

**The Call of ISIS: The Medium and the Message Attracting  
Southeast Asians**

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# Southeast Asia Focus

**W**e are pleased to release Volume 7, Issue 4 (May 2015) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta) (ISSN 2382-6444) by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

The threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) has reverberated in Southeast Asia, from where individuals, including young women and individuals with families, have travelled to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. The seriousness of the threat of ISIS however, comes from Southeast Asian fighters who will return home from battle with fresh combat skills, radical ideologies and extensive networks. The potential for these Southeast Asian terrorist returnees to mount attacks and to further radicalise and recruit other individuals, is therefore, of notable concern to governments in this region.

In this issue, **Anton Chan** discusses the medium and the message used by ISIS that has appealed to its legions of supporters in Southeast Asia. He argues that ISIS has, in particular, managed to sustain its end times narrative of a caliphate through sophisticated messaging strategies and the group's holding of physical territory. This has helped project a sense of legitimacy for the group in the eyes of a significant minority of Southeast Asian supporters.

**Laura Steckman** discusses the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), in the context of Myanmar's simmering inter-communal tensions and rising right-wing Buddhist nationalism. She observes that ISIS' success in radicalising and recruiting through the social media has impacted the Southeast Asian region, including in Myanmar. She argues that, with the growing penetration of social media networks and mobile technologies in Myanmar, the likelihood of local militant groups attempting to link-up with ISIS poses a serious challenge to the newly emerging democracy.

**Muh Taufiqurrohman** presents four distinct case studies of individuals who have succeeded or failed in their bid to travel to Syria and Iraq, to highlight the role of ISIS' networks operating within Indonesia. He argues that, despite heightened interest, the road to Syria and Iraq is fraught with multiple challenges, and is not as easy as is often assumed by those individuals seeking to join ISIS.

**Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin** discusses the spread of ISIS' influence among Muslims in the context of the Southeast Asian online domain. She argues that, presently, the voices of the anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online movements are displaying an increased tolerance for terrorism. The strategic shutdown of specific websites is therefore imperative. She however, recommends that this should also be complemented with counter-ideological community initiatives, both in the online, as well as in the real-world domains.

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# The Call of ISIS: The Medium and the Message Attracting Southeast Asians

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Anton Chan

*Since the declaration of the so-called caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the group has been able to attract fighters from around the world to join its ranks. Southeast Asia is not exempted from this phenomenon, where hundreds of Southeast Asians have already travelled to Syria and joined ISIS. ISIS' transnational appeal, which has seen hundreds of Southeast Asian fighters lured into joining the group, will be discussed in this article.*

## Introduction

Southeast Asian terrorist groups have had a long history of links to overseas conflicts. In fact, the most capable individuals from Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) – the previous predominant pan-southeast Asian terrorist organisation – as well as those from other local militant groups, had personally fought or trained in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. JI also had organisational ties to Al Qaeda, and plans to bomb targets in Singapore were found in Al Qaeda camps captured by U.S. military forces during the war in Afghanistan (Ministry of Home Affairs White Paper 2003).

After JI was exposed as a regional threat, following the discovery of the JI Singapore cell in December 2001 and the Bali bombings perpetrated in October 2002, Southeast Asian governments responded to the terrorist group by eliminating or imprisoning many of JI's prominent leaders. The killing or capturing of a large number of Southeast Asia's key operational terrorist leaders, such as Indonesians Hambali, Dulmatin and Abu Bakar Bashir, and Malaysians Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohammad Top, has gradually led to a marked decline in JI's ability to maintain a robust organisation, to recruit, plan and to carry out high profile attacks.



The Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, the bombing of the JW Marriott hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia in August 2003, the bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in September 2004, the bombing of the Philippine *SuperFerry* fourteen in February 2004 and the twin attacks to the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels in Jakarta in 2009, all bear witness to the skill level and capabilities of those operatives.

The success of those attacks, in terms of planning and execution, can be attributed back to the time of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, during which the perpetrators gained both training and experience on the battlefield.

The conflict in Syria has, however, once again presented Southeast Asian terrorists with a theatre for which the fighters may develop their military skills, strengthen their ideology and regional contacts, to considerably heighten the terrorist threat to the region in time to come.

Abu Bakar Bashir, the jailed extremist ideologue, in 2012 had described Syria as the new “University for Jihad”. At present, Abu Bakar Bashir’s words have come to pass, as there have reports of large numbers of individuals departing their home countries and streaming into Syria and Iraq to participate in violent jihad, alongside various groups, most significantly, with ISIS. There is evidence that Southeast Asian jihadist organisations have also established ties with ISIS.

### Numbers from Southeast Asia

According to an estimate by the government, as of July 2014, ‘a handful’ of Singaporeans were fighting in the Middle East and authorities believe that the figure has not changed greatly. As of January 2015, the Malaysian government has stated that there may be around 70 jihadists in Syria and Iraq, while Indonesia’s counter-terrorist unit has reported over 500 individuals in the country, known for being the world’s most populous Muslim country, who are participating in the conflict in the Middle East in one way or another.

In the Philippines, official reports have indicated that there are presently, two Filipino fighters in Syria. However, unverified figures given by various sources have placed the number as high as 200.

**“ The conflict in Syria has, however, once again presented Southeast Asian terrorists with a theatre for which the fighters may develop their military skills, strengthen their ideology and regional contacts, to considerably heighten the terrorist threat to the region in time to come... ”**

Southeast Asian terrorist returnees can easily, as elsewhere, carry out attacks in their home countries, establish training camps to recruit and pass on their skills. The potential for Southeast Asian terrorist fighter returnees to act as catalysts to further radicalise and recruit from the region, is also of serious concern to Southeast Asian governments.

### The Medium

It has often been said that the medium is just as important as the message and in this, ISIS has managed to prove itself a master of communication. In early June 2014, ISIS shocked and captivated the world by capturing Mosul in Iraq, took a second city, Tikrit, the following day, advancing towards other locations in Iraq and seizing more territory throughout the month. The group rounded up their military successes by declaring a caliphate with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as Caliph. Less than a week later, Baghdadi himself appeared in a video speaking from the Grand Mosque in Mosul.

The spectacular campaign — both military operations, as well as propaganda — was a resounding success. Subsequently, the world's attention was focused on ISIS, its continuing territorial advances and atrocities, and the group's name was plastered onto TV screens worldwide. As captivating as ISIS' early moves were, the world's media has a short attention span.

Nonetheless, ISIS has, since those early days, been able to keep itself in the media spotlight through the online domain. Specifically, both ISIS' official media organisations, as well as its fighters, have acted as ambassadors of the group in the online realm.

ISIS' inaugural issue of its online magazine, *Dabiq*, was titled *The Return of Khilafah* — a symbolic reference to the caliphate. Published by its in-house *Al Hayat* Media Centre, *Dabiq* was certainly produced well in advance of the military campaign and well-timed, given its release soon after the caliphate was declared. A professional publication by any standards, *Dabiq* articles commonly rail against ISIS' enemies, seeking to convince Muslims, including those from Southeast Asia, to abandon their homes to join the so-called caliphate.

In addition, ISIS' members have harnessed online social media platforms to publicise their ideology to an extent hitherto unforeseen by any terrorist group. Blogs of Malaysian ISIS members include that of 'Shams' — a 26-year-old female who quit her job and left her home and placed herself in an arranged marriage to an ISIS militant in Syria. Her blog is a romanticised account of her life under ISIS, providing a dangerous source of inspiration for other women to join her in a similar capacity.

Based on evidence on social media websites, there have been numerous other militants from Malaysia who are providing advice to aspiring jihadists on how to join them in Syria. ISIS has also released videos specifically targeting the Southeast Asian population. One such video is entitled *Education in the Caliphate*, which features Malay-speaking children studying in an ISIS school and handling weapons.

ISIS' highly stylised recorded executions have both shocked and fixated the world with abject depictions of violence. These execution videos

**“ ISIS itself has also released videos specifically targeting the Southeast Asian population. One such video is entitled *Education in the Caliphate*, which features Malay-speaking children studying in an ISIS school and handling weapons. ”**

have made many turn away in horror, and have also kept ISIS in the world's media spotlight, captivating the attention of the many.

### **The Message**

There is nothing entirely new about the narrative that ISIS has been using to win supporters to its cause. In particular, ISIS has constantly invoked the narrative of an Islamic 'caliphate' and made reference to Islamic end-of-times prophecies, which are religiously appealing, and although well-disputed by Islamic theologians, appear to be further validated by the group's continued holding of physical territory.

ISIS and its supporters use both an emotive appeal, as well as a pseudo-religious ideology previously also manipulated by JI. Previously, JI members in Singapore had conducted religious classes (Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Tuty Raihanah Mostarom 2011) within their homes.

Under the guise of true Islamic teaching sessions, JI members indoctrinated their unwitting candidates with radical teachings and framing these teachings around the perceived injustices experienced by the Muslim world, primarily at the hands of Western countries in general.

According to the PUPJI (*Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah*, translated to mean, The General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah), JI's core objective was to establish a Southeast Asian-based *Daulah Islamiyah* (a regional Islamic caliphate). Through the process of ideological indoctrination, JI's objectives are to imbue in the candidate the rationale for creating the nucleus of an Islamic society, subsequently to form the core of the *Daulah Islamiyah* (Mohammed Bin Ali undated).

With this end in mind, JI encouraged its members to engage in armed combat and to carry out terrorist attacks, with the specific goal of furthering its regional agenda of bringing about such a caliphate. ISIS' narrative is similar, but much stronger because of the fact that it has actually managed to seize hold of large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq – distinguishing the utopian from the real statehood.

Additionally, the group has established a semblance of governance, with its own brand of law and order, a social and administrative system and even an economy. ISIS has used its vast wealth, gathered through diverse sources, including from selling illicit oil and energy resources from territories which it has seized, to fund its growing membership. ISIS supporters have claimed that while Al Qaeda or JI only dreamt of Islamic States, ISIS has in fact has set up an Islamic State, with the necessary characteristics of a state actor, in a physical space.

When ISIS first declared a caliphate, there were reservations from Southeast Asian extremists about joining the group. Its brutality was well-known, and considered extreme, even by other jihadists, and its outright defiance of Ayman Zawahiri's advice to support Jabhat al Nusra (JN) in the Syrian theatre had created a significant rift within the broader jihadist community. There was doubt among extremists, especially those who were more familiar with Al Qaeda's branding, specifically, concerning ISIS' ability to cement its power. Nonetheless, ISIS defied expectations by expanding its footprints across core provinces in both Syria and Iraq. With time, ISIS has also created a living space not only for fighters, but also for non-combatants, making active advertisements to recruit doctors, engineers and media professionals to the conflict zones to help strengthen ISIS' army, a source for which has in effect, legitimised the Islamic

**“ ...the motivation for families to bring their young children to such a dangerous area stems from a sense of allegiance to the ISIS *ummah*, and an increased misperception that the ISIS caliphate is a religious duty or obligation for all Muslims. ”**

State's appeal as a 'global' caliphate. Furthermore, a practical issue for many Southeast Asians aspiring to join groups fighting in Syria and Iraq in the past was the fear of a culture shock, given how ISIS was, at its heart, composed of Arab-speaking fighters. This had raised concerns about the potential difficulties in communication, practices, and even dietary habits by would-be recruits.

However, ISIS seemed cognisant of this, given that it has already established a unit under its wing. This new unit comprises of non-Arabic, Malay speaking fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia. Originally called Katibah Nusantara Lid -Daulah Islamiyyah (Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), the unit was renamed Majmua al Arkhability to highlight its Arabic connection, in early 2015.

Given how ISIS has been able to strengthen its credibility as a transnational entity, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, new, more worrying trends on the ground have emerged. Besides travelling to join ISIS in their capacity as foreign terrorist fighters, Southeast Asians have also joined the group in other capacities, such as in the case of one Singaporean woman and her Malaysian husband. 'Shams', as mentioned earlier, travelled to wed a jihadist fighter.

The woman is believed to be working as a cook, while her 18-year-old daughter teaches English to the children of other jihadists. Another child, a 14-year-old boy, is also believed to be fighting with jihadists in Syria.

It stands to reason that the motivation for families to bring their young children to such a dangerous area stems from the misguided idea of an allegiance to the ISIS *ummah*, and an overall increased misperception that the ISIS caliphate is a religious duty or obligation for all Muslims.

This has led to a phenomenon of Southeast Asian families travelling to make a life in a foreign land through *hijrah* (Islamic migration) to ISIS' false caliphate. The infection of ISIS' ideological falsehoods are strong enough for those individuals to misperceive an alignment between ISIS' practices and its Islamic tenets, and furthermore, to become blinded to the brutality and savagery as practiced by ISIS.

### Conclusion

The dangers posed by Southeast Asian ISIS fighters, both to the current conflict zone, and to their home countries, cannot be underestimated. Having perpetrated violence in the Middle East, ISIS fighters returning to their home countries will not only serve as inspirational figures for aspiring jihadists to travel to the conflict zone, but could also be emboldened to carry out attacks with their skills acquired from the frontlines. ISIS' purported narrative that it has established a 'caliphate,' will remain an enduring narrative for extremists within Southeast Asia.

As long as ISIS can sustain the fiction that it does indeed provide a legitimate Islamic government, it will continue to attract disillusioned citizens to join its ranks. Governments in Southeast Asia and around the world must be prepared to both deal with returning extremists, not by simply ejecting them by denying them entry, as some Western governments have done, but by immediately picking up returnee fighters upon their return, with thorough debriefings, detention and eventual reintegration, through comprehensive and contextualised rehabilitation programmes.

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# Myanmar at the Crossroads: The Shadow of Jihadist Extremism

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Laura Steckman

*As Myanmar transitions from decades of army-led isolation into a democracy, the country is now at the crosshairs of religious extremist and terrorist activities. Myanmar contends with continuing communal strife primarily between the Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya, and rising Buddhist right-wing nationalism. Against this backdrop, there are threats posed by local insurgent groups, including the probability that these groups might attempt to link up with jihadist terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). Along with the intensification of social media networks and mobile technologies within the country, the danger that jihadist extremists may spread their ideologies through such platforms, in an attempt to expand their influence, and eventually, their caliphate concepts, should not be discounted.*

## Introduction

Myanmar is at the crossroads of change. As the government works to modernise its telecommunications infrastructure and reduce its vulnerability to threats through its enhanced security apparatus, the nation must meanwhile contend with jihadist and extremist elements that will inject new pro and anti-government sentiment into the society. In transitioning to democracy, Myanmar's internal security landscape is beset with complex security challenges, including threats from the militant jihadist groups in the surrounding region. The threat is further complicated by the democratic expansion of spaces, given the growing penetration of social media networks and the opportunity for religious extremist groups to use them to radicalise and recruit both the Muslim (Rohingya and Kaman) and non-Muslim population (primarily Bamar, Karen and Shan) in Myanmar.

## Challenge of Jihadist Social Media Networks

New media technologies — encompassing social media and mobile phone messaging applications — are fast gaining a foothold in the country. As such, Myanmar's national government currently faces an ever-growing challenge associated with governing democratic spaces within new media technologies, and mitigating its attendant effects, which include the spread of extremist narratives.

Myanmar had been an insular country since the mid-twentieth century. Only recently has it opened its doors to form official diplomatic and corporate relationships to replace those abandoned under the dictatorship. Virtually untouched by external forces for half a century, Myanmar's armed dissident and insurgent groups within the country waged traditional guerrilla warfare against the state in relative isolation. Insurgent messages rarely reached abroad, and barely penetrated into Myanmar, due to the highly regulated and out-dated telecommunications infrastructure. Closed-door national policies served to stifle incendiary speech and communications.

This changed, however, with the privatisation of Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), which led to the establishment of the Myanmar Telecom in 2012, and the gradual implosion of wireless communication networks thereafter, a process by which Myanmar has formed a bridge with the rest of the world.

Prior to Myanmar's first post-privatisation telecommunications expansion with the Telecommunications Law of 2013, outsider groups predominantly manipulated information to goad Muslims to support Myanmar's Rohingya violently. Despite the limited internet access, online jihadist propaganda on YouTube videos and in photographs were already circulating, albeit at low levels.

The country's 2012 internal conflict led to a major wave of anti-Burmese, pro-Rohingya jihadist rhetoric. Violence again broke out when the local Buddhist community in Rakhine (Arakan) State protested the murder and gang rape of a Buddhist woman by Muslim perpetrators. Long-standing Buddhist-Muslim religious tensions were ignited as a result, leading to rioting and decimation of villages. The conflict left hundreds dead and thousands displaced. In the aftermath of the violence, jihadist propaganda exploded

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across internet forums. Pictures supposedly taken locally, appeared on regional social media platforms, seemingly to depict the Muslims' victimisation. These pictures, presented as factual representations, functioned as propaganda intended to deceive Muslims worldwide through emotive appeals.

Foreign social media users recognised mistakes in the photos, noting that few of them originated in Myanmar. Pakistani and Indonesian forum participants tracked the mislabelled photos' origins (Tribune.com.pk 2012; Kaskus.co.id 2012). The Central Tibetan Administration (2012) cried foul at misapplied photos of Tibetan monks and traced the misidentified photos to Pakistan.

Four possible Pakistani sources had culpability: the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which shortly thereafter declared itself the defender of Burmese Muslims (Tribune.com.pk 2012); the Jamat-e-Islami and the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam, two conservative Islamist parties; and the Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD), the charity branch of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (CSM 2012). The pictures spread false propaganda to Muslims worldwide, aiming to incite the *ummah* (community). Clearly, the Rohingya situation became a focal point for regional extremist groups to rally a response to Myanmar's little-known Muslim plight.

The June 2012 riots in Rakhine State spread to parts of central and northern Myanmar in the following months. In addition to displacing approximately 100,000 people, the continued status of Rohingya Muslims as a persecuted religious and ethnic minority continued to provide ample avenues for exploitation by the anti-

Burmese, pro-Rohingya extremist groups. Numerous terrorist groups adopted the Rohingya cause as a justification to conduct jihad locally, including the Rohingya themselves. For instance, in mid-2013, an Indonesian extremist news website, *Arrahmah* (Mercy) published exclusive photos featuring Rohingya jihadists in military-styled formations and practising shooting drills (Arrahmah 2013).

These photographs appeared on popularised jihadist forums, including on Pakistan's Bab-ul-Islam, Al Qaeda's (AQ's) primary English language forum, *Ansar al-Mujahideen*, and Russia's Kavkaz Centre. These photos attest to the viral nature of social media networks and the ability for such networks to spread emotively-charged extremist propaganda, including even the Rohingya, who are themselves depicted as being radicalised.

Since 2012, a number of active jihadist militant groups in the surrounding regions, particularly in South and Central Asia, have placed Myanmar at the centre of a militant jihadist nexus. These groups include the TTP, Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and ISIS, along with lesser known local groups, such as Harkat-ul-Jihadi Islami (plus its Bangladesh and Arakan wings), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM, or The Army of Muhammad), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Myanmar Muslim Army and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO).

Hence, how the country fares in dealing with these groups and in limiting their influence will have major ramifications in shaping the peace and stability of the country as Myanmar transitions to democracy.

### **Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)'s Interest in Myanmar**

In March 2014, Al Qaeda's As-Sahab media centre released a video trailer for the group's new magazine, *Resurgence*. The original trailer indicated that AQ had designs on South Asia as its next major battleground. With the magazine's release, AQ affirmed that it included Myanmar in its regional aspirations. AQIS has staked claims in South Asia, with the aim of establishing a South Asian-based caliphate encompassing India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. AQIS has claimed that the aforementioned caliphate is

**“...the continued status of Rohingya Muslims as a persecuted religious and ethnic minority continued to provide ample avenues for exploitation by the anti-Burmese, pro-Rohingya extremist groups.”**

a “humble effort to revive the spirit of jihad in the Muslim *ummah*.”

Al Qaeda's *Resurgence* magazine references Myanmar six times, most notably as an area plagued by Western-created neocolonialism and irreligiousness and oppressed by the Buddhist national government. Despite a strong focus on Myanmar, AQIS remains a potential danger because it could capitalise on existing inter-communal tensions.

At the same time, AQIS is unlikely to gain traction within Myanmar as it is a small organisation operating primarily in Pakistan and India (OneIndia 2015). AQIS' small numbers and geographic distance impede its ability to recruit directly from Myanmar's Muslims.

The danger that AQIS poses, lies in the potential that it may form alliances with other violent jihadist elements in South or Southeast Asia. AQIS could rekindle old alliances from the 1980s Afghanistan conflict and their successors, like insular Southeast Asia's Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), to capitalise on Myanmar's religious tensions and impact its volatile Rakhine state, or seed fear among the general population.

AQIS already disseminates Burmese language material to entice potential Rohingya jihadists (Bashar 2015). Such alliances could develop if South Asian extremist groups reconciled some of their ideological differences, even temporarily.



## Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Connection with Myanmar

Extremists with ties to Myanmar pose a greater threat than foreign-based radical groups, largely due to their local knowledge of the country. Abu Zarr al-Būrmī, a Pakistani national of Burmese heritage, holds the title of *mufti* (spiritual leader) for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

He is also an avowed TTP affiliate, an ally of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), commonly referred to as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and a mouthpiece for multiple Central Asian foreign fighters in Waziristan. Al-Būrmī is a talented linguist who has produced speeches and uploaded them onto YouTube in Arabic, Uzbek and Burmese, and has also been cited for allegedly giving interviews in German (Flade 2012).

Al-Būrmī is not exclusively a religious leader. He participates in para-diplomatic strategising for the groups with which he is affiliated. When he visited the Rakhine state in 2012, with Nur Bashar, an AQ explosives expert, he helped to reinvigorate a relationship with the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), an organisation known for running military training camps on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border (Gupta 2013).

In the 1990s, the RSO had loose connections to AQ through JI and sent Rohingya to fight for the Taliban (Irrawaddy 2014). Al-Būrmī's association with multiple jihadist groups and multinational connections indicates that he functions as an inter-group liaison, much like his role in building the alliance between AQ and RSO.

His Burmese background, speculated as ethnically Rohingya, combined with his ability to speak the Burmese language, heighten his credibility and authenticity in a way that foreign jihadists cannot imitate.

## ISIS Threat to Myanmar

ISIS reinvented the image of the traditional transnational terrorist group after publicly breaking ties with AQ and by forcibly usurping territory in Syria and Iraq ostensibly to create a caliphate. In the caliphate's June 2014 inauguration speech from Mosul, ISIS' leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had identified Myanmar as a battleground for future jihad.

**“ ...Uighur refugees have been found in Myanmar, as they make their way from Xinjiang, through Yunnan and into Southeast Asia. ”**

In his statement, he specifically called on Muslims worldwide to rise up and embrace armed jihad.

Notably, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi correlated the Rohingya to the minority Muslim populations in the Central African Republic (Seleka) and China (Uighur) (Bayoumy 2014). Apart from this reference, ISIS central has not expressed any imminent interest in Myanmar.

Although ISIS has not had apparent success in targeting Burmese nationals, Uighur refugees have been found in Myanmar, as they make their way from Xinjiang, through Yunnan and into Southeast Asia.

ISIS has proven more successful in recruiting Chinese nationals into its ranks, particularly those from the Uighur militant movement, ETIM. The threat of radicalised Uighur militants making inroads into Myanmar and seeking to link up with ISIS cannot be discounted. In this instance, the danger is that ISIS may radicalise and recruit Myanmar's Uighur refugees.

Evidence exists that some Burmese have embraced ISIS' jihadist rhetoric. In November 2014, the Hindustan Times reported that India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested Khalid Mohammad, a Burmese citizen and Rohingya Muslim, in connection with an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion in India's West Bengal state. At the time of his arrest, Mohammad possessed manuals on making explosives, in addition to pro-ISIS jihadist literature (IBT 2014).

Actors like Khalid Mohammad, who adopt pro-ISIS rhetoric and embrace violent jihadism, pose a danger wherever they are located. Although there are no confirmed Burmese nationals who have travelled to Syria or Iraq as foreign fighters to date, with many Rohingya attempting to flee oppressive conditions in Rakhine state, their routes to Pakistan or through Southeast Asia could potentially open a path to ISIS, given their disenchantment with the state.

### **Threat of Right-wing Buddhist Nationalism**

Pro-violence and extremist rhetoric have not been limited to radical Muslim jihadists. Ashin Wirathu, a controversial Buddhist monk from the northern city of Mandalay, has used social media to promote unrest and violence against Muslims. Wirathu leads the 969 Movement in Myanmar, a nationalist movement opposed to Islamic influence in a country with an overwhelming Buddhist majority.

In July 2014, Wirathu exacerbated religious tensions on Facebook by inventing a fictitious rape story wherein a Muslim man forced himself on a Buddhist woman. The story incited riots across Mandalay that led to two deaths and fourteen injuries (CNN 2014).

Wirathu continued to spread his message on YouTube and on Facebook where he currently has more than 38,000 followers. Since 2012, Wirathu has catapulted into public view with his firebrand speeches preaching animosity and targeting the Rohingya Muslims.

For Wirathu and his followers, Buddhism equates with a narrow nationalism. Hence, Wirathu's social media campaigns against the Rohingya specifically justify violence as an offensive measure aimed at preventing Muslims from establishing their own Islamic state within Myanmar.

This campaign of violent extremism has earned Wirathu the nickname of the 'Burmese bin Laden' (Al Jazeera 2015). More recently, Wirathu has started rumours of an ISIS infiltration into Myanmar as he continues to instil Islamophobia in the Buddhist majority (Burma Times 2015).

**“ Pro-violence and extremist rhetoric have not been limited to radical Muslim jihadists. Ashin Wirathu, a controversial Buddhist monk from the northern city of Mandalay, has used social media to promote unrest and violence against Muslims. ”**

### **Conclusion**

The immediate prospects for extremists to impose radical ideologies on Myanmar are unlikely, given the government's vigilance to the threat. However, given the presence of the militant jihadist interest in Myanmar, as well as the history of inter-communal tensions among the various groups and right-wing Buddhist nationalism, the threat should nonetheless, be taken seriously.

This is particularly so, given the fact that until recently, it was difficult to access the archaic communications infrastructure, and information shared in Myanmar only reached a very exclusive, wealthy portion of the population. Myanmar faces the threat from regional extremist groups who may utilise ISIS as an inspirational motif to incite violence.

For instance, the TTP, having recently declared formal allegiance to ISIS, could decide to renew its commitment to defending the cause of the Burmese Rohingya. Likewise, the JMB has announced plans to incorporate Myanmar into a more localised Islamic state with credible links with ISIS (Dhaka Tribune 2015).

In December 2014, the Dhaka police arrested three Rohingya militants, with ties to the JMB, RSO and Arakan Rohingya Union, after they were found to be in possession of explosives (Daily Star 2014). These cases of local and regional radical groups in Myanmar — with international ties — indicate that there are both Muslim and non-Muslim actors who have an interest in making Myanmar part of a caliphate or, should the 969 Movement's anti-Muslim goals triumph, a state with no significant Muslim influence.

According to official estimates, 80% of Myanmar's population is expected to gain internet access by 2016. With a significant proportion of the population in Myanmar gaining access to social media and mobile phone technologies, a large portion of people who have hitherto remained unexposed to pro-violence messaging will gain exposure to extremist content disseminated online by anti-Burmese/pro-Rohingya individuals, and right-wing Buddhist nationalists.

As local, regional and transnational extremist groups continue to harness telecommunications technologies, seeking to expand their virtual footprint, Myanmar is truly at a crossroads of potentially malign interests. It is therefore incumbent on the people and the government to navigate these challenges in the country's transition to democracy.

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# The Road to ISIS: How Indonesian Jihadists Travel to Iraq and Syria

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Muh Taufiqurrohman

*Since mid-2013, an increasing number of individuals linked to various Indonesian groups have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS. However, as the case studies of four individuals who were either members of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) or Jamaah Tauhid Wal Jihad (JTWJ) presented in this article demonstrate, the road to Syria and Iraq is not as easy as is often assumed by ISIS supporters seeking to join the group.*

## Introduction

Since the July 2014 declaration of a caliphate by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader of the terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), there are at least 18 extremist groups which are supporting ISIS in Indonesia. Among these 18 extremist groups, four of them are *takfiri* groups (Sunni Muslim movements accusing other movements of apostasy (Blanchard 2009)) and include, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), Jamaah Tauhid Wal Jihad (JTWJ), Darul Islam Ring Banten (Banten Faction of Islamic State or DI Ring Banten), Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT, or the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia) and Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam (Forum for Muslim Activists Enforcing Islamic Law or FAKSI). These groups have come into greater focus due to their *baiat* (pledges of allegiance) to ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (Widodo 2015 and IPAC 2015). This is in addition to the increasing numbers of Indonesians pledging allegiances to ISIS in their quest to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight.

Other Indonesian extremist groups do not believe that ISIS' so-called caliphate meets the criteria of an ideal Islamic state. It is interesting to note that those pledging allegiance to ISIS are mostly the supporters of *takfiri* ideology, referred to as *takfir muayyan*. The *takfir muayyan* are individuals who hold the belief that anyone who rejects Islamic law and works for the Indonesian government is considered a *kafir* (infidel) (IPAC 2015).

In December 2014, Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT, or *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme*) provided an estimate that about 514 Indonesians were in Syria and Iraq fighting alongside ISIS.

Authorities also identified Indonesian ISIS fighters who had been involved in terrorist activities in the past, and also detected some 5,000 individuals in Indonesia who were actively supporting ISIS (Ary 2014). Although this number is small, compared to the 250 million Muslim population in Indonesia (Julaikah 2014), the increasing support for ISIS in Indonesia is certainly a cause for concern.

As the case studies of the four individuals belonging to Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Tauhid Wal Jihad (JTWJ, led by Aman Abdurrahman) presented demonstrate, the road to Syria and Iraq is not as easy as is often assumed by ISIS supporters seeking to join the group. Although this is a factor which could eventually erode the overall support for ISIS, however, in the meantime, the Indonesian government must remain vigilant and take appropriate counter-measures to neutralise the threat that these entities might pose.

### The Case of Abu Fida

The account of Muhammad Saifuddin Umar's a.k.a. Abu Fida journey to Syria is based on statements given to police in August 2014. Abu Fida was a former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member and a religious teacher of JAT based in Surabaya, East Java (Indonesian Police 2014). In 2013, Abu Fida was invited to speak at a Friday sermon at Al Hikmah mosque in Surabaya, where he met with a JAT member named 'Toriq'. In April 2014, Abu Fida again met up with 'Toriq' to discuss issues of the Syrian conflict. In the meeting, Abu Fida asked 'Toriq' if he could help Abu Fida get to Syria.

**“ ...the road to Syria and Iraq is not as easy as is often assumed by ISIS supporters seeking to join the group... this is a factor which could eventually erode the overall support for ISIS... ”**

Toriq provided Abu Fida with the contact details of an individual named 'Helmi', who was one of Aman Abdurrahman's active followers living in Malang, East Java at that time (Indonesian Police 2014). Abu Fida contacted Helmi, who then agreed to help arrange for Abu Fida's trip to Syria (Indonesian Police 2014).

On 3 August 2014, Abu Fida left Surabaya for Syria with the intention of travelling first from Surabaya to Kuala Lumpur and then to Istanbul (Indonesian Police 2014). He travelled with Helmi's friends, including Salim Mubarak, a.k.a. Abu Jandal, of Pasuruan (Indonesian Police 2014).

However, Abu Fida failed to reach Syria on the expected date because he fell ill and was quarantined by Turkish authorities. He was deported to Indonesia on 6 August 2014. Indonesian authorities did not detain him upon his return, likely due to insufficient evidence of his involvement in terrorism.

Abu Fida's foiled trip to Syria uncovered the role of JTWJ's network of individuals responsible for organising trips for interested Indonesians wanting to join ISIS. The members of JTWJ played a major role in raising funds suspected to have come from Australian ISIS supporters, which were then used to send people to Syria (Armandhanu 2015).

Among JTWJ's network of individuals was Muhammad Fachry, who was responsible for spreading ISIS propaganda in Indonesia and conducting events on behalf of ISIS to solicit pledge of allegiances. Other individuals include: Aprimul Hendri, who was responsible for raising funds for sending people to Syria; Engkos Koswara, who was responsible for recruiting people to join ISIS (William 2015); Helmi, who was responsible for purchasing the recruits' tickets and planning their travel expenses; and Salim Mubarok, who was responsible for serving as a guide to facilitate their crossing through the Turkish border into Syria (Indonesian Police 2014). The good news is that these individuals are now in police custody. However, other members of their network are still at large, and they continue to recruit people for ISIS.

### The Case of Afif Abdul Majid

The account of Afif Abdul Majid's trip to Syria is based on his statements made to the police on 13 August 2014. Afif Abdul Majid enlisted the help of his friends to get connected to ISIS. He was able to get in touch with Kasum, a member of *Komite Indonesia Untuk Solidaritas Palestina* (KISPA, or the Indonesian Committee for Palestinian Solidarity). Kasum had apparently promised Afif that he would be able to travel to Syria in January 2013, along with members of KISPA's humanitarian aid wing (Indonesian Police 2014).

However, when KISPA dispatched its team to deliver humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees that month, it did not have sufficient places for an additional member (Indonesian Police 2014). Kasum promised Afif that KISPA would send him to Syria on the next trip.

On 25 November 2013, when KISPA dispatched its humanitarian team, again, the organisation did not have a place for Afif. Afif next sought help from Bambang Sukirno, a JI member heading a humanitarian organisation called Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI, or the Red Crescent Society of Indonesia).

Agreeing to work as a language interpreter for HASI, Afif asked Bambang to include him on HASI's list of individuals sent to Syria for humanitarian assistance.

**“ Abu Fida’s foiled trip to Syria uncovered the role of JTWJ’s network of individuals responsible for organising trips for interested Indonesians wanting to join ISIS. ”**

Afif was yet again turned down, as Bambang advised Afif that HASI had already sufficient numbers of interpreters in addition to other interpreters who were also on the waiting list and that HASI would not be able to send him to Syria (Indonesian Police 2014).

Afif then proceeded to approach Widi, an editor of the pro-ISIS website, [www.shoutussalam.org](http://www.shoutussalam.org), who helped Afif get connected to his friend who was the owner of another pro-ISIS website, [www.al-mustaqbal.net](http://www.al-mustaqbal.net). Widi's friend refused to help Afif get to Syria because Afif was part of JAT, and his loyalty to the jihadist inner circle had not yet been clearly established. Particularly, there were suspicions among Indonesian jihadists that Afif was a government agent because police had not arrested him despite his link to the 2010 JAT's training camp in Aceh.

Undeterred, Afif then turned to another friend, Muslih, who was a doctor at a public health centre in Gunung Kidul, a small town in the province of Yogyakarta. Afif expressed interest in going to Syria and Muslih then put him in touch with Kholid a Syrian based in Hatay, a southern province in Turkey which is close to Syrian territory. Kholid arranged for Afif to reach Turkey together with Agung, another Indonesian who was planning to join ISIS (Indonesian Police 2014). Originally from Lombok, in West Nusa Tenggara, Agung was working at a prominent Islamic boarding school in Karanganyar in Central Java at that time.

On 13 December 2013, Afif and Agung left Indonesia for Syria traveling to Kuala Lumpur from Solo and onward to Istanbul by air. On Kholid's instruction, Afif and Agung flew to Hatay from Istanbul.

From Hatay, with the help from Kholid's friend, Abdullah, Afif crossed over into Syria. At first he was housed in a local ISIS base in Al-Husayniyah, an ISIS-controlled area in the province of Homs (Shaheen 2015), where he met other Indonesian ISIS members.

Then, he was transferred to another ISIS camp in Latakia where he participated in a military training led by Abu Yusuf al Maghribi, an ISIS instructor from Morocco (Indonesian Police 2014). Afif spent less than a month in the ISIS in Latakia together with 54 other participants where he was trained in shooting and weapon handling. In addition to learning military tactics, Afif also studied ISIS' version of jihad (Indonesian Police 2014).

On 14 January 2014, Afif left Syria, and on 16 January 2014, he arrived in his hometown in Solo. He decided to come back to Solo because he wanted to — promote ISIS ideology in religious gatherings in Indonesia and encourage people to join ISIS.

In May 2014, he recounted his training experience to members of the Hisbah Team, a Solo-based vigilante group known for its attempts to enforce Sharia (Islamic law) in the Solo area (Indonesian Police 2014). Afif, along with Abu Fida, continued to promote ISIS' extremist ideology in mosques in Solo Baru, Sukoharjo, in Central Java, and in Solo to solicit their pledge of allegiances to ISIS.

Afif was eventually arrested on 9 August 2014 (Halim 2014). Afif's trip to Syria revealed that Indonesian ISIS supporters like him were individuals who were extremely determined to participate in ISIS' war in Syria. In face of limitations encountered in the course of their pursuit to join ISIS in Syria, these individuals have sought potential alternative methods to reach Syria. In the case of Afif, he also obtained the necessary military and ideological training and returned to Indonesia with the intention to radicalise, recruit and train more Indonesians to wage armed jihad.

**“ In face of limitations encountered in the course of their pursuit to join ISIS in Syria, they have sought potential alternative routes to reach to Syria. ”**

The apparent difficulties encountered by Indonesian ISIS supporters have not deterred them from travelling to Syria to join ISIS.

### **Cases of Terrorist Detainees on Conditional Release**

Abdul Rauf and Muhammad Sibghotullah are two examples of terrorist detainees who went against the terms of their conditional release and went on to join ISIS. Abdul Rauf, a.k.a. Sam (alias), was a member of Darul Islam Ring Banten and helped raised funds for the 2002 Bali Bombings carried out by JI.

The Denpasar District Court sentenced him to 16 years in Kerobokan prison in Bali (Meuko 2009). In November 2011, Abdul Rauf was granted conditional release by *Direktorat Jenderal Pemasyarakatan* (Dirjen PAS, or the Directorate General of Correction's) (Andrie 2011).

After his release, Rauf regularly visited Iwan Dharmawan a.k.a. Rois (alias), a leader of his group, in Nusa Kambangan prison where Rois is serving his sentence for his role in the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta.

Rois himself is a strong ISIS supporter and a close prison inmate of Aman Abdurrahman (i.e., leader of JTWJ) and Abu Bakar Bashir (i.e., leader of JAT), two prominent ISIS supporters in Indonesia. In one of the visits, Rauf expressed his interest in helping his fellow Muslims in Myanmar who were being oppressed by the Myanmar government. Rois responded to Rauf by encouraging him to join ISIS (IPAC 2015).



In November 2013, with Rois' introduction to Aman Abdurrahman's ISIS network, Rauf left for Turkey from Jakarta. He fought for ISIS in Iraq, and died in a battle in early May 2014 in Ramadi, Iraq. The news of his death was relayed to Aman Abdurrahman's network in Indonesia and eventually reached Indonesian authorities (Tem 2014).

The second individual, Muhammad Sibghotullah, a.k.a. Mush'ab, a.k.a. Miqdad, is a member of Mujahidin KOMPAK (fighters of the Crisis Management Committee, an extremist group involved in the sectarian conflicts in Ambon and Poso during the early 2000s).

In 2009, he played a role as a religious teacher in extremist military trainings organised by Sofyan Tsauri (a former police officer and Aman Abdurrahman's student) and Dulmatin (one of JI's key leaders who was killed during a 2010 police raid in Indonesia), and also had access to information about the 2010 military training camp in Aceh (Indonesian Police 20014).

Police arrested Sibghotullah on 11 June 2011 for concealing the information of the 2010 training camp (Kusuma 2011). Sibghotullah was sentenced to three years in prison on 15 March 2012 by the West Jakarta District Court (West Jakarta District Court 2012).

While serving time at Porong prison in East Java, Sibghotullah cooperated with the prison staff and participated in the government's deradicalisation programme to fulfil the requirements of early release (IPAC 2015).

During this time, Sibgho's brother-in-law, Siswanto, a follower of Aman Abdurrahman and former local leader of *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI or the Islamic Defenders Front) in Lamongan, East Java, regularly visited him. Accordingly, Sibgho and Siswanto had frequently discussed the Syrian conflict and their interest in joining ISIS (IPAC 2015).

In March 2014, Sibgho was granted a conditional release. By this time, his brother-in-law had left for Syria together with a man named Bagus Maskuron a.k.a Abu Muqbil (alias), a former terrorist prisoner who was involved in the 2010 CIMB Bank robbery in Medan West Sumatra. Outside prison, Sibgho kept communicating with Bagus via Facebook and Whatsapp, expressing

**“ Abdul Rauf and Muhammad Sibghotullah are two examples of terrorist detainees who went against the terms of their conditional release and went on to join ISIS. ”**

his desire to join ISIS. Bagus agreed to help Sibgho travel to Syria on the condition that Sibgho would take Bagus' family with him. Sibgho agreed, and thus Bagus then connected Sibgho with Helmi, a.k.a. Mukmin (alias), the same man who had helped arrange for Abu Fida's trip to Syria (Indonesian Police 2014). After meeting Helmi, Sibgho received assurance from Helmi that Sibgho's dream to wage jihad in Syria would soon come true.

On 30 November 2014, Sibgho, along with his sister in law's family and Bagus' family, left Surabaya and travelled to Jakarta by train. On 1 December 2014, his group flew from Jakarta to Kuala Lumpur.

They arrived in Kuala Lumpur on the morning of 2 December 2014 and stayed at the City View hotel while waiting for their evening flight to Istanbul (Indonesian Police 2014). However, while checking in at the immigration counter, the Malaysian Royal Police arrested Sibghotullah and his group (Haryanto 2014).

In retrospect, when the Indonesian government approved Abdul Rauf's and Muhammad Sibghotullah's requests for conditional release on account of their good conduct in prison, both Rauf and Sibghotullah were obliged to get in touch with their parole officers following their release. The case revealed how terrorist detainees like Rauf and Sibghotullah were able to evade existing monitoring measures put in place by the Indonesian government and depart Indonesia for Syria.

While Abdul Rauf was able to reach Syria, Sibghotullah was arrested by Malaysian authorities and then deported back to Indonesia. In both instances, it is important to note that Aman Abdurrahman, and members of his group, JTWJ, had played a key role in enabling, arranging and facilitating Abdul Rauf's and Sibghotullah's trip to Syria.

### ISIS Supporters in Indonesia Today

As of April 2015, there are 18 groups (see appendix) supporting ISIS in Indonesia, including the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT), Jamaah Tauhid wal Jihad (JTWJ), Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Khilafatul Muslimin Indonesia (Khilmus).

In Indonesia, groups like JTWJ and JAT (as well as JTWJ's and JAT's active supporters and followers), have had the largest number of individuals attempting to travel to Syria. Those individuals responsible for organising group trips to Syria and Iraq have been found to be students or followers of JTWJ's leader, Aman Abdurrahman.

In terms of numbers, MIT has a membership of 20 (Supratiwi 2015), while the total membership of JTWJ is unknown. JAT has around 3,000 members (Budi R 2014). Many individuals from MIT, JTWJ and JAT have pledged an allegiance to ISIS and provided recruits to ISIS since May 2013 (IPAC 2015).

Khilmus, on the other hand, has only expressed support through an official statement issued on its official website ([www.khilafatulmuslimin.com](http://www.khilafatulmuslimin.com)) on 1 July 2014. For now, Khilmus is not known to have sent any of its men to Syria to join ISIS.

This is believed to be due to the fact that Khilmus' current notion of a caliphate is misaligned with ISIS' own, which is rooted in a need to perpetuate violence (Sab 2014). Hence, the government still has the opportunity to co-opt Khilmus' members to stay away from ISIS.

**“ In Indonesia, groups like JTWJ and JAT (as well as JTWJ's and JAT's active supporters and followers), have had the largest number of individuals attempting to travel to Syria. ”**

### Way Forward

In conclusion, the road to ISIS is not as easy as is often assumed by many ISIS supporters, as evidenced by individuals such as Afif Abdul Majid, whose attempts to travel to Syria have been foiled by authorities.

However, in respect of Afif Abdul Majid, Abdul Rauf and Muhammad Sibghotullah, it is evident that despite the difficulties posed, either by authorities or by ISIS networks, ISIS supporters have not been deterred from seeking potential alternative methods in order to reach Syria and Iraq.

The fact that a small number of extremist members and former terrorist detainees have been able to elude detection by authorities in their travels to Syria and Iraq, highlights the need for an extremely well-integrated vigilance regime in the country.

Specifically, such a regime should involve BNPT, the Indonesian National Police, parole officers of *Balai Pemasyarakatan* (BAPAS, or Indonesia's Parole Board) handling those terrorist detainees on conditional release. This is so that BAPAS' parole officers are able to ascertain which prisoners require the most attentive monitoring.

Additionally, the immigration department should also be involved, so that there is sufficient evidence received by the department to refuse the request to issue passports, or deny entry to would-be ISIS fighters.

Otherwise, given the strength of ISIS' propaganda, groups and individuals will continue to exploit weaknesses in the security system in their bid to travel to Iraq and Syria - regardless of the difficulties encountered.

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#### Appendix:

The 18 groups are, namely:

- (1) Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (BIB),
- (2) Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT),
- (3) Jamaah Ansharuut Tauhid (JAT),
- (4) Ring Banten,
- (5) Jamaah Tawhid wal Jihad,
- (6) Forum Aktivistis Syariah Islam (FAksi),
- (7) Pendukung dan pembela daulah,
- (8) Gerakan Reformasi Islam,
- (9) Asybal Tawhid Indonesia,
- (10) Kongres Umat Islam Bekasi,
- (11) Umat Islam Nusantara,
- (12) Ikhwan Muwahid Indunisy,
- (13) Jazirah al-Muluk (Ambon),
- (14) Ansharul Kilafah Jawa Timur,
- (15) Halawi Makmun Group,
- (16) Gerakan Tawhid Lamongan,
- (17) Khilafatul Muslimin and
- (18) Laskar Jundullah

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# Impact of ISIS' Online Campaign in Southeast Asia

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Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin

*The threat of online radicalisation has come into greater focus since the start of the Syrian conflict, and particularly with the rise of ISIS. With social media networks, the dissemination and transmission of terrorist and extremist propaganda on the World Wide Web has grown rampant, and ISIS has exploited this capability to radicalise and recruit. While the strategic shutdown of websites is a necessary counter-measure, it should also be complemented with creative and dynamic counter ideological narratives, along with community engagement in both the online and real-world domains.*

## Introduction

Since the declaration of a caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the group has been extending its reach across the world, including in Southeast Asia, where presently, a total of 22 groups have pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. At the same time, the number of individuals travelling from Southeast Asia to Syria has been increasing, with a bulk of these Southeast Asian individuals from Malaysia and Indonesia.

In March 2015, the Malaysian Police estimated that between 70 and 80 Malaysians have travelled to Syria (Astro Awani 2015). In December 2014, Indonesia's National Counter-Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, or BNPT) estimated that around 514 Indonesians have left the country to join various militant groups in Syria (Watoday 2014).

There have been a few cases of individuals from the Philippines and Thailand travelling to Syria and Iraq, and the numbers are reportedly much lower, as compared with the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts. Nonetheless, ISIS has extended its influence in the online domain to successfully amass thousands of followers and supporters.

The success of ISIS, particularly, its ability to use sophisticated social media networks is particularly seen in how the group has radicalised and recruited an increasing number of foreign fighters in the Southeast Asian region. These fighters are motivated to travel to the conflict zones for two primary reasons: to participate in the fight in Syria and Iraq and/or to migrate to the so-called Islamic State.

### **Increase in the Number of Extremist Online Sites**

A report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) indicated that in 2008, there were 117 extremist sites (ASPI-RSIS 2008). Materials posted in most of these sites were in Bahasa Indonesia and bore sentiments in line with the Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah ideology.

In 2015, Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) listed at least 300 extremist websites, forums and social media accounts in Southeast Asia, a majority of them containing materials published in Bahasa Indonesia or Malay language (Arumugam 2015). Separately, Malaysian authorities also identified 500 extremist social media accounts belonging to Malaysians. These social media accounts contained evidence of a strong support for ISIS, its objectives and its ideology.

In general, four categories of online extremist users run the show — the fighters, terrorist and extremist groups, supporters and sympathisers.

The first category of online users comprise the fighters who are responsible for providing first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground as witnessed from the battlefields in Syria and they include individuals such as Malaysian Salman Rahim. These accounts reveal critical information such as, for example, the names of Malaysian fighters who have gone to Syria or Iraq and also those who have died while fighting on the battlefield.

The second group comprise of terrorist and extremist groups in Indonesia who maintain their own websites. These individuals regularly publish ISIS videos and feature ISIS-related content with translations in Bahasa Indonesia, so as to cater to the online users from Indonesia.

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Some of their online postings also include translations of specific pertinent content found in Dabiq — ISIS' online magazine — as well as articles from other Indonesian terrorist media agencies. Content originating from the latter source may include articles on the importance of fighting in Syria and Iraq.

The third group, comprising the active supporters and avid followers of ISIS, are mainly responsible for facilitating information flow within the social media networks on matters concerning the fighters on the battleground. These active supporters and avid followers of ISIS dissect the latest gossip and past histories of these fighters in their online diaries and mini autobiographies and disseminate them through social media platforms.

One such example is a Facebook user named Intan Syafinaz. Like Intan, some of the supporters or followers have expressed interest in becoming fighters. Some of them are involved in criminal activities and are primarily motivated to travel to Syria and Iraq to escape law enforcement in their home countries.

Typically, these entities attempt to establish contact with fighters in Syria and Iraq through private communication platforms like Facebook, or through instant mobile messaging applications such as Whatsapp. They also encourage others to travel to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, to wage armed jihad there.

The fourth group are the sympathisers or the online users seeking to obtain first-hand information about the fighters and developments of the war in Syria and Iraq. Typically, these users lack direct contact with the fighters and for this reason, almost rarely post new and authentic content related to ISIS. Evidently, their account pages contain either content reposted from other sources, or personal details, such as an upcoming wedding of a daughter and odd supernatural events, such as sightings of ghosts.

These four categories of online users play important roles, both in disseminating and reinforcing ISIS' propaganda on the social media (Facebook 2014).

### **Competing Narratives: Anti-ISIS and Non-ISIS Online Extremist Movements**

In addition to pro-ISIS online movement, there has also been a rise in extremist movements that are actively opposed to ISIS' ideology.

In the Indonesian online domain, the anti-ISIS voice is led by groups and individuals traditionally in support of Al Qaeda in general and Jabhat Al Nusra (JN, or the Support Front for the People, also known as Al Nusra Front) in Syria, in particular.

A prominent individual leading the anti-ISIS voice is Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman, the son of Abu Jibriel, former spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Muhammad Jibriel was arrested in the past for his involvement in the 2009 hotel bombings in Jakarta. He is also the administrator of the extremist website, [www.annah.com](http://www.annah.com), which is known for its support for Al Qaeda.

The trend of extremist movements within the Malaysian online domain appears more complex, as online extremist movements from both the anti-ISIS and non-ISIS camps have emerged. The anti-ISIS movements regularly publish materials condemning ISIS, while the non-ISIS movements appear to be neutral in this regard — neither openly expressing support for nor condemning ISIS.

Both the anti-ISIS and non-ISIS movements are predominantly made up of Malaysian Muslims, with some non-Muslims within the online community. They, however, share one element in common — an emphasis on a need to fight in Syria and Iraq to alleviate the grievances of the

**“ At present, many of these anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online movements... have since expressed support for ISIS, aligning their cause with the group's brutalities. ”**

oppressed. Such an emphasis is seen in a message to a Malaysian fighter Abu Khattab Al Maliziya from a non-Muslim supporter in mid-2014, declaring his sympathy to the cause: *'To Encik Abu from a non-Muslim Malaysian Chinese: although I would not understand the teaching of Islam, but what I do know is the cruelty extended towards humanity in Syria... your aim is to be there to fight this cruelty...'*

Hence, while the anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online extremist movements maintain that ISIS' interpretation of Islam is extreme, they also perceive the battle to be waged against a malevolent Syrian leader, Bashar al Assad. Both the anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online extremist movements root for factions that are opposed to the Bashar al Assad regime, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Afnar ash Sham (Soldiers of Syria).

Despite their repeated calls for jihad, these anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online movements are driven by humanitarian causes and specifically oppose ISIS' well-documented atrocities, including beheadings. However, they are of concern, especially because they are gaining traction among a significant minority of online users.

At present, many of these anti-ISIS and non-ISIS online movements have since expressed support for ISIS, aligning their cause with the group's brutalities. This development is believed to have taken place in large part when Malaysian fighters made the switch from being with Afnar ash Sham to ISIS.

Inadvertently, their supporters have continued in their support for these former Afnad Ash Sham members and have also grown more tolerant towards ISIS' brand of brutality.

### Increased Tolerance for ISIS Brutalities

When the first batch of Malaysian fighters entered Syria, they joined Afnad Ash Sham. Afnad Ash Sham is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and promotes the Sharia (Islamic law), but holds an ideology dissimilar to that of ISIS' own. The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational Islamist movement engaged in political activism and charity work. Unlike ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood does not propagate for the establishment of a caliphate and does not aim to conquer territories.

This first batch of Malaysian fighters, well-known for having prominent figure Lotfi Ariffin (former leader of opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) among its ranks, was able to garner support from not just the Malay-Muslim community, but also from the non-Muslim and non-Malay communities who share in their support for the cause of alleviating the grievances of Syrians under the Assad regime (Facebook 2014).

One of Lotfi Ariffin's Facebook account pages garnered around 27,000 followers. Other Afnad Ash Sham members have also had between 1,000 to 5,000 Facebook friends and followers. It comes as no surprise then, that this group of non-ISIS fighters received much support from the wider public, and gained legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. This is due to several reasons.

Firstly, Afnad Ash Sham justifies its militant stance on the basis of an existential narrative (that of helping all victims from the oppression of Bashar al Assad), which has resonated among many in the wider community. Such narratives, including calls for unity among all militant brigades across the entire spectrum — notwithstanding religious or sectarian divides — were also visibly seen in their Facebook postings.

Secondly, members of Afnad Ash Sham also appear personable, as their regular interactions with their followers and supporters would indicate. The content of postings in the websites would frequently include anecdotal accounts and

**“ This ambiguity took a turn when in November 2014, evidence emerged of at least 14 Malaysian fighters from Afnad Ash Sham travelling from Homs to Raqqa to join ISIS. ”**

interactions with their followers and supporters, glorifications of the adventurism experienced only by being on the battlefields, and chronicles of the joys and struggles as fighters on the battlefronts. These postings provide an element of real-time melodrama, a source for which is often seen as addictive by some, if not all, of Afnad Ash Sham's followers and supporters. Given their benign appearance of a militant group in fierce defense of humanitarian fundamentals, it was hard to pinpoint which of the supporters and followers of Afnad Ash Sham were endorsing terrorism and violence.

This ambiguity took a turn when in November 2014, evidence emerged of at least 14 Malaysian fighters from Afnad Ash Sham travelling from Homs to Raqqa to join ISIS (ICPVTR 2015). Since then, members of the group have begun to project a more violent stance.

Specifically, in the past, members of the group lauded the fight against oppressors and did not mutilate or show disrespect for bodies of the deceased, but have now gradually shifted in their stance and acceptance of ISIS' brutalities.

Even more worrying is the fact that the followers and fans of these former Afnad Ash Sham members have continued in their support for the members, and thus, have also extended their support for some of ISIS' methods. Inadvertently, this has brought about a general increase in tolerance for terrorism by a number of online movements that were formerly aligned with the anti-ISIS or non-ISIS cause.

## Implications for Southeast Asia

Today, the threat of online radicalisation is unquestionably pertinent as it is relentless. Notwithstanding the role of other factors in the radicalisation process, ISIS has been persisting in its media campaign, and terrorists and extremists continue to use them as an essential medium to spread extremist messages across the world.

According to a report by a London-based think-tank, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the number of foreign fighters in Syria after about 3 years since the start of the civil war was 20,730.

This figure surpasses the number of foreign fighters involved in the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad — an estimated 20,000 foreigners had fought during the 10 year period, beginning 1979 (ICSR 2015). This is not discounting the fact that ISIS has called for attacks on the West, which it has labelled infidels of Islam, which may also serve to instigate individuals to carry out attacks in their own home countries.

A recent example was the armed attacks by Saïd Kouachi and Chérif Kouachi targeting the offices of the French satirical weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris, France, in January 2015. The magazine was targeted for its printed depictions of the prophet Muhammed, which is forbidden in Islam and which was seen by many across the world as an example of blatant insensitivity to Muslims. As of March 2015, there are 46,000 Twitter accounts disseminating pro-ISIS materials (Berger and Morgan 2015). Apart from Twitter, ISIS propaganda materials can also be found on other social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram.

Individuals are getting massive amount of information at a faster rate, at their own convenience, which has contributed to the speeding up of the radicalisation process. Individuals who are specifically in search for meaning, either to fulfil a social or a personal void, or to seek redress for their experienced marginalisation or injustice. In addition, there may be some individuals who are influenced by claims that significance can be attained through fighting and sacrificing for the group. These individuals could thus become attracted to ISIS' extreme ideology found online, becoming radicalised in the process of doing so.

**“ In Indonesia, charity bodies associated with terrorist groups..... conduct both online and real-world campaigns to collect funds they claim to be for humanitarian efforts in Syria. ”**

Radicalisation can then lead to fundraising. In Indonesia, there have been charity bodies associated with terrorist groups such as HASI (Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia, or the Red Crescent Indonesia Society), that conduct both online and real-world campaigns to collect funds they claim to be for humanitarian efforts in Syria. On an individual level, followers of Malaysian fighters have been conversing with the fighters on ways to carry out their own version of jihad, namely, by donating some money to the cause.

Last but not the least, radicalisation could lead to recruitment. In most cases, there are primary nodes offering assistance to those who have the intentions to be a fighter.

Examples include Abu Hud (whose real identity has not yet been established), a fighter based in Syria actively on Twitter and an individual named Shams, a.k.a Green Bird of Jannah, who is active on both her Tumblr and Twitter accounts. Shams is a Malaysian doctor who is married to a Moroccan ISIS fighter. Shams has also posted tips on how to travel to Syria, and has indicated her willingness to render help to individuals interested in travelling to Syria via private mobile messaging applications like Whatsapp.

## Conclusion

As counter-terrorism forces endeavour to keep pace with the rising number of extremist websites, authorities should also use preventive measures by shutting down the accounts of avid supporters.



There should be exceptions made however, to retain the accounts of some individuals, particularly those who are identified as recruiters, or who have credible links with the fighters in the real world. The social media accounts of these individuals can be used to serve as a source of information for understanding the motivations of the terrorists.

There is also a need for an online model to counter extremism and terrorism particularly tailored to the Southeast Asian context, in order to compete with the existing deluge of extremist materials. Such efforts should complement best practices in community engagement and counter-ideology in the real world. In the online domain, participants should also be mobilised to serve as peace advocates in the efforts to build authenticated counter-narratives. Such counter-narratives can also be taken offline and disseminated within the real world.

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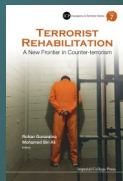
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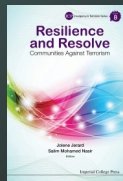


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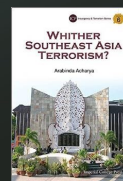
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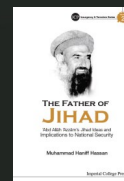
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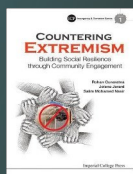
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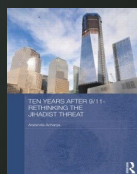
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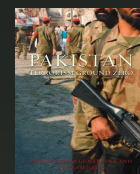
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