

How Bin Laden set up shop in southeast asia

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Reports that the U.S. is considering expanding its operations against Al Qaida in places as far-flung as the Philippines and Malaysia underscore the global reach of Osama Bin Laden's networks. A simple glance at the travel itineraries of many key Bin Laden operatives is enough to confirm that their networks have been extremely active in the Muslim regions of the Pacific Rim. And the pattern of anti-American protests in the region following the air strikes on Afghanistan — as well as some longstanding and extremely brutal local Islamic insurgencies with ties to Bin Laden's networks — suggests that Al Qaida has some significant support in Southeast Asia.

How did Bin Laden get into Southeast Asia?

Al Qaida's links with Southeast Asia originate, like Al Qaida itself, in the Afghan war. Afghanistan's jihad against the Soviet invaders drew Islamic radicals from all over the world to Western Pakistan, where they were armed, trained and organized to fight alongside the Afghan mujahedeen warriors. A handful of those volunteers came from distant Malaysia and the Philippines. Many of the international volunteers for the Afghan jihad later formed the basis of Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaida network, and some of its earliest supporters came from Southeast Asia.

The affinities created in Afghanistan were clearly visible in the case of Ramzi Yousef, who bombed the World Trade Center in 1993. Yousef, a Pakistani jihad vet, spent time after that war in the Philippines with local insurgents who had fought in Afghanistan and were now putting their skills to work fighting for an Islamic state in the southern islands of the Philippines. Yousef had even planned attacks on U.S. airliners there, and the Filipino jihad vets who formed the Abu Sayyaf guerrilla group never forgot their old comrade — one of their prime demands when they kidnapped a group of Western tourists last year was for the release of Ramzi Yousef.

Terrorism's Ivy League

The Afghan jihad may have started the process of internationalizing radical Islamic politics, but Osama Bin Laden has consciously and carefully worked to extend it. His training camps in post-Soviet Afghanistan became a kind of international university of terrorism, offering courses in murder and mayhem to which radical Islamic movements all over the world were invited. And he also provided financial support to some of these regional insurgencies in order to cement ties and win their loyalty. Besides enabling their local struggles, his objective was also to align them with his global jihad against America, thereby greatly extending his operational reach. Al Qaida-linked terror operations have been carried out by Saudis, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Egyptians, Algerians, Lebanese, Mauritians, Palestinians and more. Many of these men were originally affiliated with a specific national organization such as Egypt's Islamic Jihad or Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, but their allegiance then shifted to bin Laden. Now security officials fear that Bin Laden may be able to call for similar support from some of his Asian allies.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Phillipines

While radical Islamic groups remain a fringe element in the Southeast Asian societies in

which they operate, their power and influence in Indonesia and Malaysia appear to be growing. The Asian economic meltdown has traumatized those societies and has fueled deep nationalist resentments of the United States. In Indonesia, it also ushered in a period of volatile political power struggles and secessionist and inter-communal violence. That has created an atmosphere fertile for the Islamists to exploit skepticism over U.S. intentions in the war on terrorism. Although they represent no more than 12 percent of the Muslim population, Indonesia's radical Islamists are actively recruiting young men for training for jihad. President Megawati Sukarnoputri has plenty of political enemies among the mainstream Muslim parties that tried to keep her out of power, which leaves her having to tread warily while the campaign in Afghanistan continues.

In Malaysia, local self-styled "mujahedeen" groups remain small but nonetheless worrisome, particularly because of their suspected links with the country's largest opposition party. While the government of Mahathir Mohammed supports the U.S. anti-terror effort — though not the bombing in Afghanistan — the opposition responded by calling for jihad against the U.S. Mahathir is not in any immediate danger, but as a long-time denouncer of the U.S. himself, he can't be seen to be too supportive.

Following bin Laden's footsteps

Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines pose no threat to the stability of the government in Manila, and their kidnapping and banditry makes them unpopular even in the mostly Muslim southern islands. Still, the fact that the government of President Gloria Arroyo moved quickly to deny that the U.S. would play any direct military role in the Philippines underlined her caution over being too closely identified with the U.S.

The links between Al Qaida and many of these locally-based Islamic radical groups may well be tenuous. But Bin Laden has clearly divided the world up into a number of operational theaters for purposes of jihad — Afghanistan and central Asia; Europe and the United States; the Middle East and East Africa; the Balkans (where he first established a presence by sending volunteers to fight the Serbs in Bosnia) and Southeast Asia. In order to counter and defeat him, the U.S. may well have to mirror his actions.

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