

Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow **Making jihadis, waging jihad: transnational and local dimensions of the ISIS phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia**

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Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and Local Dimensions of the ISIS

Phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia

By Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow

On 14 January 2016 Indonesia's capital Jakarta saw its first major *jihadi* violence since the bombing of the JW Marriot and Ritz Carlton hotels in 2009. The attack on a Starbucks café and a nearby traffic police post in the Thamrin business district, which killed 8 including the 4 attackers, emulated the marauding *modus operandi* of the Paris attacks only months earlier.¹ It was claimed by the Islamic State or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and As-Sham), stating that 'soldiers of the Caliphate' had 'targeted a gathering of the citizens of the Crusader alliance' and 'those charged with protecting them',² but had been locally organised by members of Jemaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK), an organisation established as an 'umbrella' for pro-ISIS *jihadis* in Indonesia.³ Several months later, on 28 June 2016, a grenade was tossed into the Movida Restaurant and Bar in Puchong, Selangor state, in Malaysia. The perpetrators of the attack, it was revealed, had received instructions from Muhammad Wandy Muhammad Jedi, a Malaysian *jihadi* based in Syria fighting with ISIS.⁴ A year later, pro-ISIS militants in the southern Philippines, including Indonesians and

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ Kirsten E. Schulze, 'The Jakarta Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Indonesia,' *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 9, issue 11, January 2016.

² Islamic State, 'A security detachment from the soldiers of the Caliphate target a gathering of the charges of the Crusader alliance in Jakarta city,' posted on Twitter and Telegram channels, 14 January 2016 (dated 3rd Rabi Al-Thani 1437).

³ IPAC, 'Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence,' *IPAC Report No 25*, 1 February 2016, p.1.

⁴ 'KL police see ISIS hand in grenade attack,' *Straits Times*, 5 July 2016.

Malaysians, laid siege to the town centre of Marawi city on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.⁵

Despite these attacks and the departure of an estimated 800 Indonesians and 100 Malaysians to Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2017, Southeast Asia has not featured prominently in the literature on ISIS which has focused on the origins and rise of ISIS⁶ or on more specific aspects of the ISIS phenomenon, such as its savvy use of social media, its ideology, and its recruitment strategy.⁷ This literature, on the whole, has been Middle East-centric in its discussion of ISIS and Eurocentric in its discussion of foreign fighters. Southeast Asian foreign fighters, *jihadi* groups or clerics are mentioned only in passing, if at all. For instance Christoph Reuter notes that there were Indonesian *mujahidin* and that they seemed to be better trained than those coming from Europe.⁸ Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger mentions the pledges of allegiance to ISIS by Abu Sayyaf militants from the Philippines and Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir⁹ while David Kilcullen highlights the presence of extremists in Indonesia and Malaysia in generic fashion.¹⁰ Some of these passing references, moreover, are inaccurate revealing the lack of understanding of shifts and dynamics within

⁵ For detailed analysis see IPAC, 'Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilaya, and Indonesia', *IPAC Report No 38*, 21 July 2017.

⁶ See Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); Fawaz Gerges: *A History of ISIS* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015); Christoph Reuter, *Die Schwarze Macht: Der 'Islamische Staat' und die Strategien des Terrors*. Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2015. Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015); Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (London: Hurst, 2015); and Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: An Exclusive Insight Into The Inner Workings of ISIS* (London: IB Tauris, 2015).

⁷ See Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: the Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi, 2015); Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: William Collins, 2015); Peter Neumann, *Radicalised: New Jihadis and the Threat to the West* (London: IB Tauris, 2016); Anna Erelle, *In the Skin of a Jihadist: Inside Islamic State's Recruitment Networks* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015); Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2016); and William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: the History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

⁸ Reuter, *Die Schwarze Macht*, p.293.

⁹ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, p.181.

¹⁰ David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: Islamic State and the War on Terror* (London: Hurst, 2016), p.3.

Indonesian *jihadi* circles. For instance, Abdel Bari Atwan erroneously states that ‘Islamic State has allies in Indonesia’s Jamaa Islamiyyah’.¹¹

This article examines the ISIS phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia in order to broaden the discussion of ISIS beyond its Middle Eastern core and its foreign fighters from the West. It aims to explain how, where, and why the transnational and local intersect as well as the role of religion, particularly in the ideological narratives and recruitment strategies of local *jihadi* groups. At the heart of this analysis is the question to what extent Indonesians and Malaysians were lured into joining ISIS as a result of its ‘universal’ ideology and global recruitment strategy or whether they were instead propelled by local Indonesian and Malaysian dynamics into Syria and into ‘importing’ and ‘indigenising’ ISIS to advance their own agendas.

Drawing upon interviews with Islamists, police and government officials in Indonesia and Malaysia as well as material from Islamic studies sessions, sermons, Islamist publications, and police depositions, this article argues that the potency and appeal of the extremist narrative of ISIS derives from how it animates and feeds off prevailing debates within Indonesia and Malaysia.¹² These debates revolve around issues such as the nature of Muslim identity and what it means to be a ‘good Muslim’, the place of Islamic law in society, relations within the *ummah* as well as with non-Muslims, and Islamic eschatology. While there is clearly a transnational dimension, the motivations for Southeast Asians to sympathize with or join the Syrian *jihad* and their engagement with ISIS are ultimately the product of local Indonesian and Malaysian dynamics rather than the ‘lure’ of ISIS *per se*. This article

¹¹ Atwan, *Islamic State*, p.135.

¹² A methodological caveat is in order. While research for this article involved extensive fieldwork and interviews, in the case of Malaysia the authors were not able to gain access to detainees and former detainees. In the case of detainees, Malaysian authorities have been very strict about affording access, and independent scholars in particular have not been successful in their requests. As for former detainees, unlike the case of Indonesia, they are simply not at liberty to speak. Scholars familiar with research conditions in Malaysia would be aware of these constraints. As such, the level of empirical and anecdotal detail cannot match what is available in the case of Indonesia. Nevertheless, the authors maintain that there is sufficient information to make a compelling case for the Malaysian aspects of this article.

thus contributes to the broader scholarly debate on how ‘global’ the global *jihad* actually is and the phenomenon of ‘glocalisation’.¹³

Approaching this inquiry from a comparative perspective, this article starts with an analysis of the motivations of Indonesians and Malaysians for going to Syria and Iraq and for supporting ISIS, focusing on ideology, territory and legitimacy as well as the debates in local *jihadi* circles on the ISIS Caliphate and the ‘End of Times’. It also examines the role played by the Indonesian and Malaysian states, looking at how the Malaysian state has inadvertently reinforced the ideology of ISIS through its deeply politicized policies and policing of the practice of the Muslim faith, and the absence of the state in Indonesian Islamist debates on the nature of Muslim identity and what constitutes heresy, which created the space for the ideology of ISIS to flourish. This article then proceeds to explore Indonesian and Malaysian pathways of radicalisation and recruitment, followed by a discussion of the *hijrah* process through which Indonesian and Malaysian extremists landed in Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS. Here Indonesia’s network-driven radicalisation and recruitment followed by an organised *hijrah* is contrasted with Malaysia’s mostly online-driven radicalisation and recruitment, symptomatic of a more personalised *hijrah*. In its final section this article looks at how and why Indonesian *jihadis* have sought to draw ISIS into Indonesia while Malaysians *jihadis* have not.

The Call to (the Islamic State’s) Jihad: Territory, Ideology, Legitimacy

¹³ See Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The search for a new Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2002); Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality, and Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005); Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why jihad went global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism: theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2008); Jean-Luc Marret, ‘Al-Qaeda is the Islamic Maghreb: A “Glocal” Organisation,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol 31:6 (2008); Bryce Loidolt, ‘Managing the Global and Local: The Dual Agenda of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol 34:2 (2011); Fawaz Gerges, ‘ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism,’ *Current History*, Vol 113:767 (2014).; and Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, *The Global Jihad Movement* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

The eruption of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and its evolution into a *jihad* attracted considerable attention in Southeast Asia as did the rise of ISIS in 2013 and the establishment of the Islamic State in June 2014. For Southeast Asians, like for many other foreign fighters, the territory ISIS conquered and the pace at which its forces swept through major cities like Raqqa and Mosul became one of the key reasons for supporting this new *jihadi* organisation. The rapid territorial expansion was seen not only as a military success and as evidence of the right strategy, but also as ‘divine favour.’¹⁴ The territoriality of ISIS compared favourably to the lack of territoriality of Al-Qaeda and with it Al-Qaeda associated groups in Syria such as Jabhat an-Nusra, and in that respect, ISIS was seen to have succeeded where Al-Qaeda failed. It also appealed at a more personal level to those who simply wanted to join the *jihad*, for whom it ‘made sense going for the strongest group’, and to those who were interested in living in a ‘true’ Islamic state, the ‘true’ Caliphate.¹⁵ Thus it is not surprising that recruitment of Southeast Asians into ISIS accelerated in 2014 and 2015, even to the point of inducing some who had initially joined other groups, such as Ajnad ash-Sham, to change affiliation.

Territory alone, however, does not explain the appeal of ISIS but must be seen in conjunction with how its ideology interplayed with local Southeast Asian dynamics. It is this interplay which explains why Southeast Asian interest in the Syrian conflict has endured. Indeed local factors largely determined who departed for Syria and who did not. Only a small number of Filipino Muslims went to Syria as they were still actively involved in *jihad* at home in the southern Philippines. This did not, however, stop them from seeking the benefits of association with the Islamic State in their videos. Conversely, Indonesians and Malaysians went to Syria in larger numbers, in part because of their prevailing understanding that the conditions for bringing about an Islamic state in their own countries were not right.

¹⁴ Greg Fealy and John Funston, ‘Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,’ USAID, 18 September 2015, p.4.

¹⁵ Interview with a prospective Indonesian volunteer for the Syrian *jihad*, 8 January 2014.

The Syria conflict converged with local Indonesian and Malaysian dynamics on at least three counts. The first concerned the ‘End of Times’ eschatology propounded by ISIS. Unlike most of the other *jihadi* organisations in Syria whose *raison d’être* was the struggle against the regime of Bashar al-Asad, ISIS not only sought to establish a ‘true’ Islamic state but also cast itself in the role of bringing about the apocalyptic ‘End of Times.’¹⁶ Within ISIS circles in Syria, a narrative emerged that referenced a *hadith* where the Prophet was believed to have said that the ‘Last Hour’ would see the Romans [the West] land at the Syrian town of Dabiq and that ‘an army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth’ [the *mujahidin*] would fight them.¹⁷ The Syria conflict was seen as indicating that the countdown to the ‘Last Hour’ had begun.¹⁸

This narrative resonated in Indonesian Islamist circles because it tapped into considerable pre-existing interest in the apocalypse, which had been triggered by the increase in natural disasters in Indonesia as well as a solar and lunar eclipse during Ramadhan. Indeed, in 2005 former JI *amir* Abu Bakar Ba’asyir together with some activists from the Majles Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) even formed a committee to welcome the *Mahdi* (saviour).¹⁹ This pre-existing interest in Indonesia validated ISIS’s narrative and prompted Indonesians to travel to Syria in order to participate in this imminent ‘final battle’ between good and evil.

Such enthusiasm was also evident in *jihadi* circles in Malaysia. According to Malaysian home ministry officials, several among the approximately 200 people detained for suspected ISIS sympathies had expressed that their interest in ISIS was piqued by a desire to be part of the apocalyptic battle which they had read about online in ISIS media, and to ‘leave

¹⁶ ‘The revival of Slavery before the Hour,’ *Dabiq*, issue 4, p.16

¹⁷ Sahih Muslim, Book 54 *The Book of Tribulations and Portents of the Last Hour, Chapter: The Conquest Of Constantinople*, Hadith 44 ‘The Emergence Of The Dajjal And The Descent Of ‘Eisa bin Mariam,’ <http://sunnah.com/muslim/54/44>

¹⁸ Solahudin, ‘Syria as Armageddon,’ *Inside Indonesia*, January 2014. www.insideindonesia.org/current-edition/syria-as-armageddon.

¹⁹ IPAC, ‘Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict,’ *IPAC Report No 6*, 30 January 2014, p.2.

the struggles of this life in order to enjoy the fruits of heaven.’²⁰ For instance, two Malaysian detainees admitted that they left for Syria in order to heed the call to fight the cataclysmic battle unfolding in Syria against the Shi’a, Christians, Jews, and other deviant sects.²¹ Muhammad Wannady Muhammad Jedi, a prominent Malaysian *jihadi* who was based in Syria until his death in 2017, expressed in an interview that: ‘I will not turn away from my duty to fight for the establishment of the Islamic State's Caliph leadership in preparing for the al-Mahdi’s rule. . . . The Islamic State (IS) is the movement which is making preparations for al-Mahdi’s rule towards the end of the world.’²² Others have suggested, however, that while some were drawn to the eschatology of ISIS, it may not have been the most significant factor.²³

At a second level, the Syrian conflict resonated with local identity politics. In Indonesia, these were expressed in ongoing debates among Indonesian Sunni Muslim organisations to redefine what it meant to be Muslim in Indonesia. In the context of these debates, attention fell on what was or was not deemed ‘Islamic’ as defined by these Muslim organisations. Fault-lines were created, which led to the ostracising and targeting of those deemed heretics – liberal Muslims, Ahmadis, and Shi’as – by means of *fatwa* and physical intimidation.²⁴ The Shi’as, were seen as particularly threatening as it was believed they had state-backing from Iran. Indonesian Sunni-Shi’a dynamics are exemplified by the tensions in Sampang, Madura, which predated the Syria conflict. In 2006, Sunni *ulama* from Sampang tried to convert local Shi’as. In 2009, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in Sampang together with the police moved toward restricting Shi’a *dakwah* activities. In 2011, Shi’a

²⁰ Interview with a senior Malaysian Home Ministry official, Kuala Lumpur, 16 August 2017.

²¹ The authors thank Mohamed Nawab for sharing this information based on his own fieldwork on the topic. The two Malaysians were Samsualang and Zulazani.

²² ‘From Syria, Malaysian Jihadist Gives Reason for Joining IS,’ *BenarNews*, 14 September 2015. <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/Malaysian-jihadist-09112015161150.html>.

²³ Maszlee Malik, ‘ISIS in Malaysia: A Case Study,’ paper presented at the ISEAS Regional Outlook Forum, 12 January 2016.

²⁴ See Kirsten E. Schulze, ‘Indonesia - The Radicalisation of Islam’ in Stig Jarle Hansen, Atle Mesøy and Tuncay Kardas (eds.), *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington’s Faultlines from al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, London: Hurst, 2009.

leader Tajik Muluk was asked to leave the area. After he failed to do so, his *pesantren* Darul Huda was burnt to the ground in November.²⁵ In August 2012, Sunnis attacked Shi'as in Sampang, killing two and wounding dozens.²⁶ While attacks on Indonesian Shi'as were localised, the anti-Shi'a sentiments were shared more broadly. By 2015 many Indonesian Islamists believed that the Shi'as had a plan to take over Indonesia between 2018 and 2020 and this was widely speculated on in the Islamist media.²⁷ This local Indonesian dynamic made the profoundly sectarian conflict in Syria directly relevant. The behaviour of the Asad regime as well as the entry of Hizballah and Iran on Asad's side stoked Indonesian anti-Shi'a feelings further and provided additional proof of the perceived heretical nature of Shi'ism.

The desire to fight Asad's Shi'a coalition drew Indonesians to Syria not just on the side of ISIS but also on the side of local or al-Qaeda affiliated groups. ISIS's extreme anti-Shi'a narrative also made it easy to be 'imported' and 'indigenised'. In 2015 Indonesian ISIS member Bahrun Naim, who was based in Syria, ordered one of his men to attack a Shi'a mosque in Bogor.²⁸ In late 2015, another pro-ISIS group led by Abu Husna reportedly planned operations against Shi'a leaders and institutions.²⁹ In November 2016, when Jakarta-based pro-ISIS Islamists headed by Abu Nusaibah were arrested in the context of the demonstration against Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok), Abu Nusaibah told the police that his group's aim was 'to prepare for the defense against the Shi'a who are planning to take over Indonesia in 2018' and 'to prepare for sending weapons from the Islamic State to Indonesia.'³⁰ These competing narratives on who is a true believer were also

²⁵ Masdar Hilmy, 'The Political Economy of Sunni-Shi'ah Conflict in Sampang Madura,' *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol 53:1 (2015), pp.36-39.

²⁶ <https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/667841/18/konflik-sunni-syiah-di-madura-1346103220>.

²⁷ 'Tahun 2020 Syiah berencana melakukan kudeta di Indonesia,' *Arramah*, 6 ebruary 2015, <https://www.aramah.com/2015/02/06/tahun-2020-syiah-berencana-melakukan-kudeta-di-indonesia/>; 'Syiah sesat akan revolusi di Indonesia dalam rentang 2018-220,' *Waislamonet*, 26 April 2015, <https://waislamonet.wordpress.com/2015/04/26/syiah-sesat-akan-revolusi-di-indonesia-dalam-rentang-2018-2020/>.

²⁸ 'The Anti-Shi'a Movement in Indonesia', *IPAC Report no.27*, 27 April 2016, pp.24-25.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.25.

³⁰ Interview with senior Densus officer, Jakarta, 28 July 2017.

evident in Malaysia, where similar efforts to redefine what it meant to be Muslim were taking place, albeit often in the context of the partisan rivalry between the incumbent UMNO regime and its detractors. Compared to Indonesia, however, the state was far more complicit in much of these efforts. For instance, Friday sermons sanctioned by Malaysia's Islamic Development Department, Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), routinely referred to non-Muslim Malaysians as 'enemies of Islam' and Shi'a Muslims as deviants, as has Pertubuhan Ilmuwan Malaysia (ILMU), a vocal association of Islamic scholars formed by UMNO-affiliated Salafi *ulama*. The current administration of Najib Tun Razak has permitted the perpetuation of a view that Islam is under threat by Christians, Jews, and Shi'as even as it has rejected more moderating narratives from liberal and pluralist quarters of the Muslim intelligentsia in the country. This has given rise to views – not entirely misplaced - that as a consequence of this, the emerging Islamist discourse in Malaysia 'shares many similarities with the uncompromising views of ISIS.'³¹ At its extreme, the manner in which Islam has been politicized in Malaysia has led some to argue that 'the anti-Shi'a rhetoric disseminated through official media channels ... combined with sermons by some scholars' has made joining the *jihad* in Syria acceptable.³² This view has been reinforced by the work of Mohamed Nawab and Aida Arosaie, whose interviews with some *ustadz* in Malaysian Islamic institutions uncovered views that endorsed *jihad* against Shi'a and Alawites as obligatory.³³

The third level where the Syrian *jihad* fed into local Southeast Asian dynamics can be discerned from debates over the legitimacy of armed *jihad* as a means through which to introduce Islamic law and bring an Islamic state into being in the region. In Indonesia, the Syrian *jihad* resonated with the debate in militant circles about the legitimacy of *jihad* in

³¹ Fealy and Funston, 'Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,' p.16.

³² Julien Gradot, 'Why Malaysia has a problem with Isis,' *The Malaysia Insider*, 21 October 2015.

³³ Mohamed Nawab and Aida Arosaie, 'Jihad in the Bastion of Moderation: Understanding the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia,' unpublished paper, p.13.

Indonesia, the effectiveness of local *jihadi* efforts, how to fulfil the obligation of *jihad*, and the scope of *takfir* (the practice in which Muslims excommunicate their co-religionists). This debate pitted those who saw armed *jihad* in Indonesia as counter-productive against those who considered it the only way to achieve an Islamic state.³⁴ It juxtaposed those who thought the time for *jihad* was not yet right against those who thought it was, and resulted in disagreement over whether Muslims working for the Indonesian state were guilty of ‘apostasy by association.’³⁵ The Syrian *jihad* had the effect of a general revival of *jihadi* fervour in Indonesia.³⁶ However, it also reinforced pre-existing divisions among Indonesian *jihadis*, especially after ISIS started attacking Jabhat an-Nusra in Syria in late 2013. Indonesians who saw *jihad* as legitimate in Indonesia and as the only way to achieve an Islamic state now openly supported ISIS.

Not unlike what unfolded in Indonesia, the local socio-political milieu in Malaysia, where religion is frequently mobilized in service of narrow political interests, amplified the appeal of ISIS by placing the matter of the necessity of the implementation of Islamic strictures at the forefront of national discourse, irrespective of the fact that 40 percent of the population are non-Muslims. Malaysia’s dominant political party, UMNO, as a Malay-Muslim party that is predicated on the principle of Malay-Muslim supremacy, advanced a narrative that this supremacy was under siege from various (non-Malay) cultural and (non-Muslim) religious quarters and hence had to be defended. Given that Malaysia has a Malay-Muslim majority population, UMNO’s chief political opponents are also Malay-Muslim parties who brandish religious credentials as a source of legitimacy. To the extent that there is political ideology at play in Malaysia, it is Islam, and specifically, a particularly exclusive brand of Islamism which has no intention to encourage pluralism or compromise. The effect

³⁴ See ICG, ‘How Indonesian Extremists Regroup.’

³⁵ Navhat Nuraniyah, ‘How ISIS charmed the New Generation of Indonesian Militants,’ *Middle East Institute*, 9 January 2015. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/how-isis-charmed-new-generation-indonesian-militants>.

³⁶ Interview with police general Tito Karnavian, Jakarta, 27 March 2015.

of this is that Malaysian politics became characterised by parties trying to ‘out-Islam’ each other, as evident from the drive to implement *hudud*, the move to ban the use of the term ‘hot dog’, or to legally proscribe the use of the term ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims for fear of the ‘confusion’ this might cause to Muslims.³⁷ Moreover, the fact that it became heavily politicized meant that religion came to be viewed as a zero sum game simply because politics was a zero sum game.

A longstanding expression of this Islamization process has been the mounting pressure for the implementation of *syariah* law in Malaysia. This move has found advocates in both UMNO and PAS, and across the civil society terrain as well. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this is UMNO’s response to recent moves by PAS to table a Private Member’s Bill calling for the introduction of *hudud* and expansion of the *syariah* court’s sentencing powers, which has been met by either silence or tacit support on the part of the UMNO leadership. It has also found expression in the increasing frequency with which Malaysian leaders at the highest levels have come to declare Malaysia an Islamic State. This began in September 2001 when then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad famously declared that Malaysia was already an Islamic state. This view was reiterated by Najib Razak when he was Deputy Prime Minister in 2007, and again in October 2017 by the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department (in charge of religious affairs), Asyaf Wajdi Dusuki.³⁸ Yet perhaps the most bizarre example of how this quest for political legitimacy found expression in language easily construed to be sympathetic to ISIS was the statement made by Malaysian prime minister and UMNO party president Najib Razak during the course of a party event in Cheras in 2013, when he chose to set ISIS – which at that time was still a relatively unknown

³⁷ ‘Thousands rally in Malaysia to back Islamic penal code bill,’ *Reuters*, 21 February 2017; ‘Hot dogs set for step-by-step name change in Malaysia,’ *New Straits Times*, 18 October 2016; Joseph Chinyong Liow, ‘No God but God: Malaysia’s Allah controversy,’ *Foreign Affairs Online*, 10 February 2010.

³⁸ ‘BN govt committed to make Malaysia an Islamic State – Asyaf Wajdi,’ *The Sun*, 14 October 2017.

entity - as an exemplar for the Malay-Muslim political struggle and exhorts his cadre to follow the ISIS example:

When someone dares to fight to the death, they can defeat a bigger opponent.

Consider how ISIS (ISIL), with only a strength of 1300, defeated the 30,000 strong Iraqi army, to the extent that four or five three-star generals were forced to run to safety by jumping out the window in the middle of the night. Why? Because they are afraid of those who are brave.³⁹

Attempts to move the national discourse away from an overly exclusivist register ran up against the political interests of the state and power of the state to define and police the 'right' and 'wrong' Islam. This resulted, on the one hand, in Malaysia's religious authorities denouncing ISIS as a Wahhabi and *salafi* entity whose engagement in violence is *haram*, but at the same time, not explicitly repudiating its *takfiri* and anti-Shi'a ideology or invalidating the notion of the need to revive the Caliphate.⁴⁰ This religio-political climate in Malaysia created fertile ground for the extremist ideas of ISIS, including within the Malaysian security forces and state religious organisations. Indeed, a religious official from the department of religion in Malacca is known to have gone to join the Syrian *jihad*.⁴¹

In addition to the areas where Syrian and local Indonesian and Malaysian dynamics intersected, Southeast Asians were also 'attracted by the more simply defined notion that this is a Just War in which Muslims have to defend their co-religionists against repression and mortal threat.'⁴² This was particularly evident among ISIS sympathisers in Malaysia, where anger against the atrocities perpetrated by the Shi'a- backed Alawite Asad regime against Sunni Muslim civilians served as a major motivation to join the conflict alongside repentance

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9RAaC63L6o>. His mention of ISIS begins at 14:30.

⁴⁰ 'Fatwa Majlis Ulama Malaysia: ISIS Adalah Khawarij yang Berasal dari Gerakan Salafi Jihadi di Irak,' *Perjuang Ahlussunnah*, 24 January 2016. <http://www.elhooda.net/2016/01/fatwa-majlis-ulama-malaysia-isis-adalah-khawarij-yang-berasal-dari-gerakan-salafi-jihadi-di-irak/>.

⁴¹ Interview with a Malaysian Home Ministry official, Kuala Lumpur, 16 August 2017.

⁴² Fealy and Funston, 'Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,' p.2.

for living a life of vice, and political motivations predicated on perceived parallels between the failed government in Syria and the failure of government in Malaysia. In one instance, a Malaysian ISIS supporter shared that he had initially been haunted by guilt and suicidal thoughts for a life of sin, but then became convinced that he could atone for that by waging a *jihad* in Syria and dying in the process instead.⁴³

It is important to point out that the preceding discussion on the intersection of Syrian and local Indonesian and Malaysian dynamics is not to suggest an immediate correlation between these dynamics and recruitment into ISIS *per se*, but rather to highlight the existence of conditions and climates that lend themselves quite easily to the extremist and intolerant narratives propounded by ISIS. Indeed, to consider how these conditions give rise to active support for and participation in the ISIS *jihad*, whether in Syria or locally, attention must now turn to the matter of recruitment.

Radicalisation and Recruitment: offline vs. online

Based on current estimates obtained from the respective authorities, approximately 700-800 Indonesians and 80-100 Malaysians departed for Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2017.⁴⁴ In addition, several hundred ISIS sympathizers have been arrested in each country. While these figures pale in comparison to recruitment trends in Europe and North Africa, they are not inconsequential, especially when considering the potential threat posed by hardened returnees. For this reason, an informed appreciation for recruitment and radicalisation trends in Southeast Asia is imperative.

⁴³ This was shared by a Malaysian scholar involved in the deradicalization process in Malaysia over a discussion on 25 November 2017.

⁴⁴ At the point of writing, Malaysian authorities were of the view that only 10-20 Malaysians remain in Syria. Interview with a Malaysian Home Ministry official, 16 August 2017.

What marks Indonesia out in comparison to Malaysia but also with Europe, the US and Australia,⁴⁵ is the degree to which radicalisation and recruitment was organised and occurred largely within pre-existing *jihadi* circles and networks. This does not mean that the internet and social media did not play a role at all. Indonesian Islamist websites such as the pro-ISIS site *al-Mustaqbal* and the pro-Jabhat an-Nusra site *Arrahmah* contributed to the radicalisation of Indonesian Muslims through their graphic reports, photographs and videos on the Syria conflict. However, they played little if any role in actual recruitment. For this, organised radicalisation efforts through lectures, sermons, *pengajian* (Islamic study sessions in small groups), or seminars proved far more effective. Social media such as Facebook and Telegram were sometimes used to make initial contacts, but the subsequent assessment, which was the first step in the recruitment process, was face-to-face for the majority of Indonesian ISIS recruits. The reason why radicalisation and recruitment in Indonesia could be conducted in this manner was the result of the different approaches of the state to defining Islam as suggested previously, but also towards Muslim mobilisation. The Indonesian state's *laissez faire* approach allowed for a broad range of Muslim social organizations, including those with *salafi* and/or *jihadi* ideologies, to organise and to shape this debate. This created the space for face-to-face recruitment through organisations belonging to the local pro-ISIS network.

Exemplary of the organisational space open to ISIS sympathisers in Indonesia is the public declaration of support for ISIS in March 2014 at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout, on one of the busiest and most central roads in Jakarta. This declaration was organised by Muhammad Fachry, BahrumSyah, and Syamsudin Uba. Fachry was the editor of *al-Mustaqbal* and leader of the Islamic Sharia Activists Forum (FAKSI). BahrumSyah, who would later go to Syria and become the commander of the ISIS Indonesian-Malaysian

⁴⁵ See for example Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, pp. 127-146; Atwan, *Islamic State*, pp.173-180; Neuman, *Radicalised*, pp.85-109; or Erelle, *In the Skin of a Jihadists*, pp.9-13.

battalion, was also active in FAKSI and knew Uba through the Committee for Solidarity with the Islamic World (KISDI). According to Uba, this public declaration aimed at showing ‘support for both *syariah* in Indonesia and support for ISIS in Syria and Iraq’. He further explained that the public *bai’at* (oath-taking) ceremonies following the declaration of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 - which became another form of organised radicalisation and indeed, organised induction - had a similar dual, global and local purpose.⁴⁶

Some 2,000 Indonesians pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in July and August 2014,⁴⁷ reflecting the enthusiasm with which the announcement of the Caliphate was met. Indeed, Uba suggested that there were so many mass *bai’at* ceremonies to meet public demand:

The public *bai’at* were carried out because so many people asked us. The first public *bai’at* was at UIN [State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta]. It was led by Ustadz Anwar, one of Bahrumisyah’s men. The auditorium was so full that people stood outside. The women were in the balcony and the men downstairs.⁴⁸

Lower profile and less public *bai’at* continued to take place throughout 2015, 2016 and 2017 at seminars and *pengajian*. According to Uba,

What happened was that we would hold a seminar or a *pengajian* and the people would ask us to lead them in the *bai’at*. Ustadz Fauzan [Anshori] was asked almost at every public event to lead the people in the *bai’at* and there are still public *bai’at* until today. They take place at *pengajian*.⁴⁹

Pro-ISIS seminars such as those held by Syamsudin Uba in 2015 and 2016 focused on the ‘glorious economy’ and the justice of the Caliphate, on the obligation and benefits of *hijrah*,

⁴⁶ Interview with Ustad Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathizer, Bekasi, 4 April 2017.

⁴⁷ IPAC, ‘The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia,’ *IPAC Report No 13*, 24 September 2014, p.16.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ustad Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathizer, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Interview with Ustad Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathizer, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

on how the ‘Caliphate will rule the world and end colonialism’;⁵⁰ on the failure of the forces fighting against the Islamic State’⁵¹ – both western and Shi’a; or on the identity and lineage of Caliph Ibrahim.⁵² Uba lectured mainly in Bekasi, Jakarta’s poorer, more crowded and more religious urban neighbour, where his message of ‘economic prosperity and justice’ resonated greatly. In pro-ISIS *pengajian* across Indonesia participants were introduced to the now standardised ‘ISIS curriculum’ which comprises the ‘Tauhid material series’ by Aman Abdurrahman,⁵³ or Mohammad Ibn Abdul Wahab’s ‘Book of Tauhid’ as well as Wahab’s ‘Ten Nullifiers of Islam,’⁵⁴ alongside discussions on the ‘End of Time’, the Caliphate, martyrdom, escaping the torments of the grave, the 72 virgins, and intercession for the family. It was at these lectures, sermons, seminars, and above all the more intimate setting of the *pengajian*, rather than online through social media, that individuals were identified by recruiters for face-to-face discussions designed to elicit a commitment to the cause of the Syrian *jihad*.⁵⁵

As most of the debate on Syria and ISIS took place within existing Indonesian Islamist networks and *jihadi* circles, the line between recruitment and poaching was often blurred. ISIS supporters seized the opportunity to tap into the fragile, splintering Indonesian *jihadi* community. This included specifically targeting key, high profile personalities from other organisations in the hope that they would legitimise the emerging Indonesian pro-ISIS network and that their joining would trigger an exodus of their followers as well. The most obvious case in this respect was that of ageing cleric, Abu Bakr Ba’asyir. As one of the

⁵⁰ Seminar titled ‘Kejayaan Ekonomi Khilafa: Strategi Khilafa Menguasai Dunia Dan Menghapuskan Penjajahan Dunia’, undated, power point slides obtained by one of the authors on 4 April 2017.

⁵¹ Seminar titled ‘Kekalahan Pasukan Kafir Melawan Pasukan Khilafah Daulah Islam,’ December 2015, power point slides obtained by one of the authors on 4 April 2017.

⁵² Seminar titled ‘Mengenal Khalifa Ibrahim aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dan Nasab Beliau,’ 24 February 2015, power point slides obtained by one of the authors on 4 April 2017.

⁵³ Aman Abdurrahman, *Seri Materi Tauhid*, www.millahibrahim.net/seri-materi-tauhid. This is also available on various Indonesian pro-ISIS Telegram channels.

⁵⁴ Interview with Ustad Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathizer, Bekasi, 4 April 2017.

⁵⁵ IPAC, ‘Online activism and social media usage among Indonesian extremists,’ *IPAC Report No 24*, 30 October 2015.

founders of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in 1993, Ba'asyir had great symbolic value. He was held in high esteem among many within Indonesian Islamist circles and even in parts of the more mainstream Muslim community who considered him to be a victim of an American led proscription of Muslims with anti-Western views. He was also far more charismatic than the leader of the pro-ISIS network in Indonesia, Aman Abdurrahman. As amir of Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), an organisation Ba'asyir established in 2008 in order to conduct *dakwah jahriyah* (open proselytization), he was also seen as being able to bring JAT into the pro-ISIS fold.⁵⁶

Ironically, the recruitment of Ba'asyir took place in the Nusakambangan maximum security prison complex to which Ba'asyir had been sent in 2011 after he was sentenced to 15 years for supporting terrorism following the discovery of a *jihadi* training camp in Aceh in 2010. In prison, Ba'asyir was targeted by Indonesian ISIS supporters imprisoned within the same complex, who managed to convince him to abandon his position of neutrality towards the various *jihadi* groups in Syria and to throw his support behind ISIS.⁵⁷ As JAT spokesman Ahmad Fatih explained:

He was influenced by Abu Yusuf and Abu Irhab who are in Pasir Putih prison with him in Nusakambangan. I think Ustadz Abu [Bakr Ba'asyir] was swayed because he supported the establishment of *syariah* and an Islamic state for such a long time and when ISIS declared the *khilafa* all he saw was that it had *syariah* and was an Islamic state. He also believed that a lot of *ulama* supported this. He showed us a list. This list had one who was listed five times with different names. It was totally inflated. A lot of the information he received was simply not correct. What worried us most was

⁵⁶ Interview with Abu Tholut, former member of JI and former member of JAT, Kudus, 8 August 2017.

⁵⁷ At the time, he defended his neutrality on grounds that 'we do not know all the factors in the field.' Interview with Ustadz Ahmad Fatih, JAT spokesman, Jakarta, 8 April 2014.

that he was so influenced that he didn't even believe his own sons.⁵⁸

Following ISIS leader al-Baghdadi's declaration of the Caliphate, Ba'asyir pledged allegiance from his prison cell.⁵⁹ He then told JAT members that 'al-Baghdadi's Caliphate was the true *khilafa* and that it was an obligation to take the *bai'at* and if you didn't you were no longer JAT.'⁶⁰ Ba'asyir further ordered JAT members to go to Syria and join ISIS, causing JAT to split between those who supported the Caliphate and those who opposed it. The latter, who comprised about 80 percent of JAT, formed a new organisation, Jemaah Ansharut Syariah (JAS).⁶¹

Ba'asyir was not the only high profile personality targeted. Former military commander of Mujahidin Kompak, Abdullah Sunata, was also successfully recruited by ISIS while in prison. His recruitment, too, was seen as a door to the rest of the organisation. In fact, members of Mujahidin Kompak were highly sought after for their previous *jihadi* experience in Ambon and Poso, and also because their membership included trainers who could impart shooting and bomb-making skills to potential recruits. Moreover, the fact that their organisation had effectively folded after the Aceh training camp debacle in 2010, leaving them 'homeless,' meant that the opportunity availed to provide them a new cause. Finally, the alumni of Mujahidin Kompak also had one of theirs – Abu Walid (discussed later) - in the ISIS leadership in Syria.

Less successful was the approach to Ustadz Abu Rusdan, a one time member of the JI central leadership, who also commanded widespread respect in Islamist circles. As Abu Rusdan himself explained:

There were some ISISers that came to me and asked me to join them. I said to them that before I answer I would like you to answer five questions. Until now

⁵⁸ Interview with Ustadz Ahmad Fatih, JAS spokesman, Bekasi, 26 March 2015.

⁵⁹ Millahibrahim.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/bai'at-untuk-khilafa-islamiyya and 'JAT pecah soal ISIS, Mantan Anggota Bentuk Jama'ah Ansharus Syariah (JAS),' 12 August 2014, www.muslimdaily.com.

⁶⁰ Interview with Abu Tholut, former member of JI and former member of JAT, Kudus, 8 August 2017.

⁶¹ Interview with Ustadz Ahmad Fatih, JAS spokesman, Bekasi, 26 March 2015.

I have not received an answer from them. My five questions were: First, who decided that al-Baghdadi should be the Caliph? Second, who has proven his lineage? ... Third, what is the reason that al-Baghdadi broke with Zawaheri, al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada? Fourth, what is the proof that this *khilafa* is based on the prophetic methodology? And fifth, the *takfir* issue. I have not received any answers because they don't have any answers. And that is why I don't support ISIS.⁶²

Lastly, ISIS supporters were not above poaching members from each other within the pro-ISIS network. This is certainly what Abu Nusaibah stands accused of having done by followers of Syamsudin Uba who described him as a *bandal* (rascal).⁶³

In the case of ISIS recruitment in Malaysia, there have been several discernible patterns. First, unlike Indonesia, most Malaysians were radicalised and recruited over social media and in cyberspace, where such platforms were the predominant factor in generating sympathy and support for the ISIS cause. This was largely due to the fact that the Malaysian government tightly controlled public activities and space, restricting Islamist organisations through a number of legal and security tools. In addition, effective counterterrorism policies reinforced by strong security legislation have made it more difficult for terrorist groups to form and mobilise in Malaysia.⁶⁴ This 'pushed' Malaysian ISIS supporters down the internet recruitment route in order to bypass scrutiny from the security establishment. Notably, in several instances Malaysian recruits had proactively sought out terrorist groups online after they were radicalised from their own exposure to extremist material over the internet,⁶⁵ some of these communicating directly with Muhammad Wannady. Having said that, security

⁶² Interview with Ustaz Abu Rusdan, former member of the JI central leadership, Kudus, 6 April 2016.

⁶³ Interview with 'BeWe,' ISIS recruiter, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

⁶⁴ See Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Southeast Asia' in Jacinta Carroll (ed.), *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2017*. Canberra: Australia Strategic Policy Institute, 2017.

⁶⁵ Farik Zolkepli, 'Malaysian youth who joined Syrian al-Qaeda cell detained at KLIA,' *The Star*, 11 December 2015.

officials have also admitted more recently that they have detected the existence of several small ISIS cells comprising self-radicalised extremists who nevertheless managed to gather. As one official expressed: 'This is what we fear. If it was lone wolves in the past, they have now become packs of wolves which have no links to other groups.'⁶⁶

The effectiveness of social media platforms for terrorist recruitment was described by the principal assistant director of the Royal Malaysian Police Counter Terrorism Division, Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay in the following manner:

[In the past], most of them were recruited through special religious classes that you'd have to attend physically. But now, maybe you go to Facebook or surf the Internet for one hour, and then you are influenced by this ideology - you want to go to Syria to fight with the Islamic State. So that's why we have a big problem.⁶⁷

Indicative of this concerted effort to radicalise and recruit Malaysians (and Indonesians) through the internet, Malaysian authorities have claimed that there were up to seven Malay-language websites and blogs established by ISIS and their supporters that extol the heroics of Malaysian and Indonesian fighters.⁶⁸ According to the Malaysian home minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, 75% of the 107 ISIS sympathizers in detention in early 2017 had admitted that they were drawn to the ISIS cause via social media, and the majority of them were first time offenders.⁶⁹ Most of them were young, with a few explaining that they admired the heroics of the young, male ISIS fighters they encountered over the internet and later started to identify with them as they learned more about their lives online.⁷⁰ Although there have only been a handful of Malaysians who have returned from Syria, they are known to have played an

⁶⁶ Radzi Razak, 'Islamic State cells now operating in Malaysia, says anti-terror chief,' *The Malaysian Insight*, 22 November 2017. <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/24094/>.

⁶⁷ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/social-media-number-one/1783300.html>.

⁶⁸ 'More ISIS websites in Malay to recruit fighters,' *Straits Times*, 17 June 2015.

⁶⁹ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/75-malaysian-isis-militants-recruited-030614120.html>. Of the 107 arrested, six were previously held under the Malaysian Internal Security Act, five for involvement with KMM and one with JI.

⁷⁰ Interview with a government official involved in deradicalisation, Kuala Lumpur, 16 August 2017.

instrumental recruitment role by way of sharing of stories and experience garnered from the Syrian *jihad*.⁷¹

Second, the number of women who have been recruited has been surprisingly high. While many are wives of militants who took their entire families to Syria, there have also been a significant number of single females who have proactively sought to marry ISIS fighters. In one instance, Malaysian police apprehended a 14 year old girl who was on the verge of departing for Cairo in order to marry a 22 year old Malaysian ISIS sympathizer who she met on Facebook, after which both were planning to depart for Syria via Istanbul. In another case, a 28 year old girl left Kuala Lumpur for Syria September 2014 after lengthy communications with ISIS fighters in Syria over her smartphone.⁷² A tumblr blog, which has since been taken down, documented how a Malaysian who went by the moniker Bird of Jannah – she was purportedly a medical doctor - had answered a call to help in an ISIS-run hospital in Syria but who also claimed to have left home to be married ‘in the land of *Jihad* until martyrdom do [us] part.’⁷³ Indeed, Malaysian recruits to ISIS gained further notoriety because of suggestions that ‘lonely (Malaysian) widows’ were particularly targeted and that some may have gone to become ‘*jihadi* brides.’

While Malaysian women have previously also been involved in militant activities, it has mostly been as supporters confined to home soil rather than venturing to foreign conflict zones to partake in *jihad*, let alone to get married there. In this respect, the emergence of single females ready and willing to depart for Syria for the dual purpose of waging *jihad* and wedlock speaks to a new phenomenon in Malaysia, one that does not appear to have featured in Indonesia.

⁷¹ ‘Govt engineer, Facebook recruiters among Malaysia ISIS arrests,’ *Straits Times*, 16 October 2014.

⁷² Amy Chew, ‘Beware smartphone obsession, sister of Malaysian ISIS recruit warns,’ *Straits Times*, 3 July 2015.

⁷³ ‘We shall meet in ‘Jannah’ – Malaysian woman reveals married life with militant,’ *Astro Awani*, 19 September 2014, <http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/we-shall-meet-jannah-malaysian-woman-reveals-married-life-isis-militant-44247>.

Third, a careful consideration of recruitment and indoctrination processes in Malaysia throws up several key Malaysian individuals. Lotfi Ariffin, who was injured in an airstrike and subsequently died in a Turkish hospital in September 2014, played an instrumental role soon after the Syrian crisis broke out by creating awareness of the conflict in Malaysian social media circles. His departure to Syria for *jihad* was highly publicised and served to inspire others.⁷⁴ A second Malaysian personality of consequence was Muhammad Wanndy Muhammad Jedi from Durian Tunggal, Malacca, who went to Syria in January 2015.⁷⁵ Here social media connected the self-confessed ‘loner’, according to his own Facebook posting, with ISIS which played upon his need for recognition.’ Until his death, Muhammad Wanndy was known to have played an important role in recruiting Malaysian *jihadis* via his popular Facebook page, where he was known as Abu Hamzah al-Fateh. And finally, Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah, who was apprehended by Malaysian police in July 2014. Mahmud Ahmad was a university lecturer in the field of Islamic Thought, who was suspected to be a key ISIS recruiter based in Malaysia and allegedly the leader of the Malaysia-based ‘ISIS Black Flag’ cell.⁷⁶ An introvert by nature according to his colleagues, Mahmud Ahmad was believed to have recruited Mohd Najib Hussein alias Abu Anas, who became a bomb-maker and ISIS sympathizer with links to the Philippines-based militant group, Abu Sayyaf. Abu Anas was killed in Basilan, southern Philippines during a clash with Philippine military forces in December 2015. Mahmud would later figure prominently in ISIS-related violence in the region, playing a leading role in orchestrating the siege in Marawi City in May 2017 until his reported death in October as the Philippine military retook the city centre (at the time of writing his remains had not been recovered).

***Hijrah* and joining ISIS in Syria**

⁷⁴ ‘The Jihadist in Our Family,’ *New York Times*, 18 January 2015.

⁷⁵ ‘Two Malaysians Identified In A Beheading Video By IS,’ *The Malaysia Insider*, 5 March 2015.

⁷⁶ ‘Alleged militant a quiet family man,’ *The Star*, 5 July 2014.

Similar to recruitment, the *hijrah* of Indonesians to Syria was an organised process, albeit complex as the pro-ISIS network was diffused and riddled by rivalries. The first Indonesians who made their own way to Syria to join the *jihad* were mostly students already living abroad. They included Riza Fardi who left his studies in Yemen in 2012 to join Suqour al-Izz,⁷⁷ Wildan Mukhollad who left his studies at Al-Azhar in Egypt late 2012 to join Katibah al-Muhajirin,⁷⁸ Yazid Ulwan Falahuddin and Wijangga Bagus Panulat who left their technical studies in Turkey to join ISIS in 2013,⁷⁹ and four Indonesian students studying at the International Islamic University in Islamabad: Dawin Nuha Abdullah, Muhammad Fakhri Insani, Rusydan Abdul Hadi, and Arisdiantoto.⁸⁰ Subsequently, *jihadis* departing from Indonesia generally went through ‘organised’ channels linked to existing *jihadi* networks with prospective fighters covering their own travel expenses.⁸¹ According to one ISIS recruiter, there are ‘three steps a candidate has to go through: first, *iman* (belief), second, *hijrah*, and third, *jihad*. Of these ‘*iman* is the only level to be accomplished in Indonesia. After that you have to join the system.’⁸² *Iman* is imparted through the *pengajian* and candidates are evaluated on their proficiency in reading the Quran, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and their behaviour more generally.⁸³ They then undergo an evaluation by a *panitia lokal* (local committee) or *panitia hijrah* (hijrah committee), separate to the *pengajian*. The committees or panels could be attached to any of the groups associated with

⁷⁷ ‘Abu Muhammad, Mujahid Ngruki becomes a martyr in the Battle of East Ghautah,’ *VOA al-Islam*, 29 November 2013.

⁷⁸ IPAC, ‘The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia,’ p.13.

⁷⁹ ‘Pelajar Indonesia ikut ISIS, nasihat orang tua tak didengar,’ *Tempo*, 31 March 2015, <http://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2015/03/31/078654206/pelajar-indonesia-ikut-isis-nasihat-orang-tua-tak-didengar> and ‘Anak muda anggap ISIS seru dan menantang,’ *Tempo*, 1 April 2015, <http://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2015/04/01/078654413/anak-muda-anggap-isis-seru-dan-menantang>.

⁸⁰ IPAC, ‘Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict,’ p.7.

⁸¹ Nuraniyah, ‘How ISIS Charmed the New Generation of Indonesian Militants.’

⁸² Interview with ‘BeWe’, ISIS sympathiser, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

⁸³ Interview with Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathiser, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

the pro-ISIS network. They were *ad hoc* in nature, based on loose selection criteria, and if the applicant was successful he was given a *tazkiyah* (letter of recommendation).⁸⁴

For those who already had ‘*jihadi* credentials’ going to Syria was an easier and faster process. Such credentials included previous *jihadi* experience, affiliation with a *jihadi* group, or coming from a ‘*jihadi* family.’ The latter explains the phenomenon of ‘generational regeneration,’ where the sons of those who had fought in the Afghan *jihad* now joined the Syrian *jihad*. The most prominent of these were Omar Abdul Aziz, son of Bali bomber Imam Samudra,⁸⁵ and Rusydan Abdul Hadi, son of JI Afghanistan veteran Amir Mahmud⁸⁶ who both joined ISIS, as well as Ridwan Abdul Hayyi, son of MMI deputy amir Abu Jibriel,⁸⁷ who joined a local Syrian group.⁸⁸

Many Indonesians, especially those travelling with families, went as part of a larger group. These groups were facilitated by ISIS sympathisers whose role was akin to that of a travel agent. One of these was Helmi Alamudi who started facilitating groups of Indonesians going to Syria in June-July 2014 until his arrest in March 2015. In his deposition, Alamudi stated that he took on this role after returning from Syria himself in April 2014. He was motivated by the fact that he knew the route but also by the belief that he could arrange a cheaper deal. He purchased plane tickets from Indonesia to Turkey for prospective recruits, favouring the route from Juanda Airport (Surabaya) to Malaysia or Hongkong, then Turkey. Only the fourth group that he facilitated departed from Soekarno-Hatta Airport. This group stayed in temporary accommodation at Pondok Al-Mukmin in Malang before departing for Jakarta by train. Alamudi also gave them instructions how to proceed from Istanbul to

⁸⁴ Fealy and Funston, ‘Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,’ p.20.

⁸⁵ ‘Imam Samudra’s son killed in Syria,’ *The Jakarta Post*, 16 October 2015.

⁸⁶ ‘Rusydan Putra Dr Amir Mahmud Hijrah ke Daulah Islamiyah, Syahid di Jabal Khilafah,’ *Panji Mas*, 19 May 2015.

⁸⁷ ‘Innalillahi, Ridwan Abdul Hayyi Putra Ustadz Abu Jibril Dikabarkan Syahid di Suriah,’ *Panji Mas*, 26 March 2015.

⁸⁸ Interview with Jibril, brother of Ridwan, Jakarta, 2 August 2017.

Gaziantep by bus or plane.⁸⁹ In total, he organised the *hijrah* of 39 people.⁹⁰ By August 2015, some 19 women and 43 Indonesian children had successfully made the journey to Syria. Another 15 women and 20 children had been intercepted and deported from Turkey.⁹¹ In January 2016, Sidney Jones estimated that the total number of Indonesians in Syria stood at ‘just over 400 nationals,’ 45 per cent of which ‘were women and children, and not all the adult males were fighters.’⁹² Most of these Indonesians joined ISIS but it is also estimated that between 20 and 40 Indonesians have been involved with Jabhat an-Nusra both as fighters and humanitarian aid workers.⁹³ In 2017, this number had reached 700-800 and despite the military operations against ISIS in Raqqa, Indonesians were still trying to go to Syria.⁹⁴

The first Malaysians who went to Syria as early as 2012 did not join ISIS but Jabhat an-Nusra or Ajudat ash-Sham. The link with An-Nusra was established through former JI leader Yazid Sufaat, who recruited through *ceramah* (Islamic discussions, similar to *pengajian* in Indonesia) at his house. He eventually established four cells to support pro-al-Qaeda forces in Syria.⁹⁵ Many of those who joined Ajudat ash-Sham, which is linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, were formerly members of KMM (Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia) and often were also supporters of PAS. The key role in this first batch of Malaysian recruits was played by the aforementioned Lotfi Ariffin. Ariffin, himself a former member of PAS, had departed for Syria via Turkey in February 2014 to join Ajudat ash-Sham,⁹⁶ where he was involved in operations against ISIS.

⁸⁹ Deposition of Helmi Alamudi, Badan Acara Pemeriksaan (BAP) Helmi Muhamad Alamudi alias Abu Royan, 30 March 2015, p.4.

⁹⁰ Others who were charged with facilitating the departure of Indonesians to Syria in order to join ISIS included Yanto Muslim, Tuah Febriansyah aka Muhammad Fachry, Amin Mude, Agus Riyanto, and Ari Kardian.

⁹¹ Interview with senior Densus officer, Jakarta, 24 August 2015.

⁹² Sidney Jones, ‘Understanding the ISIS threat in Southeast Asia,’ presented at ISEAS Region Forum, 3 January 2016, p.1.

⁹³ Fealy and Funston, ‘Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,’ p.8.

⁹⁴ Interview with senior Densus officer, Jakarta, 28 July 2017.

⁹⁵ Fealy and Funston, ‘Indonesian and Malaysian support for the Islamic State,’ p.16.

⁹⁶ ‘Ustaz Lotfi Ariffin Mujahidin Kedah Berperang Di Syria’, 17 March 2014.

<http://bicaraworld.blogspot.sg/2014/03/ustaz-lotfi-ariffin-mujahidin-kedah.html>

Although Turkey had been the gateway into Syria for Malaysians, because of close monitoring by Malaysian security officials of departures from Kuala Lumpur to Turkey and Middle Eastern destinations, potential Malaysian recruits have had to seek out alternative transit points such as Bangkok.⁹⁷ It should also be noted that not all who departed for Syria in these early years went for the purpose of taking up arms; some had departed for Syria in order to join humanitarian relief organisations but upon arrival were dragooned into joining militant groups.⁹⁸

While the first batch of Malaysians flocked to the competition, the second batch, was mostly ISIS in membership and orientation, not least because ISIS had established an Indonesian-Malay archipelago battalion - *Katibah Nusantara lid Daulah Islamiyya*. *Katibah Nusantara*, was formed in September 2014 under the command of Bahrumisyah alias Abu Muhammad al-Indunisy, an Indonesian *jihadi* who had left for Syria in May 2014 and appeared in the ISIS video 'Join the Ranks' two months later.⁹⁹ Bahrumisyah, originally from Bogor, briefly studied at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Ciputat before dropping out in 2004 after only three semesters. He became a follower of the radical cleric Aman Abdurrahman whose religious lectures he organised in the Pamulang area.¹⁰⁰ As mentioned earlier, Bahrumisyah was one of the organisers of the pro-ISIS rally in Jakarta in March 2014 alongside Syamsudin Uba and Muhammad Fachry.

Originally based in ash-Shaddadi, al-Hasakah province, Syria, *Katibah Nusantara* was believed to have had around 100 fighters when it was formed.¹⁰¹ It was divided into 'departments' for combat fighters, snipers, heavy weapons, tactics and strategy, and military

⁹⁷ In November 2016, Mohd Ridwan Mohd Musa and Zulfadhli Jafri were recruited from Malaysia by Syria-based Malaysian *jihadi*, Muhammad Wannady Muhammad Jedi, and attempted this route but were apprehended by Turkish authorities. 'Two men charged with trying to join Islamic State in Syria,' *New Straits Times*, 28 November 2016.

⁹⁸ Interview with a scholar with access to detainees by virtue of being involved in the Malaysian government's deradicalisation process, 25 November 2017.

⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxsPR-fYnk>.

¹⁰⁰ IPAC, 'The Evolution of ISIS,' p.4.

¹⁰¹ 'ISIS fighters from Malaysia, Indonesia form military unit,' *The Star*, 26 September, 2014.

management,¹⁰² and aimed to provide Southeast Asian volunteers with military, Arabic and ideological training before they joined the main ISIS fighting force as well as assist families of fighters to settle down in the ‘Islamic State.’ When Ash-Shaddadi came under attack by Kurdish forces, Katibah Nusantara moved to the area around Raqqa. And as Syrian military operations to liberate Raqqa from ISIS commenced in 2017, Katibah Nusantara moved to the area of Deir Ezzor. Indonesian and Malaysian fighters from Katibah Nusantara played significant roles in several military engagements including at Mount Sinjar in March 2015 and Tel Tamr in April 2015 where they spearheaded attacks on Kurdish positions in operations where they incurred heavy losses.¹⁰³ Battlefield casualties alone, however, were not the only challenge. Katibah Nusantara also witnessed a leadership struggle between Bahrumisyah and fellow Indonesian Salim Mubarak Attamimi alias Abu Jandal al-Yemeni al-Indonesi, which in turn led to further strains. Abu Jandal, who originated from Pasuruan, is believed to have had prior *jihadi* experience with AQAP in Yemen.¹⁰⁴ He also had his own network in several regencies in East Java from which he recruited. Abu Jandal departed for Syria in May 2014 with his wife and five children. In December 2014 he appeared in a Youtube video threatening Indonesia’s military commander and head of police.¹⁰⁵ Abu Jandal was critical of Bahrumisyah’s authoritarian style as well as his failure to distribute funds meant for Katibah members.¹⁰⁶ Unable to resolve these issues with Bahrumisyah, Abu Jandal and his supporters moved to Homs and established a new Katibah – Katibah Masyaariq. He was subsequently killed in Mosul in November 2016 and the leadership of his Katibah first passed to Hery Kusdianto, who was killed in 2017, and then to an ustadz from Lampung

¹⁰² Jasminder Singh, ‘Katibah Nusantara: Islamic States Malay Archipelago Combat Unit,’ *RSIS Commentary*, number 126, 26 May 2015, p.2.

¹⁰³ ‘Lima syhuda Nusantara di Jabal Sinjar,’ *Azzam Media*, 27 March 2015; ‘Junud Khilafah Asal Nusantara Pimpin Operasi Militer Pembebasan Kota PKK, Tal Tamr,’ *Azzam Media*, 10 April 2015.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Profil biodata Abu Jandal Al Yemeni Al Indunesi,’ <http://tokohpenemu.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/profil-biodata-abu-jandal-al-yemini-al.html>.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Video Anggota ISIS Abu Jandal Al Indonesi Tantang Panglima TNI,’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zx_IEdho4M

¹⁰⁶ IPAC ‘Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence,’ p.4.

In addition to Bahrumisyah and Abu Jandal, two other Indonesians featured prominently in ISIS in Syria, although their exact roles in relation to the structure of ISIS remain unclear. The first is Bahrun Naim, a former member of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia originally from Pekalongan. Naim was sentenced in 2011 to two and half years prison for the illegal possession of weapons and ammunition. In early 2015 he departed for Syria where he initially linked up with Katibah Nusantara. Unwilling to take sides when the battalion split, he left first for Raqqa and then Manbij, later returning to Raqqa when Kurdish forces moved against Manbij.¹⁰⁷ Like Abu Jandal, Bahrun Naim had his own network, the so-called Team Hisbah in Solo. He also had links to Mujahidin East Indonesia (MIT), a Poso-based militant group which was the first in Indonesia to swear allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Although Naim had links to both Aman Abdurrahman and the late MIT leader Santoso, his role seemed to have been to encourage, direct, and fund operations in Indonesia such as the planned attacks on a police station, a temple, and church on 17 August 2015 in Solo, the planned attacks on New Year's Eve of 2015,¹⁰⁸ and the planned attack on the presidential palace on 11 December 2016 by what would have been Indonesia's first female suicide bomber, Dian Yulia Novi.¹⁰⁹ Bahrun Naim was killed in November 2017.

The second is Abu Walid al-Indunisy who appeared in the al-Furat video 'Bersatulah Jangan Berpecah Belah' (Be United, Not Divided) in April 2016 sitting on the banks of the Euphrates calling upon Indonesians to pledge their allegiance to the Caliph.¹¹⁰ Abu Walid is an experienced *mujahid* who went to Ambon with Mujahidin KOMPAK in 1999 where he fought under the name of Kholid. In 2003 he went to fight in the Philippines, where he was

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Schulze, 'The Jakarta Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Indonesia,' p.30; IPAC, 'Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence,' p.8.

¹⁰⁹ Deposition of Dian Yulia Novi, Badan Acara Pemeriksaan (BAP) Dian Yulia Novi alias Dian alias Ukhti alias Ayatul Nissa Binti Asnawi, 16 December 2016.

¹¹⁰ 'Bersatulah jangan berpecah belah,' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D7CpB4xMLE>.

known as Faiz, until his arrest in Zamboanga in December 2004. After his acquittal in December 2013 he briefly returned to Indonesia before departing for Syria.

Malaysians started to join Katibah Nusantara in November 2014 when a group of them left Afnar ash-Sham to join ISIS. This shift in allegiance was directly linked to loss of leadership with the death of Lotfi Ariffin in September 2014 as well as shifts within the broader anti-Asad coalition, most notably the decision of Afnar ash-Sham to cooperate with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Katibah Nusantara presented the opportunity to join other Malay speakers in pursuit of *jihad* in a foreign land. Intriguingly though, Malaysian fighters were initially reticent towards Katibah Nusantara, preferring to fight alongside foreign fighters in other groups rather than fighting under Indonesian command.¹¹¹ At the same time there was a growing ideological alignment with ISIS as illustrated by the appearance of two Malaysians in an ISIS video featuring the beheading of an ‘Asad spy’ in February 2015. The two were later identified as Mohamed Faris Anuar from Kedah, who went to Syria in September 2014, and the aforementioned Muhammad Wannady Muhammad Jedi.¹¹² Until his death in Raqqa on 29 April 2017 Muhammad Wannady had sought to be the top Malaysian ISIS operative in Syria.¹¹³

A substantial proportion of the Malaysian contingent in Syria comprises women and children. As of August 2017, it was believed that 17 of the remaining 57 Malaysians still in Syria were children, with a significant number of the other 40 being women, specifically, widows of slain Malaysian ISIS fighters.¹¹⁴ Unlike the Indonesian case, where there was active vetting and recruitment being undertaken through local facilitators on the ground, most of the Malaysians who ventured to Syria undertook their journey to Turkey on their own and upon arrival were met by ISIS recruiters and smuggled into Syria. There were, of course,

¹¹¹ Interview with Malaysian Home Ministry official, Kuala Lumpur, 6 April 2016.

¹¹² ‘Two Malaysians Identified In A Beheading Video By IS,’ *The Malaysia Insider*, 5 March 2015.

¹¹³ ‘ISIS leaders “infuriated over Wannady’s failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia”,’ *The Star*, 26 April 2017.

¹¹⁴ Interview with a Malaysian home ministry senior official, 16 August 2017.

some exceptions, such as those who were directly recruited and funded by Yazid Sufaat for Jabhat an-Nusra, or Mahmud Ahmad for ISIS. There is presently little indication that either fighters or widows and children are returning to Malaysia, despite the casualty count of Malaysians in Syria in the course of the battle for Raqqa and Homs. Indeed, some slain Malaysian fighters had in fact committed their children to the continuation of the *jihad* in Syria.¹¹⁵

‘Importing’ and ‘Indigenising’ ISIS

The intertwining of the global and local dimensions is not only key to understanding why Indonesians and Malaysians went to Syria to join ISIS but also for understanding why some of them sought to pull ISIS into Southeast Asia. Here, too, local dynamics are definitive, explaining why Indonesians have been more successful than Malaysians in importing and indigenising ISIS. Malaysia’s restrictions on militant Islamists using various legal tools and extensive security operations undertaken by the highly experienced Special Branch, have closed the space for pro-ISIS organisations or a pro-ISIS network to operate, although in 2017 there was some evidence that Malaysian ISIS sympathizers had begun to form small self-funded cells. As a result, pro-ISIS or ISIS-claimed terrorist activities, such as the attack on the Movida Restaurant and Bar in June 2016, were relegated to the realm of the ‘lone wolves’ or ‘wolf packs’.

In Indonesia, in comparison, the lack of restrictions and uneven implementation of legislation on social, political, and religious organisation allowed for ISIS to be grafted onto existing networks such as Tawhid wal Jihad, Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) discussed

¹¹⁵ Amy Chew, ‘Separation: A Malaysian suicide bomber’s will keeps his family from returning home,’ *Channelnews Asia*, 22 April 2017.

earlier, Mujahedin Indonesia Timur (MIT), and parts of the Negara Islam Indonesia (NII).¹¹⁶ At the heart of this network is Indonesian cleric Aman Abdurrahman, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison on Nusakambangan island for his involvement in recruiting for and funding of the 2010 Aceh training camp. He was the leader of Tawhid wal Jihad, an amorphous group formed in 2004, which followed the salafi ideology espoused by the Palestinian-Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi whose writings Abdurrahman translated into Indonesian. He has also been credited with ‘importing’ and ‘indigenizing’ the ideology of ISIS. Indeed, according to then Jakarta Police chief Tito Karnavian, ‘Tawhid wal Jihad is the core of ISIS Indonesia just like the Middle Eastern Tawhid wal Jihad is the core ISIS.’¹¹⁷ In an effort to give this loose Indonesian pro-ISIS network more structure, the umbrella organisation Ansharud Daulah Islamiyyah (ADI) was established in August 2015, which later evolved into Jemaah Ansharul Daulah (JAD).¹¹⁸ JAD is organised along territorial lines which in August 2017 had known *wilayas* (regions) in Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek), Banten, Central Java, East Java, West Java, Lampung, and Kalimantan¹¹⁹ as well as a cell in Toli Toli (Sulawesi) and a self-affiliated cell in Medan (Sumatra).

The spread of the pro-ISIS groups was driven by competition within the broader Indonesian *jihadi* community whereby affiliation with ISIS was used to bolster the *jihadi* credentials and agendas of some clerics and personalities. For instance Abu Husna, a former JI recruiter who left JI to join JAT, formed his own network of pro-ISIS groups Jemaah Ansharul Khilafa (JAK). JAK includes Abu Nusaibah’s Jakarta-based group. It is also loosely affiliated with Syamsudin Uba’s organisation Al-Aqsa Al-Haqquna, which Uba sees

¹¹⁶ Also part of this network were Laskar Jundullah, the Islamic Sharia Activists Forum or Forum Aktivist Syariat Islam (FAKSI), and the Student Movement for Islamic Sharia or Gerakan Mahasiswa Untuk Syariat Islam (Gema Salam).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ IPAC, ‘Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence,’ p.6.

¹¹⁹ Interview with a senior officer in Densus 88, Jakarta, 28 July 2017.

as ‘off structure’ as ‘one could only be part of the ISIS structure if one was based in Syria.’¹²⁰

Driven largely by personal animosity toward Aman Abdurrahman, JAK is neither JAD’s equal in numbers, nor in geographic spread or influence.

Another factor that facilitated the ‘import’ of ISIS into Indonesia was that, unlike Malaysia, it already had an active arena of local *jihad*. This *jihad* was conducted by Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT) led by Santoso alias Abu Wardah. MIT emerged from JAT’s Poso branch of which Santoso had been the military commander. It drew upon the grievances of the 1998-2007 Christian-Muslim communal conflict in Central Sulawesi. Indeed, Santoso himself was radicalised during this conflict following the Walisongo massacre in May 2000 leading him to join the local *mujahidin* affiliated with JI. From 2010 onwards MIT fought a *jihad* against the Indonesian police from its stronghold in the Poso mountains.¹²¹ Between 2011 and 2015, MIT also established training camps not only for their followers, but also an array of Indonesian *jihadi* groups.

The case of MIT clearly illustrates how international *jihadi* ideology was deliberately imported. It is also a perfect example of local dynamics becoming intertwined with global ones. Santoso first reached out to Al-Qaeda’s Global Islamic Media Front and then to ISIS to elevate the Poso *jihad* beyond the parochial, in order to attract funding, and to enhance his own credentials. After Santoso’s *bai’at* to Baghdadi in 2013, MIT began adopting the black flag of the Islamic State on its media statements and videos,¹²² had its own link person to ISIS in Bagus Maskuron, who left for Syria in November 2013,¹²³ and Indonesian police believe that MIT received logistical support from ISIS, most notably money to purchase weapons

¹²⁰ Interview with Syamsudin Uba, ISIS sympathiser, Bekasi, 31 July 2017.

¹²¹ ‘Chinese Uighurs key players in IS-linked MIT: Police’, *The Jakarta Post*, 7 January 2016; ‘Three MIT wives vow revenge for husbands’ deaths’, *The Jakarta Post*, 5 April 2016; Etnik Uighur anggota Santoso tersisa satu orang di Poso’, 28 April 2016, <http://beritawow.xyz/etnik-uighur-anggota-santoso-tersisa-satu-orang-di-poso/>

¹²² For instance see Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, ‘Pernyataan 11: Hakikat Operasi PPRC Thogut Indonesia,’ April 2015, justpaste.it/b4yan11.

¹²³ IPAC, ‘the Evolution of ISIS Indonesia’, p.13.

from the Philippines.¹²⁴ MIT's fighting force, which numbered around 30 persons including three women, was also augmented by several Uighur foreign fighters who had been directed to Poso via contacts in the broader international ISIS network. Until the death of Santoso in July 2016, MIT was the clearest Indonesian example of 'importing' ISIS to serve local needs.¹²⁵

Conclusion

This article has examined the motivations of Indonesians and Malaysians for going to Syria, the appeal of the ISIS ideology and Caliphate, patterns of ISIS recruitment, the Southeast Asian battalion in Syria, and the ISIS network in Indonesia and Malaysia from a comparative perspective. It looked at how, where, and why the transnational and local intersected. It argued that it was exactly because of this process of 'glocalisation' that the eschatological and sectarian ideology and narratives of ISIS were deemed valid as they were viewed through the local lens, adapted to – and by – local conditions. Indonesians and Malaysians were not simply lured into joining ISIS as a result of its 'universal' ideology, its slick propaganda, and its global recruitment strategy. Local political and religious dynamics played a key role in creating a conducive and facilitative environment. On the religious level this environment was created by pre-existing and on-going debates on what it means to be a 'good Muslim', the place of Islamic law in society, and relations within the *ummah* as well as with non-Muslims. On the political level, this environment was the result of the absence of the state in this debate in Indonesia which provided an entry point for ISIS ideology. In contrast, in Malaysia it was the presence of the state which inadvertently contributed to the

¹²⁴ V. Arianti and Jasminder Singh, 'ISIS' Southeast Asia Unit: Raising the Security Threat,' *RSIS Commentary No 220*, 19 October 2015, p.2; 'FBI confirms death of militant with DNA from severed finger,' *Reuters*, 1 April 2015.

¹²⁵ 'Indonesia's most wanted militant "killed in shoot-out",' *The Guardian*, 19 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/19/indonesian-police-most-wanted-islamic-radical-santoso-may-have-died-in-shootout>.

pro-ISIS radicalisation through the Islamisation of politics in ways that resonated with elements of ISIS's ideology and agenda.

These observations are significant given the tendency in much of the analysis on ISIS to favour the structural appeal of its narrative of global *jihad* at the expense of a deeper appreciation of local conditions that, as this article has shown, has led to the 'indigenisation' of this narrative. The diffused nature of receptivity to the ISIS narrative and the importance of local factors has been made further evident in this comparative study, where Indonesia and Malaysia have differed in terms of recruitment patterns and the nature of its appeal - the efficacy of the internet for recruitment and indoctrination in Malaysia juxtaposed against the role that traditional networks play in Indonesia, for instance.

While it is important to understand the local Southeast Asian dynamics in order to ascertain why ISIS enjoyed appeal in Indonesia and Malaysia, it is also useful to place Indonesia and Malaysia into the broader context. Here it is perhaps necessary to consider why there were not more Indonesians and Malaysians who joined the Syrian *jihad*. Geographical distance is an obvious factor. Indonesia and Malaysia – indeed, the entire Southeast Asian region – is geographically far removed from the conflict zone in Syria. This made it logistically difficult for ISIS sympathisers to realise aspirations to be a physical participant in the Syrian *jihad*. It also made it more expensive, which explains the onerous lengths to which Indonesians in particular have had to go in order to raise the funds required to finance their *hijrah* to Syria. In fact, this factor was acknowledged by ISIS central, which called for Southeast Asians to wage *jihad* locally in the event they could not make the *hijrah* to the Islamic State territories.

A second factor that accounts for the difficulty that Indonesians and Malaysians faced in participating in the Syrian *jihad* is the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies in both countries. This is especially so in Malaysia, which has a long and well established tradition of

counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations bolstered by strong internal security legislation that is currently absent in the Indonesian legal system. And last, but certainly not least, the Islamisation of politics in both Indonesia and Malaysia, and in particular the growing influence of Islamist proponents of the implementation of Syariah in both countries, has provided considerable opportunities for above-ground pro-Syariah activities that have achieved far more than the sporadic violence carried out by ISIS cells, let alone ISIS-inspired lone wolves.

It is clear from this study then that the potency and appeal of the extremist narrative of ISIS in Southeast Asia derives from how it animated and fed off prevailing debates. While the structuralist and universalist ideology and narrative of ISIS continues to capture the headlines, careful consideration and contextualization of extremist activity in the region has shown that those who have sympathized, expressed support for, and left to join the ISIS *jihād* were in fact significantly propelled by local dynamics into which the phenomenon of ISIS was ‘imported’ and ‘indigenized’.