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**Expert Talk**



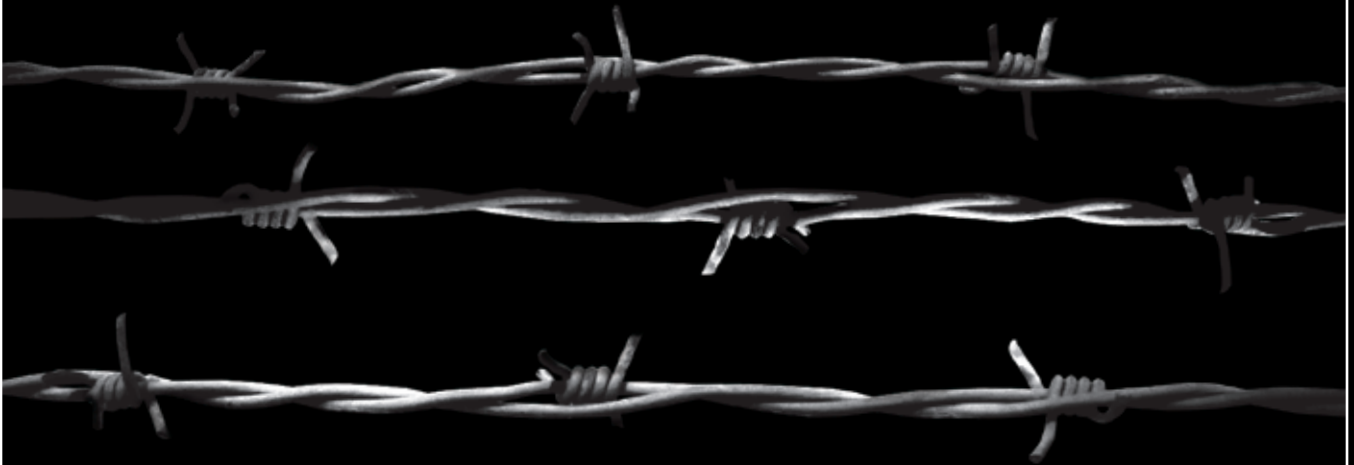
## Abu Bakar Bashir – security implications of a “spiritual leader”

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**D**espite being implicated for his involvement by the three convicted Bali bombers prior to their execution, Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiyah, is currently a free man in Indonesia. As the most populous Muslim nation in the world; the vast majority of Indonesians are secular, peace loving citizens. However the volatile extremist minority of a largely secular state, championed by “spiritual leaders” such as Bashir, raises the prospect of extremism translating into terrorism on a growing scale.

#### **JAMAAH ISLAMIYAH:**

- Responsible for the Bali Bombings in 2002 & 2005 under the guidance of Abu Bakar Bashir.
- Responsible for the J. W. Marriot hotel bombing in 2003.
- Reportedly split up into a mainstream and radical faction known as Jemaa Islamiyya Thoifah Muqotilah.
- Has close affiliations with the Abu Sayyaf group in Southern Philippines.

The titular leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) as he is widely known had served time in incarceration and has returned to politically and strategically leverage on his ‘experience in prison’, projecting himself as a victim of injustice, in order to expand and deepen his influence. The perverse form of Salafi Islamic ideology promoted by a cleric of his influence provides the justification vital for fuelling the perpetration of terrorist acts against Western interests in Indonesia and throughout the Southeast Asian region.

Born in East Java of Hadhrami Arab descent, Abu Bakar Bashir purportedly joined the Mujahideen which fought against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. He eventually returned, battle-hardened from the campaign, and rose to become one of the more influential radical clerics within Indonesia. His founding leadership of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) with 58 branches extending across Indonesia, with an estimated 50,000 members, has shaped the path of the organization geared towards Salafi Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia. Also, despite Bashir’s repeated denials of its existence, he has emerged to become a symbol of the JI network; an enigmatic organization evolved from the Darul Islam movement of which Bashir was a part. Abu Bakar Bashir’s often public and repeated denial of the existence of JI as an organization raises two pertinent issues. Firstly, it

throws ambiguity to the actual existence of the entity thereby undermining the legitimacy of it being classified and treated as a terrorist entity. Secondly, it raises the difficulty of implicating him directly with JI-associated acts of terrorism such as the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005 and the attacks on the JW Marriot hotel in 2003. His ability to cleverly adjust his rhetoric to suit his constituency while staying within the boundaries of the law has accelerated the growth of his influence. He has since moved on to establish a new front to grow his relatively popular support after leaving MMI, which was in the establishment of the Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid in September 2008.



*Abu Bakar Bashir,  
spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiyah*

Abu Bakar Bashir has been a keen advocate for the implementation of Sharia law and the abolishment of secular law in Indonesia. Throughout his career, he has leveraged on this issue to gain the political and moral high ground and raise his level of support among the grassroots. His views on Sharia Law do not necessarily

differentiate him from other clerics with similar goals. However, the use of political violence and terrorism as a means for his followers to advance the implementation of Sharia in Indonesia encourages terrorist attacks by members of his cadre within JI with the same idea.

Abu Bakar Bashir has also acknowledged an economic dimension to his campaign. Not only does he legitimize violence committed in the name of Islam against non-believers, he also advocates the committing of robberies against non-Islamic organizations and people, stating on one occasion "We can take their blood so why not money?" He openly promotes the concept of Fai'i; a concept of stealing from the so-called infidels in order to advance the cause of jihad. This can be seen in the bank robberies committed by JI members and keen Abu Bakar Bashir followers such as Mohamat Iqbal Abdul Rahman as means to finance terrorist acts planned. His advocacy of Sharia law over secular laws also raises other broader security issues. For example, there is a threat to the banking and financial system due to its symbolic value for followers of JI. Therein lays the ideologue's threat to Western-based commercial and financial interests in the region.

His effectiveness is enhanced by his familiarity with the mainstream media has helped provided the platform to which he exerts his influence and espouses his rhetoric and reaches out to followers embedded within a largely secular Muslim populace. Bashir uses the mainstream media as a platform to launch verbal tirades against the West carefully tailored to provide legitimacy to the use of violence against western interest in the name of Islam. At the same time he adjusts his language so to tread the thin line bordering the law in Indonesia. This also allows him to avoid serious terrorism charges and yet remain a key figure in the public eye. His arrest for condoning the Bali bombings and subsequent charges for treason and immigration offences, have served to boost his popularity and he has been quick to leverage on the perceived injustice done to him by the Indonesian government. Parallels of this subtle approach of "spiritual leadership" by legitimizing followers to commit acts of



*The aftermath of the Bali Bombings*

terrorism, while at the same time operating within the confines of the law, can also be attributed to radical clerics in the Middle East, such as Abd Al-Majid Al-Zindani. Zindani is another "spiritual leader" who advocates support for al-Qaeda and Hamas, and builds a foundation for radicalization, but stays within the confines of the Yemeni legal system.

Abu Bakar Bashir's influence is not limited to mainstream media, which is unavailable in rural areas. In rural communities, for example, his influence extends in the form of his teachings via institutions such as the Pondok Ngruki in Central Java and other isolated communities. Within these isolated Salafist communities where there is a lack of access to competing sources of information, Abu Bakar Bashir's brand of extremism thrives. In addition, Bashir being a public figure often gives sermons to youth movements such as Persatuan Pemuda Islam Pantura where he directly reaches out to volatile youth communities and helps engender in them a more radical and violent mindset. This multi-pronged approach has enabled him to capture an audience and following well beyond the reach of conventional media.

Abu Bakar Bashir's long term threat to Indonesia and businesses lie not in his propensity to commit acts of terrorism but in his ability to build the vital foundation for inflicting violence. As acts of terrorism against commercial entities and western individuals in Southeast Asia need justification from higher authorities, spiritual leaders such as Abu Bakar Bashir will continue to play an important role in the perpetration of violent extremism and terrorism. His ability to capture his audiences' attention and garner a huge following is testament to his influence. As the fiery rhetoric provides the potential terrorist the moral ground, indoctrination and overall motivation to carry out attacks, Abu Bakar Bashir remains a danger. Hence, despite the constant effort of the security forces working to clampdown on JI, Darul Islam and MMI terrorist operatives, more members will be churned out, indoctrinated and motivated through Abu Bakar Bashir's school of "spiritual leadership."

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### About the author

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He was formerly a research analyst at the International Centre for Terrorism and Political Violence Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He holds a Master's degree in international relations and has conducted field research interviewing JI members. He speaks and reads Bahasa Indonesian and Malay.