
In April, 2000 the first contingent of 111 “jihad fighters” sailed from the east Java port city of Surabaya to fight on the side of Muslims in the ongoing armed conflict between Muslims and Christians on the eastern Indonesian island of Ambon. By July the “Laskar Jihad” force in Ambon had reached nearly 3,000. In all an estimated 7,000 jihadis participated in the Ambon campaign before the movement fizzled and the organization was disbanded in October, 2002.

In Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia, Noorhaidi Hasan examines the emergence and decline of the Laskar Jihad in order to address broader questions about the causes of religious militancy and the threat posed by militant Islam in contemporary Indonesia. Rejecting common explanations of Laskar Jihad that place primary emphasis on either the machinations of domestic political and military elites or on the imperatives of ideology and the spread of global terrorism, Noorhaidi argues that the emergence of the group must be understood in the context of the fluid and uncertain political environment following the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, and that it is necessary to consider the sociological effects of rapid modernization and globalization, as well as the role of ideology in framing and motivating social action. Noorhaidi concludes that the Laskar Jihad was primarily a product of a particular political configuration and the opportunism of the group’s leader, Ja’far Umar Thalib, and therefore should not be viewed as indicating the strength of militant Islam in Indonesia.

While the intellectual foundations of the Laskar Jihad are based in Islamic reformism and the Indonesian exponents of reformist Islam in the first half of the 20th century, Noorhaidi traces the more immediate origins of the group to developments on Indonesian university campuses during the Suharto era. Islamic activism in Indonesia received an unintended boost in the late 1970s when the Suharto government declared a ban on all political activity by university students. The effect of this ban was to divert student interest and activity toward religion. In addition to greater religious observance and increased use of Islamic dress, the Islamic resurgence on Indonesian campuses also included a surge in interest and engagement with prevailing currents of Islamic political thought. Branches of a variety of transnational and indigenous Islamist organizations were established on Indonesian campuses for the purpose of promoting the Islamist message. Other formative influences on the development of radical Islam in Indonesia included Saudi Arabia, which promoted Wahhabism through an Arabic language school set up in Jakarta in 1981, and the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, where the military skills and radical ideas of Indonesian volunteers took shape and matured through association with like-minded jihadis.
The Laskar Jihad grew out of a particular strand of contemporary reformist thought that has come to be known as Salafism. Recognizable by their Arab-style dress and long beards, Salafi communities began to appear in Indonesia from the early 1980s. Like the earlier Salafist movement associated with the modernist reformers of the 19th century, contemporary Salafis advocate purifying religion of corrupt un-Islamic accretions in order to restore the pristine Islam of the early Muslim community. Salafism is distinguishable from other contemporary puritanical movements by its commitment to da’wah or Islamic propagation as the only acceptable form of Islamic activism. Salafis refrain from open criticism of government authorities and condemn all forms of political activity as un-Islamic innovation (bid’ah) and associationism (shirk). For Salafis the perfection of the Muslim umma is exclusively a matter of individual morality manifested by conforming one’s every action to the example of the Prophet.

The political environment in Indonesia in the late 1970s and the 1980s required that the Salafi movement remain clandestine. The dissemination of doctrine and recruitment to Salafi organizations was carried out through secret cells and underground networks. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the Suharto government’s hostility toward Islam began to relax as the regime sought to cultivate Muslim support to offset softening support for the government among the military. This new friendlier policy toward Islam meant that Salafi activity moved into the open with the establishment of a network of Salafi-oriented religious schools (pesantren) and the convening of Salafi study groups in mosques.

Noorhaidi’s analysis of the causes behind the emergence of an armed militia from an avowedly apolitical religious movement draws on concepts from social movement theory and incorporates the results of more than 100 interviews with Laskar Jihad cadres. The post-Suharto struggle for power produced a “political opportunity structure” that created an opening for new political actors. Critical to the emergence of Laskar Jihad was the alliance of hard-line Muslim groups with elements of the Indonesian military. Noorhaidi also emphasizes the importance of “framing,” a process whereby the conflict in Ambon was cast in terms of local and global themes that resonated with the Indonesian Muslim community. Before launching the mission to Ambon, the leaders of the movement sought and obtained fatwâs authorizing an armed jihad from prominent Middle Eastern Salafis. These fatwâs, which relied on information supplied by those seeking the rulings, justified the action in terms of the necessity of defending Ambonese Muslims from aggression at the hands of Christians.

The central figure in Noorhaidi’s account—the founder and dominant personality within Laskar Jihad—is an Indonesian Salafi of Hadrami-Arab descent named Ja’far Umar Thalib. Raised and educated in a staunchly reformist environment, Ja’far studied briefly at the Saudi-run Arabic school in Jakarta and the Mawdudi Islamic Institute in Pakistan before joining the Afghan campaign in 1987. In Afghanistan Ja’far displayed and reinforced his Wahhabi inclinations by associating with the Jama’at al-Da’wa ila al-Qur’an wa Ahl al-Hadith, a Saudi-supported group