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COMMENTARY

The Arab Invasion

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JAKARTA, Indonesia -- The headquarters of the Front for the Defense of Islam is reached by a narrow alley just off a one-lane street in a residential neighborhood near downtown Jakarta. But step inside the carpeted reception area, decorated by a mural of a desert mosque and partially open to the sky, and it's as if you've arrived in a bedouin kingdom.



Habib Rizieq

Your host is Habib Mohammad Rizieq Shihab, 41. He is dressed entirely in white, a religious conceit far from typical of most Indonesian *ulama*, or experts in Islamic theology. To the question, "Where are you from?" Mr. Rizieq is quick to explain that he is descended from the Quraishi tribe, from what is now Yemen. Just how he knows this isn't clear, but it's the symbolism that counts: The Prophet Mohammad was a Quraishi, and the tribe is entrusted with the responsibility for protecting God's House, the Qe'eba, in Mecca. Mr. Rizieq, in fact, is a native of Jakarta.

For the better part of the past decade, Mr. Rizieq and his Front -- known by its Indonesian initials FPI -- have played a prominent role in Indonesian political life, although the FPI is not a political party. It is an Islamist vigilante group, with the self-appointed mission of policing and, if necessary, violently suppressing "un-Islamic" behavior. Squads of FPI militants have forcibly shut down hundreds of brothels, small-time gambling operations, discos, nightclubs and bars serving alcoholic beverages. They have also stormed "unauthorized" Christian houses of worship, attacked peaceful demonstrators

from Indonesia's renascent Communist party, trashed the office of the National Commission on Human Rights and rampaged through airports looking for Israelis to kill.

"Non-Muslims from *Dar el-Harb* [countries at war with Muslims], if they are in Indonesia, then it is the duty of Muslims to oppose them to the last drop of blood," he says. "George Bush can be killed, too." As for the legitimacy of attacks on American diplomats and civilians, "this is a dilemma," though after a moment's reflection he concludes that they "cannot be disturbed" since they are here with the consent of a Muslim government.

The source of Mr. Rizieq's views -- and of the Islamic radicalism that increasingly infects this country -- becomes a little clearer as he tells his life story. A poor but talented student, he won a full scholarship to study at King Saud University in Riyadh. He says he was "not influenced by Wahhabism," which he found excessively literal in its readings of the Quran and Islamic law. As

evidence of his moderation, he observes that in *his* future Shariah state, authorities would not "cut off people's hands for stealing right away. First, you have to raise people up."

Still, Saudi attitudes plainly rubbed off on Mr. Rizieq, particularly in their obsession with religious purity. "I violently reject the mixing of non-Islamic and Islamic theology," he says in reference to the syncretic practices of Indonesian Muslims who often incorporate such pre-Islamic rituals as communing with the spirits of the dead. Muslims who do not pray five times a day, or do not fast during Ramadan, are "infidels, deviants." The same goes for heterodox Islamic sects such as the Ahmadiyya, as well as the great 13th century Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi. He is just as opposed to *topanacasila*, Indonesia's secular and pluralist official ideology, which he contrasts invidiously with the Islamic concept of dhimmitude. "The status of being a *dhimmi* [religious minority] is an exalted one because you are under Islam and you are protected as long as you respect its rules."

Mr. Rizieq claims to have five million followers; in an apparent joke, he proposes to send them to New York "to study and learn." The real figure is probably in the tens of thousands at most. But there is no question Mr. Rizieq has magnified the FPI's influence with his modulated (and so far non-lethal) use of violence, which has helped stave off a full-scale government crackdown while allowing him to bully businesses, communities and individuals at will. He has also reportedly benefited from the support of the so-called Green (Islamic) generals, who rose to prominence in the last years of the Suharto era as the dictator, in a pattern common to ostensibly secular Muslim leaders, sought to shore up his regime by appealing to his "Islamic" constituency.

Less clear is whether the FPI also gets financial support from abroad; knowledgeable observers suggest Mr. Rizieq gets all the money he needs by extorting the victims of his Islamic purification campaigns. But as Imdadun Rahmat, a leading scholar of Islamic extremism in Indonesia, notes, "the radicals are all drinking from the same breast," by which he means the ideological inspiration and financial support provided by Saudi Arabia. The Mecca-based Muslim World League, for example, is notorious for sending its representatives to Indonesia with suitcases of cash to fund its pet projects, often extremist religious boarding schools. The Saudi religious affairs office in Jakarta finances the publication of a million books a year translated from Arabic into Indonesian, according to Angel Rabasa of the Rand Corporation.

Then there is the Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, or LIPIA, a Saudi-funded university in Jakarta, which offers full scholarships to top students. "LIPIA was designed to create cadres," says Mr. Rahmat. Its graduates include Jafar Umar Thalib, the founder of Laskar Jihad, a terrorist group responsible for the death of thousands of Indonesian Christians in the Moluccas.

For his part, Mr. Rizieq tries to distance himself from that kind of violence -- although not by much. "If I wanted to I could always bomb these places," he says. "I'd rather have a physical confrontation." He adds that he is in contact with Jemaah Islamiyah, responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing, but only in order to persuade it to change its ways. Why would he set his troops upon mere gamblers or prostitutes while conversing with murderers? "When there is universal agreement among Muslims on [the immorality of] adultery or fornication then we will act violently. When there is no agreement [on issues like terrorism] then the approach is dialogue."

It's a curious form of tolerance, conceived by a man who arrogates to himself the right to define what is and is not Islamic. Is it a harbinger for Indonesia? That will depend on whether his country seeks to remain a part of Asia, or become a satellite of the Middle East.