute Triennial International Seminar
'Global Security in the New Millennium'
National Convention Centre, Canberra
9–10 October 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6266-2042 or austrusi@defence.gov.au

Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers 12th Annual Conference
'Winning in the Intelligence Game'
Rydges Lakeside Hotel, Canberra
21–23 October 2003
Enquiries: (03) 6234-1424 or www.aipio.asn.au

Australian Defence Magazine Inaugural Conference
'Doing Business with Defence'
National Convention Centre, Canberra
19–20 November 2003
Enquiries: (02) 9080-4307

Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Conference 2004
'Positioning Navies for the Future'
Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour
03–05 February 2004
Enquiries: (02) 9248-0894 or www.tourhosts.com.au/seapower2004