

# TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

## A Study Guide

By Gerald L. Houseman

**T**errorism in Southeast Asia is a topic that rapidly changes in dynamics, character, and factual base. Terrorist organizations and concerns, by their very nature, are shadowy, hidden, and certainly mysterious. Alliances and arrangements within their worlds are always shifting. Leaders come and go in quick succession because they are caught, killed, or replaced; and the strategies, tactics, and even the goals of such movements are never totally clear. This is demonstrated in Southeast Asia by the known existence of three overriding but often conflicting goals of the movements: (1) the setting up of theocratic Islamic states, (2) the establishment of units within larger states, such as the Philippines, that would supposedly support Islamic goals and needs to a greater extent than is now the case, and (3) the founding of a massive caliphate that would include all of present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, as well as Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines.

The frustrations of study and research in this field are constant, for no observer seems able to draw up a complete nor satisfactory account of much that is occurring within such organizations at any given time. Terrorism is clandestine; often the only way the outside world finds out what's occurring is because the terrorists bother to share grainy videotapes or, sometimes, talk after they have been arrested. International links with other terrorist organizations are suspected and often verified, but it seems clear that such groups do not always work together, and when they do, they may accept only a portion of the creeds or goals of the other. We know, to cite one prominent example, that the Moro Islamic National Front, which has carried out guerrilla operations in the Philippines for many years, does not accept the idea of a broad-based regional caliphate.

We can agree that the goals, tactics, and movements of terrorists ought to be more obvious, but there is no consensus, in the case of Southeast Asia, on what these exactly are. The experts certainly do not agree among themselves and can even be misleading. One prominent observer, for example, provided a guest editorial in an internationally-known newspaper four years ago proclaiming that a serious rise of terrorism in Indonesia, the region's largest country, was unlikely; it is clear that events occurring since then have changed his mind.

It is entirely possible, despite these problems, to learn about and even to master the known information about terrorism in Southeast Asia. The importance of this part of the world is a given, whether the reference point is population size (Indonesia for example is the world's fourth largest country), resources (which include vast tracts of rainforest, productive agriculture, petroleum, a massive work force available to produce manufactured goods, commercial markets,

(both real and potential), or strategic importance (emphasized by a location at the crossroads of the world's shipping routes).

At the outset of any study of the region, a few assumptions must be challenged or at least put into perspective by any thoughtful observer. Certainly not all terrorist acts committed in these countries are the work of Islamists; Christians in Indonesia and the Philippines, and Buddhists in Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand have been known to be behind bombings and other egregious events, and there are ongoing religious and politico-religious rivalries, sometimes bitter in nature, in almost all of the area's eleven countries. It is also clear that the vast majority of the peoples of Southeast Asia are moderates in both their political and religious temperaments. They often, or even usually, live side by side on a daily basis with people of different faiths and ties, and would rather sell chickens, cloves, or yams than fight about theology or politics.

There are plenty of books, articles, and Web sites available to anyone wishing to take up this subject, though there are substantially fewer sources than exist in other domains of politics or international relations. More general publications and broad-interest organizations provide information and research leads as well.

Good starting points are the Web sites of the Center for Security Policy ([www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org](http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org)) and the Center for Defense Information ([www.cdi.org/terrorism](http://www.cdi.org/terrorism)). Both have somewhat partisan viewpoints on defense and foreign policy issues, but both must deal with more or less the same sets of facts and, of course, can be used to balance each other when one is seeking an overall perspective. The CDI, which includes high-ranking retired military officers in its leadership, is quite critical of overall Pentagon policy and, it is fair to say, sees a need for a variety of changes and cuts in the defense budget. The CSP, on the other hand, is headed by Frank Gaffney, who was a top adviser on defense policy in the Reagan Administration; it can generally be assumed that the CSP prefers to err on the side of caution and readiness.<sup>2</sup> The usual sources for library holdings, magazines and journals, and book publishers can also be employed initially to get a grip on this subject.

A few periodicals are vital for anyone who wishes to take up this field. An obvious candidate is the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, available only to subscribers in its Web site and hard copy formats; *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, especially in its Weekly Edition format, is available to subscribers in Web and hard copy, but non-subscribers can buy the hard copy format. The "Asia" section published weekly in *The Economist* can be a fruitful source, though this also is not generally available on the Web. Standard-fare news magazines are of limited use, but there are any number of newspa-

pers available, mostly online, that can provide valuable information. Among these are the *Straits Times* (Singapore), which is government-controlled but generally reliable on international topics, the *Bangkok Post*, *South China Morning Post* (published in Hong Kong, and a close observer of Southeast Asia), *Jakarta Post*, and *Kompas*, which may lay claim to being Indonesia's leading daily, whose English edition is displayed at the touch of a button. The *Philippines Post* has a terrorism-related article in almost every edition.

Australian dailies such as *The Age*, *The Australian*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* occasionally provide data not found elsewhere. Less useful, though they are nonetheless possibilities from time to time, are such dailies as the *New Straits Times* (Malaysia; government-controlled) and the *Vientiane Times* (an American-based follower of events in Laos.) *The New York Times* and some other dailies also serve their purposes, both in terms of reportage and in editorial-page content.

Academic and specialized journals are indispensable for in-depth treatments of this subject, especially when it is borne in mind that terrorism is a phenomenon of truly international scope. (Some Philippine and Indonesian terrorists have been trained in Afghanistan and other far-flung locations, for example, and such ties can hardly be ignored.) The leaders are *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, but there are many others of significance, such as *World Politics*, *International Affairs*, *World Policy Review*, *World Today*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *Critical Asian Studies*, and the *Journal of Asian Studies*; the latter is more likely to provide understanding of cultures and societies than updates on terrorism, but it is certainly beneficial to know this background.

The University of Oregon Library provides a good introduction to anyone undertaking any branch of Southeast Asian studies (libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/intlstudies/seasia); and though this one appears uniquely accessible, there are several others of outstanding quality. Among many of the more fugitive resources, the Van Zorge Heffernan Report, available online at least in terms of its "headlines," provides up-to-the-minute analyses of Indonesia. A singular study that has made a unique contribution is Zachary Abuza's *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003). Abuza, like many of the sources listed above, reminds us that Southeast Asia contains more Muslims than any of the world's regions; and even from its distant location, the United States and its citizens are vitally and most seriously affected by developments there. ■

## NOTES

1. Harold Crouch, "Qaida in Indonesia? The Evidence Doesn't Support Worries," *International Herald Tribune*, October 23, 2001.
2. The author notes, but is less familiar with, the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), which is generally conservative.

**GERALD L. HOUSEMAN**, Professor Emeritus in Political Science, Indiana University, is the author of *Researching Indonesia: A Guide to Political Analysis* (Mellen Press, 2004) and eight other books. He has lectured and taught in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, and Britain and is now mostly involved with economic development issues.

**Q:**

**BY 2020, WHOSE ECONOMIES ARE EXPECTED TO BE BIGGER THAN THOSE OF EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS PUT TOGETHER?**

**A:**

**THE NATIONS OF ASIA.\***

It's important to keep your class informed about the latest Asian economic trends.

And now you can do that with NBR/Asia from public television's *Nightly Business Report*.

Timely videos on Asian economic and financial issues are available to high school teachers for classroom use at no charge. Each tape contains reports from Tokyo, Beijing and other Asian financial centers, presented as they aired on *Nightly Business Report* a few weeks earlier.

And to help you find a way to work these reports into your curriculum, supporting lesson plans will be available on *Nightly Business Report's* website, [www.nbr.com/asia](http://www.nbr.com/asia)

For more information on the series of videos for the current school year (to be delivered in October, December, February and April), go to [www.nbr.com/asia](http://www.nbr.com/asia)

While you're there, you can sign up for this free service. Don't delay...tape supply is limited.

**NIGHTLY  
BUSINESS  
REPORT**  
25 Years on Public TV

**Where America Turns  
for Business News**

*NBR is produced by NBR Enterprises/WPBT2 Miami  
Project made possible by grants from The Freeman Foundation.*

\*source: *Asia Rising* by Jim Rohwer