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**The Complexity around
Southeast Asian Foreign Fighters**

Noor Huda Ismail

**THE APR SERIES
E-Monograph**

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**INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND
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The Complexity around Southeast Asian Foreign Fighters

Introduction

Since fighting began in 2012, the Syrian conflict has attracted a stream of Southeast Asians travelling to Syria to join Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime with about 20,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries. These groups included but were not restricted to *Jabhat al-Nusra*, an Al Qaeda affiliate that initially included Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) before it morphed into 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 was; 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.”¹

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 in 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, which were created by the Western powers in the 20th century.

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

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

To explicate the above questions, one needs to explore the complex interconnectedness between three entities: (i) the emergence of transnational and national network as a “social force”, (ii) the world order as the global structure, and (iii) the social, political and economic dynamic of the state as “form of the state” forged through local social relations 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 first 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 19th 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. Second, most contemporary transnational Islamist activists do not fall within the “jihadists” description: they are a 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 population better Muslims in terms of following Islamic ritual practices and codes of moral behaviour. The *Tablighi Jamaat* represented 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 *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Ayoob 2011).

The above anecdote suggests that transnational Islamism is politically heterogeneous and Islamists work towards different short-term 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 to grasp the reality on the ground. Edward W Said called 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 United States in 2001 when George W Bush used the word "crusade", with its connotation of a Christian holy war against Muslims. The attacks themselves were presented by the perpetrators as an Islamic holy war against Christians and Jews although the world's Muslim nations from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, from 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 Caucas region, Somalia, and Syria has been that these states may 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 voluntarily rebelling in an armed struggle outside their own home country, might prolong a civil war by introducing more actors to the theatre 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 a failed state and training ground for terrorists. Lastly, they will gain skills that 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: (i) enlistment, in which a foreign fighter is drawn into domestic fighting by a calculating second party; and (ii) socialization, in which a foreign fighter’s preferences change through the experience of military life, for example, he comes to see theological arguments constraining violence as impractical or naïve and domestic terrorism as legitimate.

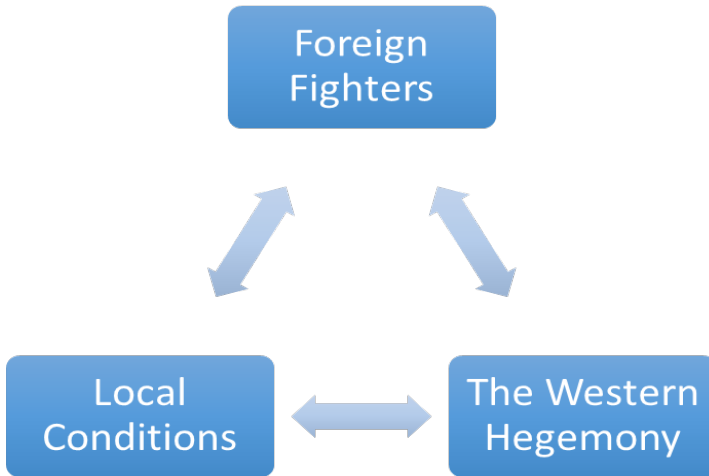
The excessive use of violence by today’s ISIS through beheadings and mass killings has horrified international community. Their brutality has made the general public ignore what Edward W Said (1997) reminded us of: that the Islamic world “numbers a billion people and includes dozens of countries, traditions, 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 socio and global dynamics after the United States 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 America’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 destruction (WMD) that will eventually be used by bin Laden’s Al Qaeda to destroy America.

Mary Kaldor (2012) simply called the US invasion in Iraq in 2003 an “oil war”. She quoted then Deputy Secretary for Defence, Paul Wolfowitz as he argued: “the most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that economically we just have no choice in Iraq. The country swims in

a sea of oil". This ill-planned military intervention has helped the creation of ISIS and thousands of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. This time around, the great players such as the United States, European Union countries, Saudi Arabia, China and Russia embarked on a "proxy war" (Clinton 2014).

To understand the complexity of the issue around foreign fighters, I propose this diagram which I modified from Robert Cox's *Social Forces, States and World Orders* (1981). I use Indonesian foreign fighters as my case study:



Local conditions

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

The government struggles for legitimacy before civil societies. Most Indonesian Muslim organisations do not 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 the funeral were straightforward: “welcome home martyr and let’s continue their struggle”.

The feeling of being humiliated and oppressed is a 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. The prison is often a venue for radicalisation. Prison employees have permitted jihadi leaders to hold study circles inside the prison and through this avenue ordinary prison inmates and even prison guards have been recruited. Many terrorists have regrouped and created new cells while inside a prison.

The Western hegemony

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

These rebels quickly received support from neighbouring countries, especially from non-state actors linked to Saddam’s establishment and former Iraqi armies, who lost their position during the US invasion in Iraq in 2003. The protracted conflict in Iraq after the US occupation in 2003 led to “the failed state” because the state had lost its legitimacy and monopoly of organised violence as can be seen by the emergence of non-

state actors like then AQI to gain traction among foreign fighters from the Muslim world, including from Southeast Asia.

Globalisation marked the rapid development of the aeroplane industry, the development of the Internet and social media. Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) has termed such virtual communities as “email ethnicities”, where “transnational networks of people are tied together culturally” through the Internet, “despite the diversity of their places of residence and the limitations of national borders”.

On a societal level, one can see the process of “alienation” among more people, especially youth, because of the impact of compartmentalisation of the capitalist system. The system has also produced massive inequality. 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’s population own just 4.2 per cent of the world’s 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 trying to save Syrian Muslims from the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad.

What is happening in the Middle East and its relationship with the West dictates the social relations of foreign fighters. Many Southeast Asian Muslims seek knowledge and work opportunities in the Middle East as students or casual workers, or as consumers of jihadi publications and

electronic media. This community cluster 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-Iman University in Yemen, having graduated from Al-Mukmin Islamic school in Ngruki in 2006. Rizal Fardi's death was announced in an Arabic tweet by the Suqour al-Izz Brigade on 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, Bashir'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.*²

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

Offshoots of the militant group JI and the local vigilante organisation 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.

² Prison interview in 2013.

³ Interview with source, Kembang Kuning Prison, Nusakambangan, July 2014.

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 those of other terrorist organisations always use images as these assist in engaging cognitive processes. The usage of social media and YouTube videos by ISIS provides visuals of the camaraderie of men in arms.

What next?

The United Nations 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".

Expressing concern over the establishment of international terrorist networks, the Security 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-Qaeda.

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

1. *Empowering former fighters and exploiting the "fault lines" between themselves*

To get maximum results, one needs to execute this endeavour through creative methods such as documentary films or a social media campaign. An example is: 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.⁴ 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.⁵

2. *Empowering the role of mothers*

Recently, I interviewed Akbar Maulana (16) who was ready to go to Syria; he had saved up US\$ 200 and met the ISIS contact in Kayseri, a Serbian who had also studied at his school and been to Syria and back. 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.

3. *Women-led, university facilitated, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programmes*

This project aims to build confidence, knowledge and skills in women to counter violent extremism in 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 begun to be tapped.

The dynamics of radicalisation focus on social networks, and women are uniquely placed to influence their spouse, children and siblings, in ways both subtle and direct, to turn away from the destructive path of violent extremism.

⁴ Five suspected ISIS fighters return to Malaysia, *Straits Times*, 9 November 2014.

⁵ Interview with Malaysian Special Branch source, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014.

The project will develop and implement long-term CVE programmes that empower women, through sustained partnerships with universities, in order to prevent radicalisation and rehabilitate those who have been radicalised.

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**Mr Noor Huda Ismail**

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Noor Huda Ismail's connection to the world of terrorism is a deeply personal one: his former school mate was involved in the 2002 Bali Bombing, while others died in Indonesia, the Philippines, Syria and Iraq for terrorism activities. To understand why some of his friends had become terrorists and to prevent more from converting, he founded the Institute for International Peace Building in Indonesia, winning the Ashoka Award in 2013. Previously, he worked for the Southeast Asia bureau of the Washington Post, where he interviewed hundreds of jailed terrorists in prisons across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Egypt and Yemen. He was recently on the Syrian border for his documentary film project about foreign fighters.





## **INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA**

The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia was established on 8 April 1983 as an autonomous, not-for-profit research organisation. ISIS Malaysia has a diverse research focus which includes economics, foreign policy, security studies, nation-building, social policy, technology, innovation and environmental studies. It also undertakes research collaboration with national and international organisations in important areas such as national development and international affairs.

ISIS Malaysia engages actively in Track Two diplomacy, and promotes the exchange of views and opinions at both the national and international levels. The Institute has also played a role in fostering closer regional integration and international cooperation through forums such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT). ISIS Malaysia is a founding member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and manages the Council's Secretariat.

As the country's premier think-tank, ISIS Malaysia has been at the forefront of some of the most significant nation-building initiatives in the nation's history. It was a contributor to the Vision 2020 concept and was consultant to the Knowledge-Based Economy Master Plan initiative.









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