

Interview with a Former Terrorist: Nasir Abbas' Deradicalization Work in Indonesia

By Nick O'Brien

A PROBLEM WITH countries that suffer terrorism is that they often do not understand the enemy and therefore lack the framework to counter the terrorist threat. Understanding how and why people are radicalized to the extent that they want to kill others and sometimes themselves is fundamental to countering terrorism. Once the radicalization issue is understood, steps can be taken to introduce deradicalization and counter-radicalization strategies and policies.

The best way to understand the radicalization process is to question those who have been radicalized themselves to the point of turning to violence. This article will examine the case of Nasir Abbas, a former senior member of the Southeast Asian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiya (JI) who now works with the Indonesian government in their deradicalization program. In February 2008, Abbas agreed to be interviewed on film about radicalization and deradicalization for Charles Sturt University's postgraduate distance education program. During the interview, Abbas was accompanied by a senior Indonesian police officer, and Abbas had to be careful not to incriminate himself since he has not been charged with any terrorism offenses. The Indonesian police officer was himself an expert in their deradicalization program, having been instrumental in introducing a strategy following the recent Muslim-Christian clashes in Poso. He also agreed to be interviewed. What was learned from the two interviews is described in detail below.

Before Afghanistan: Nasir Abbas' Upbringing
JI was organizationally split into four "mantiqis" under a regional consultative council, with each mantiqi covering a different region in Southeast Asia.¹

Nasir Abbas became the head of Jemaah Islamiya's Mantiqi III in April 2001.² In 2003, Abbas was arrested by the Indonesian police and prosecuted for immigration offenses. He agreed to work for the police in their deradicalization program, and in 2004 he identified Abu Bakar Bashir as the head of JI in an Indonesian court of law.³

Nasir Abbas was born on May 6, 1969 in Singapore. Early on, he and his parents moved to Malaysia, where he earned citizenship. He described his upbringing as normal and not very Islamic; his mother did not wear a headscarf nor was his father an activist. He stated that he did not even pray five times a day as required and was not a good Muslim. In 1983-84, he began reading about the Soviet-Afghan war in newspapers and magazines. It was at this time he became aware of the mujahidin. During the interview, he described the mujahidin as "holy warriors" having "holy status" and fighting for Islamic rights and defending Islam. He said that at this time his "dream" was to go to Afghanistan.

Abbas said that he was a poor student and not good at school; therefore, at age 16 he asked his father if he could drop out. His father initially refused, but Abbas found a school attached to a mosque that ran a course in translating Arabic and taught students about the Qur'an. Abbas persuaded his father that he should attend the school. He explained that the school was not radical and that he would not learn about killing or fighting—just Arabic and the Qur'an. Some Indonesians, however, started preaching at the school. Abbas identified three of the preachers as Abu Bakar Bashir, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Jibril, all of whom would become prominent members of Jemaah Islamiya. Abbas stated that they did not speak about fighting, but talked about Islam and the obligations of Muslims. Some of the preachers sold the students books about Afghanistan and jihad. Abbas was impressed by the Indonesian teachers because they were wise and could speak Arabic.

In 1987, one of the visiting preachers approached Abbas' teacher and asked him to speak to Abbas about going to Afghanistan. By this time Abbas was a valued resource at the school since he had spent two and a half years there and had become an assistant teacher. His teacher did not pass the message on to Abbas and consequently one day he was asked by a visiting preacher whether his teacher had spoken to him about Afghanistan. When Abbas questioned his teacher, the two of them prayed together, had lunch and then his teacher spoke to him "with heavy heart" about going to Afghanistan. His teacher made one proviso before allowing the young Abbas to leave: he had to receive permission from his parents. Abbas stated that he knew his mother would not allow him to go, so he asked his father who agreed to him leaving because he considered the fighting in Afghanistan an "Islamic struggle."

Abbas thought that this was a "dream come true" and said that he was curious about the mujahidin and jihad. He understood that the conflict was about repelling the Russian invaders and helping the Afghans fight for their homeland. He did not see anything wrong about the fighting.⁴

To Afghanistan and Back

In 1987, Abbas went to Afghanistan in a group of 15 comprising 13 Indonesians and two Malaysians. On arrival, he was sent to a military academy. He was frustrated at being told that he had to spend three years at the academy, the inference being that he would have preferred to get involved in the fighting immediately. Yet, Abbas stayed the course. He said that life in the academy was disciplined and included saluting senior officers and flags and wearing a military style uniform. His instructors were from the Afghan military, most of whom had been trained at the military academy in India. As well as learning about Islam and jihad, Abbas was taught about weaponry, navigation, leadership, physical training, self-defense and marching. Each year Abbas

1 Mantiqi I covered Singapore and Malaysia; Mantiqi II was based in Indonesia; Mantiqi III's area was Sabah, Sulawesi and the southern Philippines; Mantiqi IV covered Australia. For more, see "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests

and the Threat of Terrorism," Singapore Government White Paper, January 2003, p. 10.

2 Personal interview, Nasir Abbas, February 25, 2008.

3 "Ex-JI Member Names Bashir as Leader," *The Age*, May 25, 2004.

4 During this point in the interview, Abbas was asked whether he thought Muslims looked at the situation in Iraq in the same way. He replied that Muslims had an obligation to fight in Iraq but that there was a difference between fighting troops and killing civilians. His view was that it was "sinful" to kill civilians.

was granted a month and a half leave, and it was during these times that he went to the battlefield. During these periods, he engaged in various military activities, including clearing minefields. He was experienced in many aspects of warfare, from small-arms to guided missiles. Abbas said that following his training period he became a trainer at the academy.

After six years in Afghanistan, Abbas returned to Southeast Asia where he joined Darul Islam (DI) and later Jemaah Islamiya.⁵ He subsequently established a “training camp” in the Philippines. Abbas explained that the aims of DI and JI were different, since DI wanted to form an Islamic state in Indonesia, whereas JI was pursuing a wider agenda, witnessed by its mantiqi structure. Abbas alleged that the radicalization of Muslims started in earnest when the terrorist operative Hambali became a “representative for JI,” a comment supported by the section on Hambali in the 9/11 Commission Report.⁶ In 1997, Hambali started to send JI personnel to a camp established by Usama bin Ladin in Kandahar.

Abbas stated that it was about this time that Bin Ladin was urging revenge against the Americans on “both military and non-military” targets.⁷ Abbas said that the effect of Bin Ladin’s message was that Hambali carried out the bombing of the Philippine ambassador’s residence in Jakarta on August 1, 2000. Abbas also said that a cache of “explosives” and “armalites” that were seized in General Santos City, Philippines, were destined for Singapore.⁸ According to Abbas, Bin Ladin’s message was counter to what

he believed, which was that the killing of civilians was wrong. Abbas claimed, however, that at the time he could not protest as he was at a “low level in the organization.” Abbas also stated that he believed the first Bali bomb was “sinful.” He asserted that when he became head of Mantiqi III in April 2001, he tried to protect his men against the influence of Hambali.

Abbas offered some comments about JI’s method of radicalizing supporters, explaining that it was achieved through activities other than military means. JI used a mixture of Islamic preaching, education, and social and economic outreach to radicalize supporters. This in itself is interesting as it appears that JI leaders may have been attempting to copy similar successful strategies employed by other groups such as Lebanese Hizb Allah, which is known for its delivery of social and other public services.⁹ Abbas was asked how people become so radicalized that they would be willing to kill themselves in a suicide attack. He answered that it was because of “misfaith,” stating that “heaven is a gift; it’s not our goal.” He believed that some Muslims were preaching that heaven was a goal and that becoming a suicide attacker would make one a *shahid* (martyr) and go straight to heaven.

Turning Abbas into an Asset

After Abbas’ arrest, the Indonesian police were able to convince him to work in their deradicalization program. Abbas was treated with respect when he was arrested and spent his first night in captivity wondering why God did not let him die. In his own words,

I tried to make myself to be killed, I mean not to kill myself, but make people to kill me because I fight against the police. When I got arrested, I had Kung Fu fighting with the police, me one against six policemen because I try to make them to kill me or to shoot at me but they did not shoot at me with one bullet. So I am thinking, all night long I am not saying any words I am just saying God forgive me, God forgive me, God forgive me. They are asking me ‘what is your name?’ I just say God

forgive me, ‘who are you where is your origin?’ God forgive me, I just only say that. All night long because I don’t want to answer the police questions before I am answering my own questions. My own question is, the first question is, why God not let me die? Why God not let them to shoot at me? I tried, I tried, they are pointing the gun against me, maybe six guns. In the police training when you are being asked to stop, don’t move, OK, so once you move, one step you move, they are allowed to kill you, or to shoot at you. I am not only move one step but I am rushing I am going forward but they not kill me so this is a big question, why God not let me die? I tried, I tried to make them to kill me, so this is something, something mysterious that I do not know but God knows, he knows.

Although the above is only the account of one man, there are some interesting indicators as to what causes a person to become radicalized to the extent that they will use violence, and also what can assist to deradicalize. In Abbas’ case, he went to fight in Afghanistan in response to the Soviet-Afghan war. His goal was to join the mujahidin in defending Muslim lands. Similar to the case of London bomber Shehzad Tanweer, who mentioned Iraq and Afghanistan in his video will as being the reason for his attack, Abbas was driven by foreign policy grievances.¹⁰

What is also of note are the circumstances of Abbas’ arrest. The fact that Indonesian police treated him well was certainly a factor that led him to assist their deradicalization program, although it must be acknowledged that not being charged with a terrorist offense may have also played a role. The Indonesian police officer who was present during the interview—from this point referred to as “K”—spoke about the Indonesian National Police’s (INP) deradicalization program. K said that the INP had realized that they had

5 Rohaiza Ahmad Asi asserts that many members of Darul Islam were recruited into Jemaah Islamiya. For more, see Rohaiza Ahmad Asi, “Darul Islam: A Fertile Ground for Jemah Islamiyah’s Recruitment,” in Rohaiza Ahmad Asi, *Fighting Terrorism: Preventing the Radicalisation of Youth in a Secular and Globalised World* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemudi Melayu Singapura, 2007), p. 114.

6 *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), pp. 150-152.

7 A useful abbreviated version of this declaration is published in Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 23-30.

8 This seizure was mentioned in a speech on February 7, 2002 by the Philippine president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

9 J.P. Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 80.

10 “London Bomber Video: ‘Just the Beginning,’” CNN, July 7, 2006. This was also the case in the 2006 UK plot to blow up aircraft. Police found six video wills and three of these mentioned the West’s presence in Muslim lands. Also see “‘Suicide Videos’: What They Said,” BBC, April 4, 2008.

been responding to terrorist incidents in a “fire-brigade” style and that they needed to change mindsets to contain terrorist violence. He believed that there was no single reason for people joining terrorist groups, commenting that some joined because they believed jihad to be a spiritual obligation. He identified both Abbas and Imam Samudra, however, as people who had been initially motivated by “fun and adventure.” K believed it was important to teach police officers to treat Islamists well and that torture would only make people more aggressive when released.

The Indonesian Solution

According to K, one test case of a solution to Islamist violence occurred in Poso, which was plagued by Christian-Muslim violence. The Indonesian solution was identified as multifaceted but basically had two elements: the hard and soft approach. The hard approach was to identify, arrest and prosecute those responsible for terrorist acts. The soft approach involved changing mindsets using a number of different strategies. The INP worked with local people and local governments to identify Islamist preachers and to “encourage local people to kick those people out of Poso.” They also identified two Islamic boarding schools that were run by JI. They encouraged the school foundations to initially close the schools, and to replace the Islamist teachers with others who held moderate views. Modern and large Islamic boarding schools were also constructed with \$2.5 million funding from the central government. Compensation was given to widows who had lost their husbands in the conflicts, and the local government offered scholarships to the children of the widows. Work opportunities were also provided in consultation with non-governmental organizations. K believed that it was especially important to ensure that military-trained civilians were given work opportunities. He commented that the majority of people in Poso—both Christians and Muslims—were “fed up with fighting” and that “dialogue was really important.”

For the hard approach, the INP established a police unit in 2005 specifically to deal with the Poso situation. After one year, they had arrested 64 individuals and seized 135 weapons, more than 11,000 rounds of

ammunition, 168 homemade bombs and 414 detonators as well as miscellaneous bomb making materials. They had also solved 46 cases connected with the conflict. As a result, between January 2007 and the February 2008 interview there were no terrorist attacks in either Poso or Central Sulawesi.

Although there are a number of weaknesses in Indonesia’s deradicalization program—discussed in detail by Dr. Kirsten Schulze¹¹—the fact remains that Indonesia is one of the few countries to have initiated a robust program that has had some success. It is important for Western governments to study Indonesia’s program more closely, as its expansion could help further reduce the risk of terrorist violence in Southeast Asia.

Nick O’Brien is an Associate Professor of Counter-Terrorism at Charles Sturt University. Before joining Charles Sturt University, he represented the UK Association of Chief Police Officers - Terrorism and Allied Matters Committee (ACPO-TAM) and all the UK police forces as the Counter-Terrorism and Extremism Liaison Officer (CTELO) at the British High Commission in Canberra. Prior to this posting, Mr. O’Brien was in charge of International Counter-Terrorism in Special Branch at New Scotland Yard. He also had responsibility for the National Terrorist Financial Investigations Unit (NTFIU) and International Liaison. Mr. O’Brien has had national responsibility for all Special Branch training in the United Kingdom. He is a visiting Fellow at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation in Indonesia.

¹¹ Kirsten E. Schulze, “Indonesia’s Approach to Jihadist Deradicalization,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:8 (2008).