A Multitude of Spaces: Radical versus Moderate Islam

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The catastrophic events of September 11 have created openings for the re-scaling of power at home and abroad. President Bush’s foreign policy remark -- “either you are for or against us” -- maps out a new hegemonic redrawing of security and terrorist spaces. The “postliberal politics of fear” (Jayasuriya 2002) spawned a war on terror without the US government ever figuring out what it is. Because there is no clear definition about what terrorism is, the Bush administration has relied on dividing up the Islamic world into moderate and radical regimes, and has focused on linking terrorism to a harboring or sponsoring state such as Iraq. This paper will analyze the relevant pattern of interactions among various components brought together by the Sept. 11 events in order to reveal phenomena that are ‘radically emergent’ (Sole and Goodwin 2000, 20). I do this by tracing concepts about new spatiality -- a new ecology of security, terrorist networks, franchise terrorism, transnational Islamic state -- now inform military and state discourses about national and global insecurity.

I will first discuss new military thinking about how terrorist attacks represent a new ecology of asymmetrical threat, but its advocates are drowned out by voices calling for war against Iraq. Next, I consider how the war on terror has changed US policy towards SE Asia, previously perceived as a region of developing democracy and civil society, into a second front in the fight
against terrorism. Southeast Asia countries must now define themselves in terms of moderate and
classical Islam, a process that has increased the power of authoritarian government Third, I
suggest we need to go beyond both anthropological assertions about a plurality of Islamic politics
and claims about franchise terrorism to study the range of emerging transnational Islamic
networks that transcend sovereignty and citizenship.

**An Ecology of Asymmetrical Threat**

Previously sustained by free trade, the informal American empire now relies on a war against
terrorism that identifies a multitude of spaces at home and abroad as suspected havens for
terrorists. Sept. 11 represents a new conception of citizenship and of the homeland. First, the
automatic link between an enemy and a foreign “Muslim” nationality has resulted in legal
discriminations between citizens and Muslim immigrants identified as “terrorists” (see Volpp,
2002). The irony of course is that many of the 9/11 hijackers were diasporic subjects and thus
fulfilled American criteria of multicultural citizenship. Second, the notion of where home is also
being revised, as the links between the homeland and the law-enforcement relations have
extended beyond it. There is a sense that the nation is linked to constellations of spaces
heretofore beyond the view of the nation security apparatus.

Some military strategists note that the cold war state-oriented threat model -- the military “force-on-force” capabilities of rival states -- has been replaced by a whole new threat spectrum of
threat non-state adversaries not likely to be deterred by America’s overwhelming military
superiority (Wilson 2002, 9). There is a new ecological thinking about global security, one much
more complex than previous environments of American security. I use the phrase “baroque
ecology” to denote contemporary complexities, specifically a concern with maintaining the *oikos*
or ‘home’ through the wider ecology of security and surveillance (Ong n.d.) the homeland is now enmeshed in a multiplicity of shadowy places and enemies who are unlike conventional adversaries. In the coming period of great uncertainty and unpredictability, “global defense issues are murkier” (Wilson 2002, 5).

A previously open society must now be reconceptualized and remobilized as borders between the homefront and overseas, between civil and military zones blur. The emerging global security environment is an ecological one in which dispersed lines of foreign populations interact on multiple ways with domestic ones. These mobile foreign populations disrupt what in military parlance is called US space assets, “counter-space strategies” (Wilson 2002, 17) to punch holes in our global architecture of security.

The concept of “asymmetric threat” refers to the proliferation of non-state actors who “exploit our open society, use our technologies against us ....a shadowy global network of extremists who struck unprotected targets, using methods we did not anticipate..”(Wilson, 2002, 2), making “it less vulnerable to more traditional intelligence and security approaches...” (26). Terror-networks proliferate “to disrupt, degrade, or defeat portions of the US space support system.” (17) The terrorist networks appear to be the kind that can be endlessly extended and intermeshed with other social phenomena (Strathern 1996, 522). Radical Muslims are viewed as forgers of networks that combine disparate elements in a chain that can set off explosions anywhere in the spaces of American global security. The point therefore is to reconfigure an ecology of security that is not a war in the classic sense, but rather a war that is more like the war on drugs or the war against international criminals. Such thinking among some military strategists however is drowned out by American leaders who are clearly relying on older models of the rogue states.
This cold war model, flying in the face of the complex interconnections that cut across national borders, is framed in terms of a global division between moderate and radical Islam regimes.

**Radical versus Moderate Islam**

The war against terrorism abroad thus requires US allies in the Islamic world to proclaim themselves to be moderate Islamic nations. President Bush has asserted that “no country can afford to stay on the sidelines; there are no sidelines in this war against terrorism” (source?). This warning has a special meaning in Southeast Asia, a region that after September 11 is labeled a “second front” in the war against terrorism, after the austere theater of Afghanistan.

Heretofore, the United States considered Southeast Asia a region of Asian tigers and emerging civil society. But the war on terror has radically upended that pro-democracy emphasis as the United States now compel local governments to be demonstrate their “moderate Islamic” status by detaining suspected terrorists.

Eager to present themselves as home to modern Muslim populations, Southeast Asian nations saw a opportunity to gain new moral legitimacy by collaborating in the US war against terrorism. President Arroyo of the Philippines accepted American constabulary forces and resources in her fight against rebel and extremist groups, thus stirring protests against the violation of national sovereignty by US troops. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s arrest of a dozen al-Qaida linked suspects (Kumpulan Militan Malaysia) won him a new American image as a moderate Muslim leader, despite the new label of the country as a terrorist launching pad.

Neighboring Thailand has also increased surveillance and arrested some suspected terrorists in the Southern provinces abutting Malaysia. The Singaporean government arrested dozens of al-Qaida-linked terrorist suspects and thus pre-empted planned attacks against American embassies and
servicemen. The island has practically become an American aircraft carrier, a concentration of US military might and intelligence in the region.

This division between moderate and radical Muslims reverses an earlier American focus on human rights violations in the region. The Malaysian and Singapore governments received a Bush endorsement of their notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows arrests with charges for up to two years. Furthermore, under the banner of anti-terrorism, governments have increased limits on free speech. In Malaysia, new measures to curb “inflammatory speech” including placing surveillance devices in mosques, thus inflaming the so-called moderate Muslim majority to become more anti-American (Faris 2002). Thus the regional alliance against terrorism has extended the division between moderate and radical Muslim spaces from the national to the local and neighborhood levels. Ironically, Mahathir has managed to make political capital out of the war on terror by claiming “With the September 11 incident, our country ... has emerged in the international arenas the only Islamic country that is progressive, democratic, and stable” (The New Straits Times, January 2, 2002).

In this new SE Asian line of defense, Indonesia is perceived as “the weakest link” (Newsweek, Jan. 31, 2002). The largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia has its own sense of being a world player, and is resistant to the rallying around American power. A vast archipelago of many peoples, languages and religions, Indonesia has its own domestic struggles against diverse dissident and separatist Islamic groups (see Hefner 2002). The major ideological divide between those groups that do not believe in rebelling against a Muslim government, and others that will engage in jihad even against Muslim enemies (Jones 2002). For example, the Front Pembela Islam attacks discos, nightclubs, and other institutions of perceived western decadence. Laskar Jihad, a recently
disbanded military group linked to anti-Christian attacks in Moluku. In contrast, Muslim rebels (GAM) are fighting the Jakarta government for an independent Aceh state. The key militant group identified with recent al-Qaida linked terror attacks is the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The JI group has taken over a movement, that has its roots in the 1950s, to set up a regional Islamic state by turning to increasingly violent means to achieve a Darul Islam. The JI has been linked to the Bali bombings in early October.

The Bali attacks have weakened President Megawati’s standing while strengthening the military. Under intense US-pressure, the government adopted an ISA-like anti-terrorism law, and arrested Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the leader of JI. In addition, police searches of Muslim boarding schools and surveillance of mosques have drawn criticisms from the largest Muslim-based organization in the country, the Nahdlatul Ulama. Megawati has had to defend her actions by reassuring mainstream Islamic groups that the government was not abusing the anti-terrorism regulation, nor following Western scenarios that equated terrorism with Islam (The Jakarta Post, Nov. 20, 2002). Many Indonesians, however, believe that the Bali blast was the work of the C.I.A, in a move to force Indonesia, a certified “moderate Muslim country,” to join in the US threat to attack Iraq (The New York Times, Nov. 6, 2002). While dismissed in the West, the C.I.A rumors speak to a larger truth, that American power is re-configuring the local and regional stakes of Islamic politics.

By sharply drawing a line between moderate Muslim leaders and radical Muslim rebels, the US-orchestrated war on terror has increased the power of authoritarian Asian regimes. It has allowed them to brand a spectrum of local opposition or separatist groups as terrorist or al-Qaida-linked. The terrorist discourse is used as a resource against political opponents, to disguise military
actions against insurgents at home, and to link sectarian violence at home and terrorism on the
global stage. In July, the ten-nation regional ASEAN coalition admitted that the region was riddled
with “terror cells,” and agreed to tighten borders formerly open to Muslim travelers, as well as
freeze the flow of Muslim funds. Indonesia and Vietnam voiced concerns that the ASEAN pact
may be used to allow the deployment of US troops in the region (Pereira July 30, 2002). This new
compromised sovereignty in the region is connected to a new Bush doctrine of US primacy (not
hegemony) which stresses US intervention but not US unilateralism. Richard Haas, a Bush
advisor, articulates the concept of “Imperial America” that focuses on collaboration with other
countries in order to foster integration: “Integration is about locking them into policies and then
building institutions that lock them in even more” (Lemann, 2002, 46). This interlocking ecology of
US imperial power relies to no little extent on the distinction between moderate and radical Islam
re-drawing a boundary around citizenship and political sovereignty.

A Franchise of Terrorism?

Much academic scholarship however has stressed that there is a plurality of Islamic politics the
region, especially between proponents of democracy and their neofundamentalist rivals, suggesting
that local struggles should not be viewed through the prism of “the clash of civilizations” (Hefner
2002). But one can agree with this general observation without at the same time dismissing the
emerging phenomenon of transnational Islamic networks, and their complex intersections with
local groups pursuing domestic agendas while seeking international partners in their larger anti-
American struggles.

Intelligence sources in the United States and in Southeast Asia have produced a reading of militant
Islam as a seamless single network linked to international terrorism. Al-Qaida is compared to a
global corporation that relies on al-Qaida-trained Asian operatives to set up their own terrorism franchises around the world (Beach 2002). This franchise theory is an overdetermined reading of the complex networks, since franchise terrorism suggest that the variety of underground groups operate according to the same formula, assembling the same ingredients in different sites in order to produce the same product, i.e. the bombing of US, Israeli and Australian embassies, warships, personnel, and airlines, as well as tourist sites frequented by Westerners. The variety of loosely linked groups with a diversity of linkages, goals, and methods suggests more a series of open-ended networks, with the potential for triggering connections, very much like synapses waiting for connections to be sparked.

Not surprisingly, Southeast Asia observers dismiss the franchise terrorism as an overdrawn model of covert military operations. Rather, recent bombings or threats to bomb West institutions and tourist sites suggest that copycat action has benefited from al-Qaida training, funds, and expertise and now dispersed to other locations (Tay 2002). Local observers stress loose coalitions, flexible networks between autonomous groups focused on local issues but that are sympathetic or ideologically-linked to the notion of an international jihad. The most militant group is Jemaah Islamiyah or JI, which has built a web dedicated to undermining current regimes in order to eventually set up a regional Islamic state. Under JI’s operational commander Hambali (or Riduan Isamuddin) a regional council (shurai) was set up in Kuala Lumpur, overseeing sleeper cells in Malaysia (such as the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia) and in Singapore, and with links to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayyaf group in Southern Philippines. Some of the JI recruits trained with al-Qaida in Afghanistan.
There is evidence to suggest that since the war in Afghanistan, JI has grown closer to the goals of al-Qaida. A JI document, Jihad Operation in Asia last year planned simultaneous attacks on US diplomatic compounds in Singapore, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. The document is reported to state that “By hunting Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, they justify the murder of innocent children and women in Afghanistan. This is all part of the US and Jewish strategy to destroy Islam.” For their support of the American war on terror, the document warns that “... it is time for us to engage in a holy war to eradicate the Jewish ‘satans’ in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia .... they will face a wave of violence in their societies.” (Watkins 2002). In this connection, the French oil tanker Limburgh blown up off the shores of Yemen in early October had been chartered by Malaysia’s state oil company Petronas, and the ship was carrying oil owned by Malaysian companies (Watkins 2002).

We thus see a convergence of JI and al-Qaida goals of terrorism against the United States and its Asian allies. The Bali attacks can also be construed as an attack on the United States and its allies in Indonesia and Australia, an observation supported by the recent Osama bin Laden recording of future attacks.

An anthropological approach is crucial for studying the forms of networking among local and global Muslim groups, and how the convergence of larger goals may temporarily bring about alliances between far-flung groups. An actor-network approach (see Strathern 1996), for instance, would investigate how links in the chains are forged and how the resulting relations are sustained.
Newspaper reports suggest that specific links between al-Qaida operatives and Southeast Asian groups have become possible through the exchange of different objects -- terrorist manuals, funds, explosives, companies, lodging, wives, and volunteers. It appears that for al-Qaida, Southeast Asia (rather than South Asia) has emerged as a region for plotting terror attacks because it was an area not previously associated with anti-US bombings, its centers of technological capabilities, and huge Muslim populations. Kuala Lumpur was chosen to be the cross-roads of militant Islamic terrorists because of its modern facilities, Internet access and a stable banking system. Until very recently, Muslims from all over the world could enter without a visa. Furthermore, under Suharto’s New Order regime when Muslim activists were suppressed, many including the JI leader Ba’asyir sought refuge in Kuala Lumpur, where they came into contact with Middle Eastern Muslim extremists. Kuala Lumpur became a site where diverse political agendas got meshed, and terrorist techniques and resources were shared. For instance, a Malaysian JI member Yazid Sufaat formed an electronics company to help Sept. 11-suspect Zacarias Moussaoui enter the United States. Another al-Qaida operative now under US custody was temporarily married to an Indonesia woman, thus given cover for his operations in the region. It is suspected that Ba’asyir provided volunteers to help al-Qaida agents do their work in Indonesia. There were multiple actors, and each one forged a link in the chain, building up contingent networks of alliance through the assemblage of ideological beliefs, subjects, things, and goals at each node. The concept of a terror franchise is too simple and uniform for understanding the diverse and shifting forms of coalitions and collaborations subject to differing sets of agenda.

Anthropologists too have much to learn from other kinds of complex Muslim networks, the vast assortment of peaceful groups that in recent years have extended their connections further to the
West. Indeed, for some time now, Islamic scholars in Asia have claimed that there is a resurgent Islamic sociality -- an Umma -- that cuts across borders. There is wide-spread Muslim aspiration for transnational solidarity. This yearning is expressed in a variety of ways and goals. Despite a diversity of Islams, there is a unity a Muslim responses to global events that adversely affect their overseas brethrens. An extreme version of the umma is the desire of neofundamentalists for the founding of a regional Islamic state in the region. Thus the Indonesian Mujahideen Council seeks to promote the implementation of the Islamic syariah in the country, and to spearhead the establishment of an Islamic khilafah (sultanate) akin to the Ottoman kingdom (that collapse in 1924). Forcible aims will be use to set up this Daulah Islamiah made up of Malaysia, Indonesia and the southern Philippines that is against capitalism, globalization, US domination of the region (The Straits Time, Jan 6, 2002).

Other transnational Islamic groups have taken a strong stance against violence, stressing peace through submission. Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia has argued that Muslims in Southeast Asia generally stress the politics of dignity and justice (keadilan) for Muslims in Palestine and elsewhere. He stresses that SE Asian Muslims, who are outside the Israeli-Palestine crisis and oil politics of the Middle East, have emerged as peaceful global figures. Muzaffar is the founder of an NGO called International Movement for a Just World that is guided by “universal spiritual and moral values rooted in the oneness of God” (http://www.just-international.org)

In short, there is an Islamic resurgence, a perception that “there is an Islamic world,” a unified umma that has grown out of the global haji population, the kinds of transnational networks formed that go beyond regions, and the blurring once again of the lines between the Middle-East, South and Southeast Asia. Japanese Islamic scholar Yasushi Kosogi (2002) claims that the new
“Islamic World” is not a geographical space; it is only a meta-area, a “satwhal” or an emerging reality based on the aspirations of many Muslims in the South to be an international community. It behooves political and military observers in the West not to mistaken this resurgence of Islamic umma as the beginnings of a clash of civilization. Despite September 11 and subsequent al-Qaida linked attacks, it is crucial that we acknowledge and learn to live with the new ecological reality of diverse forms of transnational umma.

Closing Remarks

The war on terror must not be expanded, nor become an unending war. Second, a war against international criminals should not become a war against radical Islamic groups everywhere. As anthropologists, we need to go beyond asserting academic truisms about the plurality of Islam to give analytical attention to the variety of transnational networks emerging in the Islamic world. We need analytical finesse in disentangling the different strands that connect peoples of the same faith to a variety of political goals, very few of them terrorist-oriented towards their own governments or foreigners. In Southeast Asia, only one organization, JI, has been positively linked to al-Qaida. Such insights into the complex world of a resurgent global Islam are needed for the United States to articulate its moral position to the world’s one billion Muslims.

Unfortunately, American leaders seem dedicated to the old model of state to state combat as the solution to the threat of terrorist attacks. At the same time, the US government has embarked on propaganda efforts to show -- through videotapes -- that America is not hostile to moderate Islam (New York Times, Oct. 30, 2002). But this moderate versus radical Islam strategy may not work since the invasion of Iraq appears imminent. Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia has warned that the
imminent attack on Iraq will only prolong the anti-terrorism campaign, thus inflaming the Muslim world, and creating pools of new recruits to the terrorist ranks (Financial Times, Sept. 17, 2002).

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