

To Jihad and Back

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Membongkar Jamaah Islamiyah: Pengakuan Mantan Anggota JI (Unveiling Jamaah Islamiyah: Confessions of an Ex-JI Member), by Nasir Abas, is reviewed.

Full Text (1444 words)

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To Jihad and Back Membongkar Jamaah Islamiyah: Pengakuan Mantan Anggota JI (Unveiling Jamaah Islamiyah: Confessions of an Ex-JI Member) By Nasir Abas 332 pages, Jakarta: Grafindo Khazanah Ilmu, 2005 (in Bahasa Indonesia)

Before interviewing Abu Bakar Bashir, the radical Islamic cleric, in Jakarta's Cipinang prison in August, I imagined an angry firebrand under heavy guard. Instead, I found a smiling, bespectacled lecturer eating dates and surrounded by dotting acolytes. "It's true there's a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West," he explained politely, "because Islam and infidels, the right and the wrong, cannot live together in peace. The jihad against the Jews and Christians is destiny." The alleged spiritual leader of the Southeast Asian terrorist organization Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), Bashir had just received word that Indonesia's Justice Ministry would cut four and a half months from his 30-month jail sentence for "inspiring" the 2002 Bali bombings, an attack that killed 202 people. But when the conversation turned to his former student and onetime top JI commander, Mohammed Nasir Abas, Bashir growled, "He's a betrayer, a betrayer."

Bashir's feelings toward Abas aren't entirely unreasonable. The 36-year-old Abas testified against the man he continues to call "teacher" in Bashir's 2004 trial, tagging the cleric as the "emir of JI" and telling the court that Bashir had met with Osama bin Laden and had sanctioned the killing of non-Muslims. Abas, after serving 10 months' jail time for immigration-related charges, struck a deal with prosecutors and walked free. If that didn't cement Bashir's feelings toward his former comrade-in-arms, Abas's new book certainly will. Abas has penned his own terrorist tell-all, *Membongkar Jamaah Islamiyah*: Pengakuan Mantan Anggota JI (Unveiling Jamaah Islamiyah: Confessions of an Ex-JI Member), in which he recounts his experience as a senior operative for JI.

Published in Bahasa Indonesia in July with an English translation forthcoming, the book has made Abas something of a celebrity in Indonesia, though his critics echo Bashir's judgment that the book is merely intended to please the police and make money. Unveiling Jamaah Islamiyah

provides a glimpse inside that rarest of secret societies, describing the structure, strategy, and ideology of JI—a highly compartmentalized organization bonded in trust by cross-cutting ties of friendship, kinship, and discipleship—tracing its violent origins from the ranks of the mujahideen to the planning and execution of military operations against "enemies of Islam" across Southeast Asia.

Yet Abas hasn't turned his back on JI entirely. He continues to argue that JI shouldn't be outlawed, because he claims that many within the organization reject al Qaeda's vision of global jihad. In fact, even when I met with Abas this summer, he still refrained from fully condemning his former leader. "I cannot say that [Bashir] lied or ordered bombings," says Abas, "but he ... did nothing to stop Hambali [a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war, now in U.S. custody] from planning suicide attacks and killing civilians, including innocent Muslims. That's one of the reasons I quit JI."

Abas claims that he didn't change so much as did JI's leadership. When JI was established in the mid-1990s, Abas was asked to swear an oath of loyalty to the new organization, and to obey its 44-page manual and constitution, called the General Guidelines for the Jemaah Islamiyah Struggle. Abas says it allows JI to conduct itself as a "secret organization" by concealing its doctrine, membership, and operations from public view. But he argues that it does not sanction lying to the Muslim public. When Bashir, Hambali, Bali plotter Imam Samudra, and others began to misguide the community of believers, twisting Islamic teachings to feed on the public's fears, Abas says he had to leave. "Not one verse in the Koran contains an order for Muslims to make war on people of another religion," Abas writes. "[The contrary belief] has only created discord in the Muslim community and has led non-Muslims to regard Islam as sadistic and cruel." He reasons that, for suicide bombers who believe that what they're doing is sacred, perhaps the best way to turn them from violence is to religiously promote competing sacred values.

While opposing JI's justification of violence against non-Muslims and secular-minded Muslims, Abas's book stops short of discussing other key aspects of JI's activities, such as how JI became affiliated with al Qaeda's dreams of global jihad, including suicide bombings and tolerance for killing other Muslims and noncombatant civilians. But in our talks, Abas filled in some of the blanks. As he tells it, Hambali was the JI lieutenant most attuned to Osama bin Laden's vision of global jihad against "the far enemy" (Jews and Crusaders) and closely associated with al Qaeda's operations chief and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Hambali was apparently eager to make Southeast Asia part of the terrorist movement's frontlines and began to send jihadis to fight Christians on Indonesia's Maluku islands in 1999. Encouraged by his success in heating up the Maluku crisis, Hambali decided to extend his brand of jihad to all of Indonesia and then to "globalize" the jihad by enlisting suicide bombers to hit Western targets and interests (including the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2003 attack on Jakarta's J.W. Marriott hotel).

Abas tells of his own initiation into jihad, following a secular education in Malaysia until the mid-1980s. His path included a religious epiphany at 16 after hearing a reading from the Koran, a charismatic mentor's urging him to attend training camps in Afghanistan to become an arms instructor and religious teacher, and Bashir's appointing him as one of JI's regional leaders. His account could give counterterrorism officials insight into how bright and earnest youth turn to violent jihad. And that is where the book's true service lies—not so much in the description of the

inner workings of a terrorist organization (although such details are illuminating)-but in the repentant account of how youthful idealists can be hijacked into becoming terrorists.

But all the lessons that might be gleaned from Abas's story will be lost if governments refuse to deal with their homegrown terrorists. In Indonesia, for example, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono says he cannot submit legislation to parliament proscribing JI because of insufficient "proof" it exists. The speaker of Indonesia's parliament, along with many of the country's Muslim leaders, has even visited Bashir in jail to show solidarity with this "victim" of pressure and interference by the United States and Australia. All this, after JI operatives plotted to assassinate the previous president, nearly cut off the head of the future defense minister, and are widely believed to have carried out the October 2005 Bali bombings that killed 22 people. Indonesian intelligence has also authenticated a 1998 letter in which Bashir declared he was acting on bin Laden's behalf to advance "the Muslim world's global jihad."

Why do so many people-and governments-seem to tolerate terrorism? Perhaps only because support for American policy appears to them even more risky. According to the Pew Survey of Global Attitudes, in June 2005, 80 percent of Indonesians feared an attack on their country by the United States. These sentiments no doubt feed the willingness of the two out of every three Indonesians who would like to see Islam play a greater role in personal and national life. But they are also associated with tolerance for a broader spectrum of coreligionists, including militant radicals, and a readiness to amplify any slight against an Islamic leader or nation into a perceived attack upon the whole Muslim world.

Ironically, increasing democratization of Indonesian politics has weakened resolve to deal with terrorism. Militant jihadi groups, as well as mainstream Islamic parties that seek to transform Indonesia into a state ruled by sharia, were banned from serious public politics until Suharto's downfall in 1998, but their support is now critical to a government in which no party controls more than 25 percent of parliament (Yudhoyono's party has 8 percent).

Abas still dreams of a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia as the best way to bring lasting justice and peace to the region. He now forswears violence except on the battlefield. Abas agrees that the Iraq war and relentless U.S. and Australian pressure on Indonesia's government to crackdown on JI play into violent hands. Mostly, he stresses that "violence thrives in confusion and Indonesia is confused; it doesn't know if it wants to be a Muslim state or not."

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