

Bilveer Singh – *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists*

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The terrorist attack on the New York twin towers on 11 September 2001 has resulted in a number of works on terrorism committed by Muslims in the name of Islam. Bilveer Singh's book is one of those which try to explain the radicalisation of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia – termed as 'talibanisation'. Since the Bali attacks on 12 October 2002, a number of articles and books have been published examining the nature and extent of the militant Islamic threat in the region, and Bilveer Singh's *Talibanization of Southeast Asia* falls into this category. The book is, of course, not the first of its kind in trying to understand the question of the emergence of militant Islam in the region. It is extremely informative, especially on Jemaah Islamiah (JI), as the author has collected and put together various information and earlier writings on the issue, as evident in the bibliography, chronology and appendixes provided.

In the first chapter, the author provides an explanation on the meaning of 'talibanisation' as he intends to use in the book. For the purpose of the study, he defines 'talibanisation' as encompassing "Islamist political endeavours, including the resort to violence and terrorism that is legitimized through selective reading and interpretation of Islam" (p. 14). He adopts the concept of 'talibanisation' as a socio-political phenomenon to explain the political struggles that are taking place in Southeast Asia where there is a clear nexus between religion and terrorism. Bilveer even includes the quest for greater autonomy in southern Thailand, Aceh separatist movements as part of this 'talibanisation' endeavour.

The next chapter describes the development of Islamist extremism and jihadism in Southeast Asia, focusing on the Indonesian JI and several movements considered as 'jihadi-oriented movements' such as Darul Islam, the Aceh separatist movements, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MORO Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Muslim separatist groups in Thailand and the Rohingya struggle in Myanmar. These are considered as the 'old' national jihadi movements. Bilveer contends that the "Talibanization of Southeast Asia is riding high on the birth of many new Islamist groups that came into being in the 1980s and 1990s". The new movements are distinguished from the old with their intense military, extremism and increasing propensity to resort to or condone violence to achieve their political goals. The rise of the 'new Jihadis' is attributed to the disillusionment of Muslims with the international system and failure of national governments

to address grievances of these groups. The author also contends that “while all, if not most, Islamist organizations have seen the intensification of radicalism be it in Malaysia, southern Thailand and southern Philippines, it is in Indonesia that the process of Talibanization is most acute and apparent”. He attributes this to both internal and external developments. After explaining at length the development, the threat of radicalisation to the extent of ‘talibanisation’, Bilveer concludes that despite the widespread experience with Islamist radicalism in Southeast Asia, the region “succeeded in maintaining a balance in favour of moderate Islam and kept the ensuing radicalism at bay”. This is on a more positive note than the alarming subtitle of the book might suggest.

The third chapter focuses on the rise of JI as Southeast Asia’s leading transnational terrorist organisation. It provides the reader with a detailed survey of the origins, evolution, development and the organisation of the JI and its connection to Al-Qaeda. The author considers “the fact that the United Nations and a number of countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, and even the European Union have listed JI as a terrorist organisation justifies analyzing the origins of this largely elusive organisation, believed to be behind most of the major terrorist activities in the Southeast Asian region since the late 1990s.” In this chapter, Bilveer also reproduces arguments forwarded by some denying the existence of JI. Abu Bakar Baasyir has argued that “the notion of *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) as a terrorist organisation is a fiction created by the United States, Israel and countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore that have always expressed enmity towards Islam”. This conspiracy theory is also shared by some who believe that “JI is not real, but only a fictitious organisation set up by Malaysian and Singaporean governments to silence the criticism of Islamic radical groups in their respective countries”. To support this argument, Bilveer also cites a number of scholarly writings that have alluded to the intelligence–terrorist nexus in the case of JI. In response to the lengthy discussion on the doubt about the existence of JI, Bilveer finally concludes following a brief explanation that “it is difficult to deny the existence of JI”.

The fourth chapter on “Counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia” is interesting for the light it sheds on the difficulty of combating terrorism in Southeast Asia. The author contends that “even though ASEAN has committed itself to combating the scourge of terrorism, its ability to do so has been greatly hampered by growing differences among its member-states over various issues” (p. 130). Among them, the different approaches adopted by member states to tackle the menace, the growing political clout of political Islam in Indonesia, and the “most serious obstacle in stamping the terrorist threat in the region has been the presence of a large Islamic community that is not always supportive of government policies as far as antiterrorism is concerned” (p. 130). However, the book does not provide the relevant and necessary details of policies and examples of how and where such obstacles emerged.

In the fifth and concluding chapter, Bilveer reviews the failure of Southeast Asia's war on terror against Islamist extremism and its prospect. His conclusion echoes the common perception that counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia can be won and lost. Quoting a Singapore official spokesperson, the book states that "JI is believed to have been stripped of its ability to strike big anytime soon", but at the same time "it would be naïve of us to believe that we are out of the woods". Following the 9/11 incidents, several governments in Southeast Asia began a crackdown on JI which resulted in the organisation being weakened and split up, even if its primary infrastructure remains intact. The author also argues that "most governments in Southeast Asia increasingly have begun paying attention to various Islamic-related educational institutions and other organisations that are believed to have acted as 'feeders' in providing potential recruits to the JI" (p. 137). They include institutions such as the *pesantren* in Indonesia, religious schools in Malaysia and the *pondok* schools in Thailand. Southeast Asian countries have also collaborated with external powers, such as the United States and Australia, in the war on terror in the region.

While the book makes a useful reading for those looking for extra details on the activities of JI and the threat the organisation may pose to Indonesia and Southeast Asia, it does not sufficiently analyse the conditions which make such a situation possible in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia. Equating the degree of religiosity of Muslims in Southeast Asia with propensity towards terrorism reduces the credibility of the book. The book is mainly devoted to the activities and threats of JI, but it would be misleading to suggest that JI represents the beginning of the process of the so-called 'talibanisation' of Southeast Asia. While JI can be taken as a recent example of the dangers of Islamic extremism, many other movements mentioned in the book did not have their origins in religious extremism or fundamentalism. *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia* provides a catchy title, although it does not quite catch the real situation on the ground as far as the development and threats of Islamic extremism in Southeast Asia are concerned. The book reminds the reader of other works dealing with militant Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, but with less sensationalised titles. It is informative on JI, but for those who are looking for a more intellectual and honest explanation of the nexus between Islam, political violence and terrorism in Southeast Asia, the book generates more questions than answers. It has not exhausted the efforts at providing a more satisfactory answer to why and how Southeast Asia may fall victim to 'talibanisation'. A sense of history on the part of the author might have led him to avoid the label of 'talibanisation' in discussing the rise of militant Islam and its activities in Southeast Asia. One might as well heed the advice that Islamic politics in Southeast Asia must be viewed within its own specific context and not seen as part of the process of 'talibanisation'. Perhaps it is more important not to jump unprepared onto the fashionable bandwagon of the worldwide alert in the war on Islamic extremists and terrorism.