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August 17, 2003

THE CAPTURE OF HAMBALI: GLASS HALF EMPTY, GLASS HALF FULL

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The recent capture of the Indonesian terrorist Riduan Isamuddin ("Hambali") is another important link in the chain of impressive accomplishments by the American Administration in its war on terror. Hambali is undoubtedly a key figure in the terror system operated for more than a decade by al-Qaeda and its offshoots. Hambali is chief operations officer of Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the most active terrorist organization in south-east Asia. But he also personifies the dense network of contacts linking various Islamic terror groups and the various methods and channels available to Osama bin Laden to manage the terror system aimed at realizing his aim of establishing a world-wide Islamic khalifate.

Hambali got involved in international terrorism in the mid-1990s as a protégé of Ramzi Yusef, who was responsible for the first bombing of the World Trade Center in February 1993. Together with Khaled Shaykh Muhammad, the operational overseer of the September 11 attacks, he planned the operation against a dozen American airliners flying from Asia to the United States that was foiled by Philippine security services in early 1995. Hambali, like Khaled Shaykh, escaped from custody and went on to build a career in international terrorism. The two played a central

role in the planning and coordination meeting of the global terror system held in Kuala Lumpur in early 2000. Among participants in that meeting were those responsible for planning and carrying out a number of highly lethal attacks, including two of the 9/11 suicide pilots, the commander of the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, and planners of the spectacular bombings in Singapore (foiled in December 2001) and Bali.

Hambali was key to the extensive system of ties linking al-Qaeda to various terrorist networks supported by it. That network is based on the common background of the "Afghan alumni" (graduates of the 1979-89 war and of the training camps set up in Afghanistan after the war), or the personal connections between members of the different organizations, on the common commitment to the path of jihad, and on the financing supplied by al-Qaeda to other groups.

Hambali himself had a close personal link with bin Laden and his deputy, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. He was entrusted by them with managing the world jihad system in south-east Asia and Australia and was aided, in turn, by his associate of long standing, Khaled Shaykh, who helped him with operational planning and financing. These sorts of ties render meaningless the question of al-Qaeda's actual involvement in

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

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attacks perpetrated by terrorist organizations and networks linked to it and identified with it. Most of the major international terrorist attacks perpetrated (or planned and foiled) in recent years – in Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Australia – involved fundamentalist Islamic organizations or networks linked to al-Qaeda through operational coordination and/or financing and other logistical support. And Hambali was involved in all of them.

The same model apparently exists on other continents. In Africa, there is an ongoing hunt for al-Qaeda activists such as Fazool Abdallah, who commanded the attack on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and was mentioned as the man responsible for the attack on the Paradise Hotel in Mombassa and the abortive attempt to shoot down an Arkia airliner in November 2002.

Most of the senior operational commanders involved in terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda and its offshoots are now behind bars as a result of the global counter-terrorist campaign waged with such intensity and cooperation by the U.S. and its allies. To the casual observer, such a campaign would appear to be self-evident. In fact, it involves an exhausting and complicated intelligence and operational effort. And the fact that the heads of al-Qaeda, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, are still at large and free to pursue their aim of globalizing Islamic terrorism, serves as a continuous prod to those engaged in the war on terror to step up their effort.

The main explanation for what is seen as the puzzling failure to capture them is that the heads of al-Qaeda, unlike the senior operational activists, apparently do not move around in "the field" but instead manage the terrorist system from safe havens somewhere in topographically and physically remote areas of Afghanistan or Pakistan, under the protection of local warlords in "non-governed regions" outside the reach of the central authority.

Capturing or liquidating the leaders of al-Qaeda

is an essential condition for defeating it and the organizations it supports. But even the neutralization of al-Qaeda and the arrest or elimination of senior leaders like Hambali or even bin Laden himself will not mean an end to international terrorism. To change the strategic status of terrorism in the international system, the U.S. and its allies need to change the rules of the game with respect to the tolerance shown for terrorism as a tool by which states and organizations advance their political interests. That means a comprehensive and coordinated effort to force a drastic change in the patterns of behavior of traditional state sponsors of terrorism, especially Iran and Syria, as well as of those termed "failed states" because of their refusal to act against terrorist organizations using the territory of those states as if it were their own. States like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Somalia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand and others have largely "failed" to exercise their sovereignty, assert their authority and deny the use of their territory to terrorists not because of an inability to do so but rather because of unwillingness to do so for political reasons.

Forcing these "failed states" to meet their responsibilities and prevent the "leakage" of terrorism from them is one of the central challenges posed by the events of September 11. The capture of Hambali, along with the trial and sentencing of those who carried out the terrorist attack in Bali, provide concrete evidence that "failed states," with active American support, multilateral cooperation among security services, and world-wide political backing, can create a hostile operating environment for terrorists and their supporters. Additional measures in the areas of intelligence, law enforcement, financing and diplomacy can further constrain the ability of terrorists to operate and limit the benefits to them and their patrons of trying to act – and bring about even greater gains in the struggle against this phenomenon.