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*The Complexity Around Southeast Asians Foreign Fighters*

by

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## **The Complexity Around Southeast Asians Foreign Fighters**

By: Noor Huda Ismail \*

### **Introduction**

Since fighting began in 2012, the Syrian conflict has attracted a stream of Southeast Asians who have travelled to Syria, joining Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime. There are an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries affiliated to such groups. These groups include but are not restricted to *Jabhat al-Nusra*, an Al Qaeda affiliate that initially included Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) before it morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013.

Headcounts are difficult to confirm, as few Southeast Asian fighters are as public about their presence in Syria as former Malaysian politician and Afghan veteran Lotfie Ariffin. Before his death in a missile strike by Syrian regime forces in Hama in mid-September 2014, he regularly posted photos and videos of himself in action to encourage other Malaysians to join him in helping defend “our Sunni brothers who are now suffering from the brutality of Assad regime.”<sup>1</sup>

ISIS came into being thanks to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In its early emergence, ISIS was just a number of Sunni extremist groups fighting US forces and attacking Shiite civilians in an attempt to foment a sectarian civil war led by an Afghan veteran from the 1980s, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In contrast to Al Qaeda, ISIS seeks to control territory and create a “pure” Sunni Islamist state by challenging the current international order and destroying political borders of the Middle East that were created by the Western powers in the twentieth century.

How were Southeast Asians recruited to fight in these foreign wars? What should we do to deal with them?

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon by Ustad Lotfie Ariffin uploaded to YouTube on January 15, 2014. The video was viewed more than 16,000 times in the first 6 months.

To explicate the above questions, one needs to explore the complex connections between three entities: (1) the emergence of transnational and national networks as a “social force”; (2) the world order as the global structure; and (3) the social, political and economic dynamic of the state as a “form of the state”, forged through social relations local that enabled the recruitment of foreign fighters.

### **Transnational network of Islamism and its violent offshoots**

This paper clarifies two key issues of transnational Islamism. First, transnational Islamism in its modern sense is not a recent phenomenon. It is embedded in a system of colonial empires that divided the Muslim world into several colonially crafted political entities and then multiple sovereign states. It has a tradition going back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century under the term *pan-Islamism*. Pan-Islamism is an ideology based on the view that all Muslims were one people who had a responsibility to help each other in times of crisis. Additionally, most of contemporary transnational Islamist activists do not fall with the “jihadists” description: they are very small minority.

There are two main forms of transnational Islamism activity that are salient in the Muslim world today. The first is transnational missionary activity; referred to as the *dawa* (literally, ‘call’) aimed at making existing Muslim populations better Muslims in terms of following Islamic ritual practices and codes of moral behaviour. The *Tablighi Jamaat* represents this movement. The other is an explicitly political trend of transnational Islam that seeks to re-create an Islamic caliphate based on the model of the “righteous caliphate” of early Islam, without openly advocating violence. The revival of the caliphate tendency is represented by *Hizbut-Tahrir* (Ayoob 2011).

The above anecdote suggests that transnational Islamism is politically heterogeneous and Islamists work toward different short-and mid-term aims and display systematic behaviour. Thus, any attempts to picture Islamism as a single solid cultural and political entity like Huntington’s *Clash of Civilization* is doomed to fail as it fails to grasp the realities on the ground. Edward W. Said characterised Huntington’s hypothesis as “*The Class of Ignorance*” (2001). For

Said, Huntington's theory has a simplified view of the world.

However, the theory regained strength after the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001 when George W. Bush used the word "crusade", with its connotation of a Christian holy war against Muslims. The attack itself was presented by its perpetrators as an Islamic holy war against Christians and Jews despite the fact that the world's Muslim nations, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, and Iran to Indonesia, condemned the terrorist attacks.

### **The Global Structure**

Over the last few years, one of the major policy concerns about the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Russia's North Caucasus region, Somalia, and Syria have been that these states may both attract and breed transnational insurgents, threatening domestic, regional, and international security (Bakke 2014).

Bakke argues that from the perspective of the international community, the worry about transnational insurgents is fourfold. First, transnational insurgents, who are not state actors, who voluntarily participate in an armed struggle outside their own home country, might prolong the conflict by introducing more actors to the theater and complicating attempts at ending the war through intervention or negotiation. Second, many of today's transnational insurgents are Islamists and these actors are transforming the struggles they are joining. Third, if transnational insurgents strengthen the rebels or prolong the war, they may contribute turning the conflict-ridden state into failed state and training ground for terrorists. Lastly, they will gain skills and they can put to use back home.

Calling this the "veteran effect", Hegghammer (2011) posits two processes that may explain why a foreign fighter acquires the motivation for an attack at home even if he left with no such intention: enlistment, in which a foreign fighter is drawn into domestic fighting by a calculating second party; and socialization, in which a foreign fighter's preferences change through the experience of

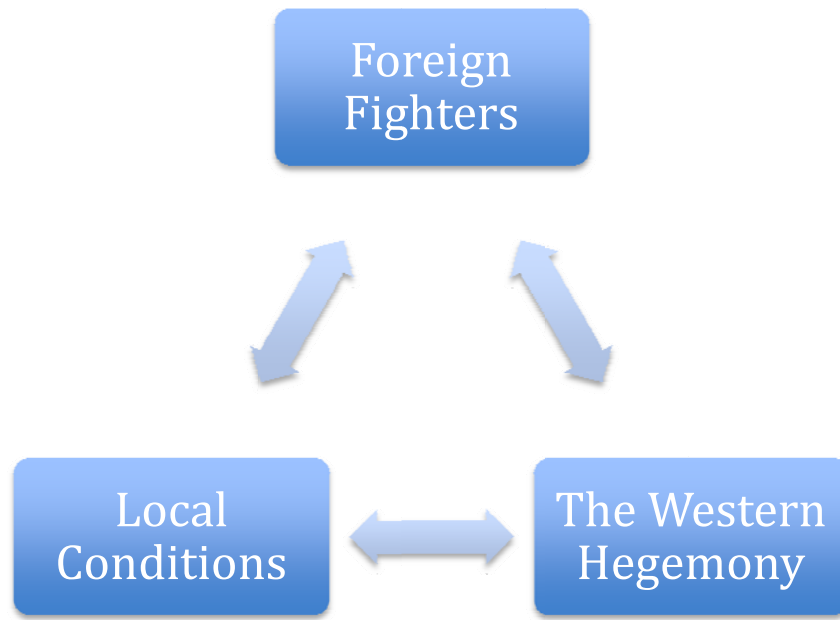
military life, e.g. he comes to see theological arguments constraining violence as impractical or naïve and domestic terrorism as legitimate.

The excessive use of violence by today's ISIS through beheadings and mass killings has horrified the international community. Their brutality has caused some of the general public to ignore of what Edward Said (1997) reminded us – that the Islamic world “numbers a billion people and includes dozens of countries, traditions, languages and nations”. Thus, it is “simply false to try to reduce Islam to a handful of political organisations, rules, stereotypes of fundamentalism and extremism, and generalizations about the faith, its founder and its adherents.”

As I argued earlier, to understand ISIS, one must understand the social and global dynamics after the US invaded Iraq in 2003. Domestically, Bush borrowed Kissinger's argument (1994) that America serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home and then it is American's obligation 'to crusade for democracy around the world' including promoting democracy in Iraq in 2003. Moreover, Saddam Hussein, Bush argued, produced the weapons of mass destructions (WMD) which could be used by bin Laden's Al Qaeda to destroy America.

Marry Kaldor (2012) simply called the US invasion in Iraq in 2003 as an “oil war”. She quoted then Deputy Secretary for Defence, Paul Wolfowitz who argued: “the most important different between North Korea and Iraq is that economically, we just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims in a sea of oil”. This ill-planned military intervention helped to create ISIS and thousands foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. This time around the great players such as the US, EU countries, Saudi Arabia, China and Russia seem to be embarking on a “proxy war” (Clinton 2014).

To understand the complexity of the issue around foreign fighters, I proposethis diagram that I modified from Robert Cox's *Social Forces, States and World Order* (1981). I use Indonesian foreign fighters as a mycase study:



### **Local Conditions**

The Indonesian government successfully arrested at least 840 terrorists since the first Bali bombing in 2002. This has weakened the military capability of the splinter groups of JI that was led by the late Malaysian, Noordin M Top, to mount any terrorist attacks. During that process of law of enforcement, around 70 “suspected” terrorists were shot dead.

The government struggled for legitimacy before civil societies. Most Indonesian Muslim organisations don't support terrorism and violence but were appalled by the police brutality. The funerals of those suspected terrorists were attended by hundreds of their supporters. The main topic of speeches and banners during that funeral were straightforward: *“welcome home martyr and let's continue their struggle”*.

The feeling of being humiliated and oppressed is very powerful message to transform into retaliatory action. Diana Perlman (2004) reminded us that being humiliated is *‘like being filled with poison that has to be expelled in order to regain composure.....and demand for rectification, often by taking down the humiliator’*.

Meanwhile, the prison and post-prison system in Indonesia has been the weakest link in counter terrorism efforts. Prison is often a venue for radicalization. Prison staff have permitted jihadi leaders to hold study circles inside the prison and through this avenue, ordinary prisoners and even prison guard have been recruited. While inside prison, many of those terrorists have regrouped and created new cells.

### **The Western Hegemony**

On the global arena, the Arab Spring reached Syria in 2011 and turned very ugly. Just like Libya, the authoritarian regime of Bashar al- Assad responded with excessive force and mass detentions, which in turn eventually led some Syrians to take up arms to defend themselves and eventually, try to topple Assad.

These rebels quickly received support from neighbouring countries especially from non-state actors who are linked to Saddam's establishment especially former Iraqi military operatives who lost their jobs and social positions after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The protracted conflict in Iraq after the invasion led to the country becoming a "failed state" because the state has lost its legitimacy and the monopoly of organised violence were controlled by emerging non-state actors like Al Qaeda in Iraq, which gained initial traction among foreign fighters from Muslim world including from Southeast Asians.

'Globalisation', marked by the rapid development of airplane industry, and the development of Internet and social media, also had a role to play. Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) has termed such virtual communities "email ethnicities", where "transnational networks of people are tied together culturally" through Internet, "despite the diversity of their places of residence and the limitations of national borders.

On societal level, especially among the youths, the process of "alienation" because the impact of compartmentalisation of capitalism system is increasingly widespread. The system also produced massive inequalities in this world. The top 0.5 per cent of the world's population own over a third of its wealth, and the

world's 1,226 billionaires have a combined wealth of US\$ 4.6 trillion (Bull 2013). At the same time, the bottom 68.4 per cent of the world population own just 4.2 percent of its wealth and nearly 650 million people around the world are undernourished (Therborn 2012).

### **Foreign Fighters**

ISIS promulgates the idea that they are creating the embryo of an Islamic caliphate that will eventually stretch from Arabia to encompass Southeast Asia. This might explain why some fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and even Australia bring their wives and children to Syria with them. For born again Islamists, ISIS offers a higher cause than eliminating alcohol and vice from the street: They are to save Syrian Muslims from the tyranny of Bashar Al Assad.

What is happening in the Middle East and its relation to the West dictates the foreign fighter's social relations. Many Southeast Asian Muslims actively seek knowledge and work opportunities in the Middle East, whether as students studying there, consumers of jihadi publications and electronic media or as casual workers. This cluster of community provides ample opportunities for would-be foreign fighters to continue their connection and relevance to the global Islamic World, including in Syria.

The tipping point came with the announcement of the death of Indonesian student Rizal Fardi in Syria. Before joining the rebels, Rizal had been a student at the Al-Imam University in Yemen, having graduated from Al-Mukmin school in Ngruki in 2006. Rizal Fardi's death was announced in an Arabic tweet by the Suqour Al Izz Brigadeon 28 November 2013 with words that appeared to damn with its faint praise: *The martyr, Abu Muhammad al Indonesia, is a man of perseverance (to the cause), devout to his God and always vigilant during patrols.*

Traditionally in Indonesia, people become interested in joining jihadist groups through the influence of radical Islamic preachers. Firebrand cleric Abu Bakar Bashir has openly supported ISIS since 2014. To those who ask for advice on going to Syria, Ba'asyir's standard response is: *I encourage every Muslim who*



*has capability to go to Syam to fight. No more sitting around and discussing matters that are not important for us. The day of justice has come. God has opened up the field of jihad for us.*<sup>2</sup>

Convicted terrorist Aman Abdurrahman has translated and distributed ISIS materials on the internet. He said: *There is no point to follow AimanAz-Zawahiri because he has no territory. ISIS has it. Why are you still hiding in the cave? Show yourself and be with Al Baghdadi.*<sup>3</sup>

Offshoots of the militant group *Jama'ah Islamiyah* and the local vigilante organization Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) also support the founding of an Islamic state. But there is a second process that should be discussed: the spillover effect from the people who have made the trip and arrived there.

In Afghanistan in the 1990s people joined the mujahedeen clandestinely. Now they post selfies. These images can arouse people's interest back home. ISIS supporters often take selfies of fighters from their personal account and post them on their social media page. Some websites also pick up on these pictures and report them on their website in a positive light.

Contemporary recruitment processes of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations always use images as this assists in engaging cognitive processes. ISIS usage of social media and YouTube videos provides visuals of the camaraderie of men in arms.

### **What next?**

Following up, the UN through resolution 2178 (2014) condemned violent extremism and decided that member states shall, consistent with international law, prevent the "recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts.

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<sup>2</sup> Prison interview in 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with source, KembangKuning Prison, Nusakambangan, July 2014.

Expressing concern over the establishment of international terrorist networks, the council underscored the “particular and urgent need” to prevent the travel and support for foreign terrorist fighters associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), *Al-Nusra* Front (ANL) and other affiliates or splinter groups of Al-Qaida.

These are practical ideas that I think we can do collectively do:

**(1).Empowering former fighters and exploiting the “fault lines” between themselves**

To get maximum result, one needs to execute this endeavour through creative methods such as documentary films or social media campaigns. One of the examples of these fault lines that we can explore comes from the following story: Three Malaysians are said to have told interrogators that they returned home as they were unhappy that the slightest disagreements would trigger gunfights among the different militant groups in Syria.<sup>4</sup> One returnee, who was with *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, said a fellow Malaysian, a personal friend who joined ISIS, shot him in the arm over ideological differences. He came home to recuperate.<sup>5</sup>

**(2) Empowering the role of mothers.**

Recently, I interviewed Akbar Maulana(16) who was all ready to go to Syria; he had saved up USD200 and met the ISIS contact in Kayseri, a Serbian who had also studied at his school and been to Syria and back. But although he thought fighting in Syria was “cool”, Akbar continued to have doubts about carrying out jihad without his parents’ permission; he feared that God would not bless him if he went to Syria without parental approval, which he did not dare seek.

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<sup>4</sup>5 suspected ISIS fighters return to Malaysia, *Straits Times*, 9 November 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Malaysian Special Branch source, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014.

### **(3) Women-led, university facilitated Countering Violence Extremism (CVE) programs.**

This project aims to build confidence, knowledge and skills among women to counter violent extremism in three key locations that have become centres of radicalisation. It recognises that many women in these regions want to work to prevent radicalisation and promote rehabilitation, having been directly impacted by extremism, and that the potential of women to contribute in this field has barely been tapped. The dynamics of radicalisation pivot on social networks and women are uniquely placed to influence their spouses, children and siblings, in ways both subtle and direct, to turn away from the destructive path of violent extremism.

The project will develop and implement long-term Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs that empower women in order to prevent radicalization and rehabilitate those who have been radicalized, through sustained partnerships with universities.

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