

# Salafis, Jihad, & Drama

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The rise of the Laskar Jihad, which from April 2000 until its disbanding in October 2002 mobilized more than 7,000 members to fight jihad against Christians in the Moluccas and other Indonesian trouble spots, perfectly represents an attempt made by a group of people to negotiate their identity through the call for jihad and the particular kind of violence it enacted. This paramilitary organization is an extension of and transformation from an "apolitical" Salafi *da'wa* movement concerned primarily with the purity of *tawhid* and the subsequent moral integrity of individuals.

The Salafi movement began to exert its influence throughout Indonesia in the mid-1980s. Its efflorescence cannot be isolated from Saudi Arabia's immensely ambitious global campaign for the Wahhabization of the Muslim *ummah* that finally aims at reinforcing its position as the centre of the Muslim world. Thanks to skyrocketing world oil prices, which provided considerable economic benefits during the 1970s, the Kingdom sponsored a variety of *da'wa* activities throughout the Muslim world, working with local agents. In this way Wahhabism was exported and disseminated. This campaign was later intensified, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the takeover of al-Haram al-Sharif in Mecca in 1979.

Signs of the expansion of the movement were first and foremost strikingly seen in the appearance of young men wearing long flowing robes (*jalabiyya*), turban (*imama*), trousers right to their ankles (*isbal*) and long beards (*lihya*), and women wearing a form of enveloping black veil (*niqab*) in public places. Initially its presence was most significantly felt on university campuses where it formed an exclusive current of Islamic activism. Under the changing political circumstances during the first half of the 1990s, the movement spread beyond campuses. Members openly organized meetings, called *halqas* and *dauras*, in mosques located on city outskirts and rural villages. As a result, enclaves of members sprung up, followed by the construction of mosques and Islamic schools under the banner of the Salafi movement. Through religious activities organized systematically and openly, a sense of solidarity and group identity was born that fostered a growing network. The publication of pamphlets, bulletins, journals, and books provided communication channels through which Salafi messages were disseminated to a broader audience.

The attraction of the Salafi movement is rooted in its ability to provide a domain in which a resistance identity is created through discourses, symbols, and everyday practices. Within this context members are required to organize themselves into small tight-knit communities that stand distinctly apart from the "anything goes" open society around them. To some extent it can be identified as a sect, demanding complete loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle. As its name indicates, it is a kind of refuge for pure believers who undergo an internal hijra (migration) to shelter themselves from the stains and temptations of the outside world.

The fast currents of modernization and globalization, which provided the opportunities for young people from rural villages to migrate to big cities in order to pursue higher education or seek jobs, contributed to the growth of the movement. Ironically, the social mobility of these youths has been mired in the failure of the New Order regime to fulfill its development promises, particularly to make good on its promise to distribute public goods and resources for all. This deficiency has been aggravated by rampant corruption and a lack of public accountability. The upshot is that many of the young rural migrants have become discontented and frustrated. Globalization accelerates their frustration to the extent that their identity is shaken. These deprived youths have tried to release their frustration. One option is to establish an enclave, a closed system, which distinguishes itself by an exclusive pattern of dress, interactions, and rela-

**Jihad is often perceived as an expression of religious fanaticism and is mostly associated with the outrageous act of irrational, insane individuals inspired by their firm belief in radical religious doctrines. Although there is some plausibility in this perception, it fails to uncover the deeper meaning of jihad. Jihad is also a language of protest that can be used by marginalized individuals to construct their identity and thereby their position in the public sphere. For them, jihad is a message conveyed to display attempts to transform and empower their marginalization and break out of their own sense of frustration. Through its public display of violence the Indonesian Salafi movement, Laskar Jihad, illustrates this particular use of jihad.**

tionships. By doing so, they achieve control over the social space by shrinking the world to the size of their community. Doubtless this passive resistance can be activated through the art of mobilization.

## Towards political mobilization

The Salafis began to make their appearance in the arena of the Realpolitik of Indonesia shortly after the collapse of the New Order regime in May 1998. In response to the escalation of the bloody communal conflict in the Moluccas, which erupted in January 1999, they issued a jihad resolution and established the Laskar Jihad (Jihad Army) organization. The pre-existing

informal social network built among them emerged as the key to the success of Laskar Jihad formation. Centres of Salafi activism served as the recruitment pools through which voluntary fighters were recruited. The cohesiveness of the network reduced the free-riding problem. All Salafis associated with the network felt themselves necessarily part of the mobilization. It was therefore natural that they competed to clamber on board the ships that would take them to the Moluccas. The magnificence of jihad, which had frequently been discussed in religious lectures and glorified in their religious publications, had apparently borne fruit.

Despite the importance of the network, the establishment of Laskar Jihad benefited enormously from the political conditions following the collapse of the New Order regime and its ensuing transitional processes. This dramatic event stimulated the growth of a free political space, which enabled all members of Indonesian society to discuss and develop opinions on issues affecting their lives. Consequently, a variety of groups, identities, and interests emerged, competing for the newly liberated public sphere. Paradoxically, this openness offered the remaining powers of the status-quo (the old elite) room to manoeuvre and orchestrate a game that could hold the seeds of the destruction of the emerging civil society and help them, in turn, to recover their lost power. The key to reach this end was to manipulate the public sphere, the main arena in which ideas, interests, values, and ideologies are formed and relations of civil society are voiced and made politically efficacious.

The Salafis sought to frame their actions by placing the Moluccan issue coherently within the context of global conflicts in the Muslim world. In what can be described as a manifesto they stated that having succeeded in winning the cold war against the Soviet Union, the United States lost no time in proclaiming itself the sole superpower. And it continued to say that this superpower had thereby given itself the right to subjugate Islam which it saw as the greatest and most dangerous enemy of the globalized world. The Salafis interpreted the success of the United States as a victory of Zionists and (Christian) Crusaders, who had long been nurturing a hatred of Islam. Conflicts and violence that had erupted in different parts of the Muslim world, including Bosnia, the Philippines, North Africa, and Chechnya, they declared, were all evidence of the fierceness which the enemies of Islam displayed in their efforts to eliminate all Muslims from the face of the earth. Confronted with the complexity of the Moluccan conflict, the Salafis saw no solution except jihad. They were convinced that with jihad the manoeuvres of the enemies of Islam seeking to undermine the growth of Islam in Indonesia could be halted and, at the same time, the fate of Moluccan Muslims could be turned.

## Drama of jihad in the Moluccas

Under the banner of Laskar Jihad the Salafis started their mission in the Moluccas by staging a spectacular collective action in the Senayan Main Stadium in Jakarta on 6 April 2000. At that time they presented



**Laskar  
Jihad at the  
Indonesian  
Legislative  
Assembly,  
Jakarta,  
10 April 2000**

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themselves majestically: a sea of swarming, writhing people clad in white, absorbed in chants of "Allah Akbar" whose echoes reverberated throughout the stadium. Sunlight flashed from their swords like strobe lights. In the background banners and posters fluttered magnificently, emblazoned with the slogans "Wage *jihad fi sabil* Allah" and "Defend Muslims in the Moluccas". At the height of his public exposure, commander-in-chief Ja'far Umar Thalib mounted the podium and delivered a speech in which he decried the "disaster" afflicting Moluccan Muslims, confronted as they were by a genocidal threat.

The Salafis' mission to fight jihad in the Moluccas is better conceptualized as a drama, because this apparently frenzied action was motivated not so much by the hope for a resounding victory as by the intention to fabricate a heroic image. It was the moment in which the Salafis proclaimed their rightful place in the political arena of Indonesia. Through the staging of theatrical scenes, they emerged on the political scene as a bunch of militant youths willing to martyr themselves for the cause of God. Wearing the distinctive uniform (white *jalabiyya* and turban) complete with arms on proud display, they portrayed themselves as the most heroic jihad combatants, aching to go to the frontlines.

The Salafi fighters, cast as heroes or villains destined for some great ideal according to differing scenarios, acted in a plot that could end either in a happy or in a tragic ending. The plot might have been written beforehand or it might have been improvised, or it might have crystallized only after the drama was underway. Any of these possibilities is of little account as long as there is no public to side with the play's main character and applaud their warring spectacle against the hegemonic global order.

The main actor in this drama was no doubt Ja'far Umar Thalib, himself a sign among signs. But it was the drama of jihad that created him, raised him from the ranks of a modest Salafi *ustaz* (teacher) to an icon of jihad, for without this drama the image of the hero could never have taken form. Nevertheless, in order to leave a lasting impression, he needed to mobilize, and more importantly be seen mobilizing, the forces that would carry him on the political stage. Mobilizing men for jihad was, thus, his primary task. The flow of fighters from various provinces in Indonesia, who came to proclaim their support for this call to action, contributed to both strengthening his position as the icon of jihad and to facilitate the process by which he could claim central leadership among Indonesian Muslims.

As players in a drama, the Salafi fighters acted intentionally to capture public attention. They enjoyed the coverage in the media, including television, radio, newspapers, bulletins, and magazines, although their

underpinning doctrine should have prevented them from doing so. They warmly welcomed reporters from the media who used the event (and at times sensationalized it) to sell their publications. Yet, ironically, because most of the Salafi fighters were actually unskilled combatants, their only success lay on the symbolic level, that is, in creating propaganda that influenced public opinion through the media.

Even this success was only partial; for the rise of Laskar Jihad by no means indicated the success of militant Muslim groups in taking control of the Indonesian public sphere. It served instead to highlight the marginal position of militant Muslims and their unsuccessful efforts to gain hegemony for their discourse of glorifying militancy and violence. Because these militants pursue their struggle through spectacular violence, jihadi Islam remains on the political periphery and may never succeed in actually changing the strategic landscape of the country. It certainly did not change the map of Indonesian Islam. Nor has it changed the secular system of the Indonesian nation-state. The majority of Indonesian Muslims remain tolerant and opposed to the use of violence, let alone terrorism. The wave of militancy and violence that has engulfed Indonesia has instead encouraged Indonesian Muslims to work more systematically and consistently for the dissemination of discourses on democracy, gender equality, and human rights.

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