
Laskar Jihad and the Conflict in Ambon

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Frenzied slaughter, savage mutilations, forced conversions, and the wanton destruction of property characterized the conflict in Ambon following its eruption on 19 January 1999. Driven by the festering wounds of past colonial injustices against Muslims and present Christian fears, as well as by rumors of a Christian conspiracy to wipe out Islam, on the one hand, and of Islamization policies on the other, it claimed an estimated 9,000 lives and produced more than 400,000 refugees. Yet it was not until the emergence of Laskar Jihad and the group's determination to wage *jihad* in Ambon that Jakarta politicians started to take note, albeit without doing much to address the situation. The call for *jihad* also attracted international attention, again without significant action. In fact, only after the events of 11 September did Laskar Jihad's interpretation of Islam, paramilitary presence, and above all its international links to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines come under closer scrutiny. This brought pressure on the Indonesian government to find a solution to the Ambon conflict, which resulted in the February 2002 Malino II Declaration.

Evidence of al-Qaeda network links to the Taliban and Abu Sayyaf has raised questions regarding possible ties Laskar Jihad may have to al-Qaeda. While such global connections need to be taken very seriously—not least because they have boosted Laskar Jihad's military capacity and have provided it with an ideological framework—Laskar Jihad is essentially a homegrown rather than

international *jihadist* organization. It is the product of a very specific Indonesian situation—the conflict in Ambon—and the Indonesian government’s inability to manage the violence. Its emergence was the result of the turmoil of democratic transition and economic crisis that allowed for suppressed social, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts to resurface. The initial inertia of the government and security forces misjudgements followed by widespread popular apathy, and the political benefits of playing the Islamic card provided Laskar Jihad the freedom to operate. Elite political power games held conflict resolution hostage, and Islamists undermined security policy by branding it anti-Islamic.

There is no doubt that the challenge posed by Laskar Jihad’s paramilitary and ideological agenda encompasses more than Ambon. However, despite the organization’s links to the Taliban and alleged ties to Abu Sayyaf, the organization’s threat is not one of international terrorism. Rather, it is an internal threat to the mainstream interpretation of Islam in Indonesia and, crucially, the Indonesian state’s monopoly on force.

Laskar Jihad

Laskar Jihad was established in January 2000 in response to the government’s inability to resolve the conflict in Ambon and protect Ambon’s Muslims from Christian onslaught. It did not, however, make a real impact on this conflict and indeed Indonesian politics until April, when an armed procession went to meet President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) to plead their case. Despite Gus Dur’s objections, an estimated 3,000 *mujahedeen* departed for Ambon. In Ambon they proceeded to centralize the command—combining local and non-local Muslim militias. This was followed by the introduction of automatic weapons and a change in tactics, from the ad hoc defense of Muslim areas to actively targeting Christian enclaves. With the help of some elements of the Indonesian military (TNI), Laskar Jihad on 21 June overran the headquarters of the police mobile brigade (Brimob), prompting Gus Dur to declare a state of civil emergency. Having successfully shifted the military balance to favor the Muslims, Laskar Jihad proceeded to consolidate its position in Ambon, not just in relation to the Christians but also vis-à-vis Ambon’s Muslims. The organization tried to impose its own vision of society on Muslims, including *Syariah* (Islamic) Law in March 2001.

Laskar Jihad’s *panglima* (commander-in-chief) is 40-year-old Ustaz Jaffar Umar Thalib, born in Malang of Arab-Madurese descent. The grandson of a Yemeni trader, his formative experiences include fighting with the Afghan Mujahedeen in 1988-89 and studying in the Mawdudi Institute in Lahore, Pakistan. Both have shaped his view of Islam as well as the struggle in Ambon and Indonesia as a whole.

Laskar Jihad follows the Salafi tradition, or *as-salaf as-salib*, which seeks the revival of the lifestyle based upon the way of the Prophet Mohammad and the four righteous Caliphs—the *rashidun*. It seeks to purify Islam from beliefs, rulings and manners that have corrupted Islam following the first three generations after revelation. Like other *salafi* movements, Laskar Jihad draws upon the works of the fourteenth century scholar and Islamic revivalist Ahmad Ibn Taimiyya whose works, in turn, were inspired by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal—the great ninth century founder of one of the four orthodox schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It also adheres to the teachings and practices of eighteenth century preacher Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab. Though it uses the label *ablus sunna wal jamaah*—which in an Indonesian context tends to denote traditionalism—and despite the fact that it relies upon scientific analysis characteristic of modernist Islam, Laskar Jihad does not describe itself as either. Its ideology instead is staunchly conservative as reflected in its views on women, democracy and the West. Nineteenth century Islamic philosophers Mohammed Abdu and Rashid Rida are deemed too Western. Democracy is seen as an alien idea incompatible with Islam. Equally incompatible is a female head of state, placing Laskar Jihad at odds with Indonesia’s president—Megawati Sukarnoputri. The most obvious Middle Eastern influence, however, lies in the generous dose of anti-Zionism that pervades Laskar Jihad’s rhetoric and underlines its belief that the conflict in Ambon was the product of “Christian conspiracy politics” and the “hegemony of World Christianity and Zionism in Indonesia.”

This philosophical mixture has not only driven its struggle against non-Muslims, but has also affected intra-Muslim dynamics. Laskar Jihad sees syncretistic or *abangan* Islam as a target for purification and is also pushing a strict line against the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). During the presidency of Gus Dur, himself a NU Muslim cleric, Laskar Jihad virtually declared war on the government whose leader it saw as *kafir* (unbeliever). Its distrust of Indonesian *ulama* in fact goes so far that the *fatwa* declaring *jihad* in Ambon, *fardhu ‘ayn* (individual obligation) for all Ambonese Muslims, and *fardhu kifaya* (communal obligation) for all non-Ambonese Muslims, was issued from Yemen by Syekh Muqbil Bin Hadi Al-Wad’i.

Most revealing is that Laskar Jihad sees itself as the new Darul Islam, thereby clearly indicating a far greater Islamic agenda than defending Muslims in Ambon. Indeed, Laskar Jihad makes no secret of its ultimate ambition, which is to reform or transform all of Indonesia into an Islamic state—a theocracy under the leadership of the clergy based on full implementation of the *Syariah*. The conflict in Ambon was thus only a starting point as can be seen from Laskar Jihad’s involvement in Poso (Sulawesi) in the latter part of 2001, its establishment of training camps in Papua and its recent appearance in the restive province of Aceh. Ambon was clearly being used as a test case to assess the

strength of the non-Muslim opposition as well as the reaction of the central government and the Indonesian Muslim population.

Laskar Jihad's challenge to the state follows the pattern of militant Islamists (as opposed to political) in other parts of the world by combining social, educational and humanitarian work with paramilitary activities. Most of its civic activities have been carried out by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunna Wal Jamaah (FKAWJ), which shares its headquarters with Laskar Jihad in an Islamic boarding school on the outskirts the Central Javanese city of Yogyakarta. FKAWJ organizes religious study groups to promote Islamic values, and mass rallies to commemorate religious events through its branches in 26 provinces in Indonesia. It is filling the vacuum left by the state in the wake of the economic crisis and the fall of Suharto by establishing a broad education, health, and welfare network. Indeed, its entry point into Ambon was through sending teachers and doctors, setting up schools and health centers, as well as providing social services such as garbage removal, which had stopped functioning with the outbreak of the conflict.

On the paramilitary side, Laskar Jihad itself boasts of a membership as high as 10,000-13,000 with an estimated 4,000-6,000 volunteers in Maluku at the height of the conflict. Others believe the numbers are closer to 7,000 in terms of overall membership with an estimated 2,000 in Maluku, of which 1,000 were in Ambon. The latter were rotated on a one to four month basis, depending on their marital status. They were mainly volunteers from Java and Sumatra, drawn from the poorer sections of Muslim society but also including a small number of university graduates and professionals. Before departing to Ambon, the volunteers underwent training in one of Laskar Jihad's camps, the most prominent of which was located in Bogor. The training consisted of *akidah* (faith), physical exercises, and the use of traditional arms. They learned how to use guns, make Molotov cocktails, and assemble bombs upon arrival in Ambon. According to Laskar Jihad, training was provided by active and retired TNI personnel, fighters who have returned from Ambon, Indonesians who gained experience in Afghanistan, and—before 11 September—members of Afghanistan's Taliban itself.

Organizationally, Laskar Jihad is divided into four battalions, all named after the Prophet Mohammad's companions—Abu Bakar, Umar bin Khattab, Usman bin Afan, and Ali bin Abu Thalib. Each battalion comprises four companies, each company four platoons, and each platoon three squads. There are also special forces, intelligence and logistics. Its weapons are a combination of home-made guns and bombs, modern firearms including mortars captured in raids on security forces arsenals in Ambon, as well as army issue weapons obtained from sympathetic elements in TNI or purchased indirectly from Indonesian arms

manufacturer Pindad. During the latter part of 2001, arms were also allegedly flowing into Ambon from Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines.

The finances to fund Laskar Jihad's military operations, according to members of the organization, come only from collections in mosques and in the street as well as donations over the internet. Other sources, however, point to extortion from non-Muslims, donations from sympathetic politicians and military personnel, as well as possible funding from interested parties in Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Laskar Jihad's international connections have come under increased scrutiny since the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September. The most obvious and most worrying link from an international perspective is that with Afghanistan. Jaffar Umar Thalib himself fought in Afghanistan, Taliban trainers aided Laskar Jihad, and a number of Afghans volunteered to fight in Ambon. Yet the real question is one of threat assessment and here it can be said that funding and arms are not necessarily an indicator of global political cooperation but—more often than not—a case of sharing a transnational small arms network governed by illegality, supply and demand. Similarly, links with the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, Islamic dissidents in Thailand, and educational support from Saudi Arabia and Yemen do not necessarily mean that Laskar Jihad is an international *jihadist* organization. In fact its ideology clearly places it in the Islamic nationalist category, not only recognizing the boundaries of the Republic of Indonesia but also reaffirming them in its self-appointed role of upholding the state's unity and integrity. What these international links do provide is the broader context for the causes of Islamic resurgence and with it an insight into the forces driving Laskar Jihad such as fear of globalization, Western political and—more importantly—cultural hegemony as well as the fear of disintegration of the moral fabric of society resulting from materialism, secularism and individualism.

Clash of Civilizations?

For Laskar Jihad, the conflict in Ambon has been nothing short of a clash of civilizations. It was the assault on Islam by “World Christianity” and by the West. Laskar Jihad's statements are riddled with “evidence” of this conspiracy to dismember Indonesia in order to destroy the world's largest Muslim country. Christian appeals for UN intervention and the existence of organizations such as the Maluku Sovereignty Front (Front Kedaulatan Maluku-FKM) and the Republic of South Maluku movement (Republik Maluku Selatan-RMS) have served to confirm their perception. Moreover, Laskar Jihad members truly believe they are engaged in a struggle for religious truth and that they have a monopoly

on such truth. Accordingly, they hold that Christianity is a distortion of God's message, and that all babies are born Muslim and only made Christian or Jewish by their parents. These beliefs sanctioned the forced conversion of Maluku's Christians to Islam—returning people to their original, true faith.

Closer analysis of the underlying causes of the violence, however, reveals that the Ambon conflict was a social conflict rather than a religious one. In fact, its roots lie in the social engineering undertaken by the Dutch when they set foot on the Spice Islands some 350 years ago. The population they encountered was a mix of religions—local animistic traditions, Muslim communities established along vital trade routes, and Catholic communities who had been converted by the Portuguese. The introduction of a new power balance and Protestant Calvinism resulted in Christian-Muslim competition and, to a lesser extent, Catholic-Protestant competition. In Ambon, the Catholic community soon became Protestant and Protestants soon comprised the majority of the population. They became the local partners of the Dutch-East Indies spice traders and the colonial administrators who saw to it that the Christians received the more fertile lands, better education, employment in the civil service, and positions in the colonial army. Indeed, relations between Ambon's Protestants and the Dutch colonial administration were so good that many Ambonese fought on the Dutch side in Indonesia's war of independence and that they opted for their own republic—the short-lived Republic of South Maluku (RMS)—at the end of the war. This historical legacy sowed the seeds for Muslim resentment and continued distrust of Ambon's Christians.

The RMS was a passing phenomenon and integration into Indonesia was relatively painless. The Christians of Ambon maintained their social hegemony. Their educational advantage allowed them to continue to dominate the civil service, the education system, and the media. Indeed, it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that their position—and with it their unencumbered access to resources—started to erode. The Muslim challenge was the result of a number of factors. First, the educational gap was beginning to narrow. Ambonese Muslims entered universities and eventually competed for the civil service, education and media jobs that the Christians had for so long considered theirs. Second, on the back of President Suharto's transmigration program, a significant number of spontaneous migrants from neighboring Sulawesi arrived in Ambon and found their niche in the informal sector. These migrants, together with the local Muslims, became a demographic threat. And third, from the mid-1980s Suharto actively started courting Muslim support, thereby creating the perception that the government was pursuing an Islamization policy. This belief was further strengthened under his successor, BJ Habibie, who had been the chairman of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI)—an organization that saw its *raison d'être* to be the promotion of Muslim political, social and economic

interests. Not surprisingly, Ambon's Christians started to feel squeezed from all directions. They felt their sacrifice of giving up the RMS had never been truly appreciated. They were fed rumors of "Christian persecution," feared their loss of hegemony, were propelled by insecurity, and encouraged by the anarchy that had engulfed Indonesia since the fall of Suharto—and lashed out in January 1999. Following an otherwise trivial argument between a Christian bus driver and Muslim passenger, they attacked Ambon's Muslims and Muslim migrants, not driven by a sense of religious superiority or grand designs to destroy Islam and dismember Indonesia, but because they were afraid of losing their social position—and with it, crucially, their share of resources.

Dismembering Indonesia?

Laskar Jihad has not only proclaimed itself the defender of Ambon's Muslims but also of the unity and integrity of the Republic of Indonesia, again reaffirming their character as Islamic nationalists rather than international *jihadists*. Yet, like the belief that the Ambon conflict was religious in nature, the conviction that it is separatist was another "red herring." What has sometimes been described as Christian militias, Tentara Merah (red army), or Laskar Kristen is a haphazard collection of Christian fighters, fundamentally outnumbered and outgunned.

These Christian self defense groups were formed at the beginning of the conflict and gained momentum with the Muslim destruction of Ambon's oldest church, Silo. These groups were led by Agus Wattimena until his death on 22 March 2001 and then came under the leadership of Emang Nikijuluw, Pemmy Souissa, and Melkianus Yusuf Tuhumury. They coordinated what Ambon's Christians refer to as the "grass-roots" which comprised 25 small groups of 100-200 members in Ambon city as well as groups in the rest of the island. An estimated 60% of the members were between 12 and 25 years old—few were women. Unlike Laskar Jihad, they did not receive special training. In Tuhumury's words, "we pray first and then there are only two options – to die or to kill the enemy." The Christian militias used mainly traditional arms such as knives, machetes and poisoned arrows as well as home-made guns and a few automatic weapons, either acquired from the organic police or smuggled in from Kupang, West Timor. They were painfully aware that they were technologically at a disadvantage, with limited finances and faced with difficulties obtaining arms and ammunition. As a result, according to Tuhumury, 2,000 Christian fighters were killed in 2001. He attributes this to the Muslims having access to modern guns from Pindad and support from Laskar Jihad as well as from some elements in TNI. The grassroots agenda was defending Ambon's Christians and, arguably, the socio-political status quo. It never was a voice for separatism.

The Maluku Sovereignty Front (FKM) is a slightly different kettle of fish. It was founded by 53-year old physician Alex Manuputty on 15 July 2000 in Kudamati, Ambon but was not made public until 18 December. Its aim is the restoration of the sovereignty given to Alifuru people with the establishment of the Republic of South Maluku in 1950. Unlike the grassroots, FKM is not an armed but a moral movement. But it does not have much public sympathy despite Manuputty's claims that he has broad Muslim and Christian support. Both the Protestant Synod and the Catholic Diocese of Amboina as well as Muslim leaders have distanced themselves from FKM which they believe is no more than a passing phenomenon supported by a minority and even then not out of ideological conviction but frustration with the lack of response from Jakarta. FKM's small player status has been underlined by the fact that the organization remained relatively obscure until Manuputty and a handful of supporters raised the RMS flag on 25 April 2001 to mark the anniversary of the proclamation of that Republic. His subsequent arrest for violating articles 106 and 110 of the criminal code, dealing with insurgency and separatism, propelled FKM briefly into the public limelight, revealing that this organization is indeed separatist. But without supporters and arms it is not a particularly credible threat.

The group occupying the largest space in the threat perception of Laskar Jihad and Ambon's Muslims is the Republic of South Maluku (RMS) movement that was established by the exiled RMS leadership following the integration of all of Maluku into the Republic of Indonesia. Based in the Netherlands, they continued to function as a government in exile with the aim of continuing the struggle for a free Maluku. Yet the Netherlands, despite being the host country of an estimated 45,000 Malukans, never even acknowledged the RMS movement. RMS's struggle gained notoriety in the 1970s when demonstrations and violence propelled it into the Dutch public eye. But having achieved little else, support for the movement started to wane in the 1980s and by the 1990s it had imploded into 17 factions, was paralyzed by internal disputes and disregarded by a second generation whose interests in Maluku had given way to integration in Europe. Despite some attempts after the fall of Suharto and the loss of East Timor to enter into negotiations with the Indonesian government under Gus Dur, the momentum remained lost. Of the original leaders, three are still active: F.I.J. Tutuhatunewa, Pieter Thenu, and J.W. Wattilete. The fact that many of its offices have stayed unoccupied since the resignation or death of its holders is a clear indication that RMS is a movement of the past—a ghost of an era long gone.

Looking at these three elements of the Christian camp it is clear that the specter of separatism was and is not imminent. There is not going to be a replay of the East Timor scenario. Ambon is a horizontal conflict and not a vertical one.

Playing the Islamic Card

By far the most debilitating factor, however, was the widespread belief that religion was at the heart of Ambon's sectarian strife. Religion motivated Laskar Jihad's intervention and religion explains the reluctance and difficulties of both local and central government to tackle the conflict. The fact that ethno-religious differences were brushed under the carpet and sat upon by the military for the 32 years of Suharto rule meant that politicians and security personnel were ill equipped to deal with the conflict when it erupted in January 1999. This was exacerbated by the factors of surprise, inertia and apathy. Caught off-guard in the midst of the turmoil of *reformasi*, many hoped that the conflict would just blow over. Truth be told, Ambon did not rank particularly high on anyone's list of priorities in Jakarta.

The initial surprise was followed by inertia. Jakarta politicians after casting a brief look in the direction of Ambon returned to their own problems, relying on the security forces to bring the situation under control. The security forces, preoccupied with East Timor and the beginnings of internal reform were, in turn, looking for civilian guidance. The local military commander Max Tamaela, himself a Christian, feared that any intervention would jeopardize his own neutrality. Ambon's Muslim governor, Saleh Latuconsina, was equally paralyzed. In the meantime the sectarian strife spread to the army and police, splitting it along religious lines. In the end it took months to get the contaminated troops replaced—while Muslim and Christian civilians were arming themselves and entrenching their positions.

Apathy in Jakarta—exemplified by Gus Dur's statement in December 1999 that the Ambonese should solve their own problems—not only allowed for Laskar Jihad's establishment of training camps, but in fact, pushed them to do what the government had failed to do, namely address the conflict. Laskar Jihad's entry onto the playing field, however, only further complicated things. By not stopping Laskar Jihad the state effectively allowed itself to be usurped by a paramilitary organization. And Jakarta's political elite, seeing a sudden opportunity to bolster their own careers by playing the Islamic card, provided the last nail in the coffin of conflict resolution. Laskar Jihad had become a poisoned chalice. In simple terms, attempts to deal with the *mujabedeem* by evicting them from Ambon or disarming them were equated with being anti-Muslim. Attempts to foster reconciliation on the basis of Muslim-Christian parity and dialogue were branded as pro-Christian. As a result, Laskar Jihad's actions were not only condoned but actions against Laskar Jihad were obstructed.

There were, beyond doubt, local and individual interests, both military and civilian, which stoked the fires of conflict. But nothing had a more prolonging and paralyzing effect than the combination of the fear of being seen as anti-

Muslim combined with personal gain derived from tacit—and sometimes not so tacit—support for the Islamists. For instance, Gus Dur, the president himself, stated that he would not permit Laskar Jihad to go to Ambon. Yet they went in May 2000. Why were they allowed to go? Why did Gus Dur remain silent on the issue? Fear of being branded anti-Islamic was clearly one factor; fear of widespread Muslim unrest in Java—his own support base—was another.

When the police were asked why Laskar Jihad was not prevented from embarking on the ferry from Surabaya to Ambon, the answer is that every single member had a valid ticket and none were armed. Laskar Jihad continued to send fighters, openly collected for its *jihad* in the streets of Yogyakarta and Bogor, purchased arms in Java, shipped weapons to Ambon—and apparently none of this was sufficient to warrant a single arrest. In fact, the only decisive action in the early days was the closure of the training camp in Bogor by the police and—fearing the political fallout—then national police chief Rusdihardjo felt compelled to send a letter of apology to Jaffar Umar Thalib.

Another example of the fear of being branded anti-Muslim was the response to the combined battalion's (Batalyon Gabungan – Yongab) attempt to take on Laskar Jihad on 14 June 2001. Propelled into action by embarrassment over their initial failure, the collusion of contaminated security forces elements, as well as inertia—the military put together Yongab, comprising the special forces of the army, navy, and air force to deal with Ambon. In January 2001, this new policy saw its first success when Yongab lifted one of Laskar Jihad's strongholds in Hotel Wijaya II, confiscating numerous weapons and arresting Laskar Jihad members as well as TNI and police collaborators. As a result, the battalion managed to restore some of the shattered popular confidence in the security forces, allowing the police to temporarily arrest both Alex Manuputty in April and Jaffar Umar Thalib in May without the eruption of violence in

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Ambon. In June, during the process of disarming the militias on both sides as part of efforts to restore law and order,

Yongab clashed with Laskar Jihad in one of their sweeping operations, leaving 20 dead. While the high number of casualties indicates that something had gone terribly wrong, the political fallout was mind-boggling. Jaffar Umar Thalib, who in the meantime had been released without charges despite having ordered the public execution of one of his followers, had returned to commanding his *jihad* against Ambon's Christians and demanded the establishment of a human rights tribunal to prosecute Yongab—and received public support.

Fear of being seen as anti-Muslim was also accompanied by blatant opportunism. None more so than in the case of Speaker of the House of Representatives and National Mandate Party (PAN) leader Amien Rais who—having played a critical role in the downfall of Suharto—was now using Ambon as a means to undermine Gus Dur’s government in order to boost his own future presidential bid. Speaking at Laskar Jihad’s Jakarta rally in April 2000, he effectively called for *jihad*. Less high profile politicians such as Ahmad Sumargono of the Crescent Star Party (PBB) and Mashadi of the Justice Party (PK), consistently supported Laskar Jihad’s actions. Moreover, not an insignificant number of parliamentarians from PAN, PK, and even from the secular Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Golkar truly believed that without Laskar Jihad, Ambon’s Muslims would be left defenseless. They also, however, saw the conflict in Ambon as a means to push their own political agendas as well as a “safe” way to criticize the military that many of them blamed for the country’s current problems.

Not surprisingly, Laskar Jihad also found allies among other Muslim organizations, especially the ideologically like-minded such as Front Pembela Islam (FPI), which made its mark on the Indonesian political landscape with a series of raids on bars and restaurants selling hard liquor in Jakarta. Their ideological similarities are striking. FPI supports *jihad* in Ambon, Irian Jaya (Papua) and Nusa Tenggara and believes that Indonesia has become the victim of Western governments and the media, who are under control of either the Jews or the CIA.

Yet the ideologically like-minded are not Laskar Jihad’s sole source of Muslim support. Mainstream Muslim organizations have also collaborated in legitimizing Laskar Jihad by either opposing government action against the militants or by allowing them to disseminate their interpretation of Islam unchallenged. An example of the former is the protest by the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) against the arrest of Jaffar Umar Thalib in May 2001, following the stoning to death a Laskar Jihad member in Ambon for adultery under unilaterally imposed *Syariah* law. Interesting here is the difference with local Ambonese MUI leaders, who in March had opposed, albeit to no avail, Laskar Jihad’s imposition of that very same law as illegal, unconstitutional and contrary to Ambonese Muslim *adat* (custom).

However, more dangerous has been the tacit support for Laskar Jihad by not speaking out against its actions in the name of Islam and against its interpretation of the religion. By not engaging with Laskar Jihad on the territory of Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy, mainstream organizations gave credence to Laskar’s Jihad’s belief that Indonesian Islam is less authentic than its Arab *salafi* counterpart. They also abdicated their responsibilities of religious leadership vis-à-vis their own *umma* whose beliefs and practices Laskar Jihad has been

denigrating, and vis-à-vis the people and state of Indonesia by condoning a war in Ambon against fellow Indonesians in the name of Islam. This failure to take on Laskar Jihad on its own intellectual territory can be partially explained by the desire not to be “out-Islamised” by the radicals. Added to this is the belief that any real engagement with Laskar Jihad’s ideas would provide the militants with a platform from which to undermine the moderates. While these fears are understandable, they have also unfortunately robbed mainstream Muslim organizations of the unique opportunity and position to do what the politicians proved themselves incapable of—to rise above the parochial power-games and to provide true leadership.

11 September and Resolving the Conflict

Megawati’s dilemma since 11 September has been one of balancing external demands for cooperation in the war on terrorism against internal imperatives of maintaining consensus. This has been no more apparent than in the way she has since dealt with the conflict in Ambon and Laskar Jihad. International attention was drawn to Laskar Jihad when allegations surfaced that al-Qaeda had a training camp in the vicinity of Poso, Sulawesi—where Laskar Jihad also had its camps. The subsequent escalation of inter-communal violence in Poso and Tentena in November 2001 made quick action vital, as Indonesia felt it had to pre-empt possible foreign political intervention.

The Indonesian government at that point could quite easily have used the “al-Qaeda link” to clamp down on several militias, including Laskar Jihad. But, again, it chose not to. Heightened Muslim sensitivities since 11 September and the memory of the popular outcry following the June 2001 attempt by Yongab to disarm Laskar Jihad, demanded a different approach. So instead, an additional 2,600 troops were deployed to Poso while government mediators brought the warring factions together for talks, resulting in a peace agreement—the Malino Declaration—in December. With Poso resolved, government focus shifted to Ambon. Virtually replicating the Poso agreement, government mediators once again brought together Muslims and Christians with the result of another agreement—Malino II—in February 2002.

Yet, while Megawati’s balancing act successfully removed both conflicts from the international spotlight, the issue of Laskar Jihad remained untouched. Laskar Jihad was not a party to either set of negotiations and came out in opposition to both the Malino I and Malino II declarations. On the ground in Ambon, despite efforts to build popular support for the agreement and despite the general war weariness of the people, sporadic violence has continued. Closer analysis of the agreement and the conflict resolution process raise a number of issues that require further attention. For one, the leaders of the two

communities—without popular input—concluded the agreement in two days. As a result there has been little ownership of the agreement by the people. Demonstrations since the signing of Malino II, particularly by segments of the Muslim community, underline this fact—a situation socialization is currently aiming to address. Moreover, the actual causes of the conflict have so far not been addressed. Nor have the mutual perceptions and suspicions been dealt with. And last but not least, neither FKM nor Laskar Jihad supported the agreement. FKM has not dropped its separatist agenda and Laskar Jihad has not been disarmed. Thus, while the Indonesian government has achieved a reduction in violence and has been able to re-extend its sovereignty back over Ambon, it has not reestablished its monopoly on force. The issue of Laskar Jihad has not been addressed, only displaced as Laskar Jihad's fighters have moved on to other parts of Indonesia, most notably predominantly Christian Papua.

Conclusion

The events of 11 September have highlighted the seriousness of taking on organizations such as Laskar Jihad. This seriousness has only been underlined by Laskar Jihad's links with the Taliban and allegedly with Abu Sayyaf, which have not only boosted the organization's military capacity and but have also provided it with a fundamentally un-Indonesian ideological framework. Yet, at the same time, Laskar Jihad is still very clearly the product of a very specific Indonesian situation—the conflict in Ambon—and the Indonesian government's inability to manage the violence. Similarly, the threat emanating from Laskar Jihad is not an international but an internal one. It is a challenge to the mainstream interpretation of Islam in Indonesia and to the sovereignty of the state. And while it is too early to assess Laskar Jihad's success with respect to the former, its success with respect to the latter speaks for itself. Laskar Jihad has been allowed to maintain an illegal paramilitary presence, pursue a war of religious cleansing, declare *Syariah* law, and carry out a death sentence according to its dictates—irrespective of the state's judicial system and in contravention of the Indonesian constitution. As a result, it has achieved more in two years than the separatist Free Aceh and Free Papua movements have over the last twenty. It successfully undermined Indonesia's constitutional foundation, its territorial control and—most importantly—its monopoly on force. (W)