

# The Historical Context and Regional Social Network Dynamics of Radicalisation and Recruitment of Islamic State Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Indonesia and its Southeast Asian Neighbours

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## *Introduction*

The declaration of the Islamic State (IS) Caliphate across northern Syria and Iraq, by ISIS leader, and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in recently captured Mosul on 29 June 2014, galvanised global attention. Not only did governments give fresh attention to the threat posed by the decade-old movement that had waxed, waned, and waxed again, so too did those who were drawn to its utopian siren-song of radicalisation. Up until the rapid territorial expansion of ISIS that commenced in mid-2013 most foreign fighters in its ranks had come from neighbouring Arab states. Once the expansion began, and especially after the declaration of the caliphate, fighters and supporters streamed in from 80 countries from every corner of the globe. Between 2014 and 2018 around 6,000 people from Western Europe alone flowed through Turkey to Syria and Iraq to support the so-called caliphate (Cook and Vale 2018 cite 5,904, from Western Europe, including 1,023 women and 1,502 minors, and 7,252 from Russia and Eastern Europe, including 1,396 women and 1,255 children). As families and communities were caught by surprise renewed attention was given to the phenomenon of radicalisation. The sudden transformation of lives from areligious to foreign fighter triggered a focus on seeking to understand individual factors.

Even in Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore in particular – where radicalisation had been a longstanding problem, the rapid escalation in people from all walks of life setting out to join the caliphate shocked governments and communities alike. There the numbers were, counter-intuitively, much smaller: 1,010, including 355 women and 350 minors (according to Cook and Vale 2018), although these figures do not include the 570 Indonesians that were detained in Turkey before they could enter Syria.

The concept of radicalisation is paradoxical, in usage it can be both a notoriously nebulous and ambiguous term or one that is invoked to explain specific behaviour and concrete outcomes (Neumann 2013; McDonald 2018; Sedgwick 2010). Its ultimate utility depends upon care in clarifying what precisely it is being used to describe and in what context. This chapter is concerned with understanding radicalisation into engagement with violent movements and organisations in contemporary Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, to a much greater extent than Western Europe, IS radicalisation has involved well-established Salafi-jihadi terrorist networks originally aligned with al Qaeda (Barton 2020). The rise of the IS caliphate breathed new life into these networks and re-energised their local and regional activism. This local channelling of IS support might be one key reason why regional outflows of foreign fighters and supporters from Southeast Asia to Syria and Iraq were not even larger.

Based on what is reported in the media about lone-actor attacks, it can be tempting to think of radicalisation as a very individual phenomenon. Loose concepts or phrases such as ‘self-radicalisation’ bolster the impression that radicalisation revolves around an individual and the choices that they make (Borum 2011, Ilardi 2013; Vergani et al. 2018). This is not entirely wrong, and certainly if individuals have radicalised into violence and committed a crime, they need to be held accountable for their choices. But if we are to better understand how radicalisation occurs and find ways to prevent it, or at least to reduce its effects, then we need to understand the broader context in which radicalisation occurs.

It is quite rare for individuals to radicalise in complete isolation. Watching videos or reading texts alone in a darkened room may well be part of an individual’s trajectory of radicalisation, but there is much more to radicalisation than the consumption of radical material. In the vast majority of cases, radicalisation into violence involves a pathway of recruitment into a new social group (Bortha 2014; Nilsson 2015; Porter and Kebell 2011). Ideas and messaging are important, but they are rarely the sole drivers of the radicalisation process. Generally, it is the social relationships formed which lead to a seeker diving deeper into the movement’s media and, in time, internalising its core narratives, propelled by a natural desire to fit into a new circle of friends and associates.

Not only are individuals radicalised through social networks, but often local social networks are themselves further radicalised by global networks. The radicalisation of individuals into Islamist circles in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, is, to a significant extent, linked to a broader pattern of the mutation of local movements into globalised networks and the transforma-

tion of local conflicts into frontline fights as part of an aggressive global jihad (Nilsson 2015).

The evolution of Indonesia's extremist Islamist networks is one case in point. In Indonesia, the historical roots of extremist Islamism begin with the rise of proto-Islamist movements in the context of mid-20th century nationalism and in the subsequent generation of locally-focused proto-jihadi movements such as Indonesia's Dar'ul Islam movement in the 1950s and 1960s (Barton 1997). The Dar'ul Islam (literally, the 'abode of Islam') movement had its origins in West Java in January 1948, when local Sundanese militant Kartosuwirjo led a breakaway insurgency as the leader of one of the many nationalist militia resisting efforts by the Dutch military to retake control of their former colony (Barton 2002:47). Unhappy with the lack of recognition that he and his militia were receiving from the nationalist leaders, in August 1949 Kartosuwirjo declared the mountainous territory under the control of his fighters in West Java to be 'Negara Islam Indonesia' (NII – the Islamic State of Indonesia) (Barton 2004; ICG 2002).

In 1952, Kartosuwirjo's fledgling Dar'ul Islam NII in the highlands of West Java was joined in allegiance by a like-minded insurgency in the jungle of Southern Sulawesi led by Abdu Kahar Muzakkar. Muzakkar's local insurgency in Southern Sulawesi began as a regional dispute but mutated into an Islamist cause. Both insurgencies used the support of local communities, reinforced by an enhanced sense of religious justification, to retain control of their rugged, heavily-wooded, domains for more than a decade. In 1962, Kartosuwirjo was arrested and put on trial. Three years later, in 1965, Muzakkar was killed by the Indonesian military (Barton 2004:47). Their micro religious states were doomed from the outset, but they endured long enough to build resilient communities of 'true-believers' and their influence, and social networks, have continued for 70 years.

As is discussed in detail below, the Islamic State movement headquartered in Syria and Iraq originated as an outgrowth of al Qaeda. And like al Qaeda in the late 1980s in Afghanistan, it has its origins in insurgency and the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). The ideological origins of al Qaeda began well before the insurgent struggle by Afghan fighters against Soviet forces occupying their country in the 1980s. But it was those circumstances that served to provide a draw for would-be fighters from around the world to travel to the conflict zone to become part, they imagined, of a struggle with implications well beyond one country's desire for independence. The name al Qaeda literally means 'the base' and the organisation was formally established in 1988 to coordinate the training and equipping of foreign terrorist fighters. This was not so that they could fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, but rather so that they could be

more completely radicalised, trained and equipped to take the fight globally back to their countries of origin.

Around 300 to 400 would-be foreign terrorist fighters travelled from Southeast Asia, predominantly from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, to join in the defensive jihad insurgency in Afghanistan (Barton 2004). Very few of them saw significant front-line combat experience, but they received support from Osama bin Laden and the other leaders of al Qaeda, who recognised that their real value lay not in their contribution to the campaign of the Afghans against the Soviets, but rather in transforming them into *frontline fighters in a global aggressive jihad* that would take local conflicts and transform them into elements of a worldwide campaign.

But how do transnational networks like those of IS and al Qaeda affect the transformation of local conflicts and the spread of violence? This chapter examines the role of networks in the emergence of violence as well as the transformation of conflicts (Kenney 2018). In particular, the example of Indonesia is analysed in the context of the evolution of IS and the phenomenon of FTFs. This perspective is employed to provide an outlook to the transformation of other conflicts in other Southeast Asian states.

### *Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah*

While so far it is only in the southern Philippines that IS has been able to transform a local conflict into large-scale destruction, in Indonesia, as in the Philippines, IS has succeeded in securing the allegiance of many of the key established terrorist networks. In particular, it made deep inroads into the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) networks giving them new energy and drawing in new recruits (Barton 2005; Barton 2015; Chalk 2019; IPAC 2017; Solahudin 2013).

JI was itself formed out of older terrorist networks, notably of the Dar'ul Islam movement, which despite government campaigns targeting its leadership has proven to be a resilient multigenerational network. The two foundational leaders of JI, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, were long-time activists and leaders in Dar'ul Islam (Barton 2004:49-56). In 1969 the pair established a pirate radio station – Radio Dakwah Islamiyah Surakarta – in the central Javanese city of Surakarta, also known as Solo. Then three years later, in 1972, they established a conservative Islamic school, Pesantren al-Mukmin, in Ngruki, a suburb of Solo.

In the late 1970s, the Suharto regime attempted to eradicate the remnants of the Dar'ul Islam movement by means of an elaborate sting opera-

tion (Barton 2002; Barton 2004:48; Barton 2009; Barton 2010; ICG 2002). The sting used the pretext of a supposed threat from remnants of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) that had been destroyed in a vicious pogrom in late 1965 and early 1966. The pogrom had come at the instigation of the CIA. It was part of a bloody transition that ended the presidency of leftist populist Sukarno and saw him replaced with the then little-known general Suharto, establishing a right-of-centre military backed regime that came to be known as the New Order regime (Cribb et al. 1990; Elegant 2001; Elson 2001).

Lured into the open, the Dar'ul Islam leaders were rounded-up and prosecuted. Sungkar and Ba'asyir were jailed in 1978, but released in 1982. When a legal challenge to their early release was about to commence, they made a strategic retreat, or *hijrah*, to Malaysia in 1985 (Barton 2004:14-15, 39). From their sanctuary in Kuala Lumpur, and reunited with many of their Dar'ul Islam fellows, who had fled from Indonesia to Malaysia, they campaigned openly to recruit *mujahidin* to travel to Afghanistan-Pakistan and train with what was to become al Qaeda (Barton 2004:14-16, 32-33).

Even after the fighting concluded with the Soviet withdrawal at the end of the decade, they continued to send Southeast Asians to al Qaeda's camps on the rugged Afghanistan-Pakistan border to be trained and equipped to return home and continue the jihadi struggle in Southeast Asia. It was from this crucible that new terrorist organisations like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Mindanao were formed (taking for their name the name of a prominent al Qaeda patron Abdul Rasul Sayyaf (Barton 2004:109).

And it was in one of al Qaeda's main training camps in 1993 that Ba'asyir and Sungkar declared that henceforth they were separating from Dar'ul Islam and were forming a new network known simply as the Community of Islam – Jemaah Islamiyah – borrowing the name of the terrorist wing of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (in Egyptian Arabic referred to as Gamaah Islamiyah (Barton 2004:51, 59). The two men returned to Solo in 1999 and the next year Ba'asyir established the high-profile, non-violent organisation, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI - the Mujahidin Council of Indonesia), even while JI continued to grow and expand as an underground movement build around a nucleus of 'Afghani alumni'. In 1999, shortly after returning to Indonesia, Sungkar died of natural causes and the leadership of JI fell to Ba'asyir (Barton 2004:56-57).

The collapse of the Suharto regime in May 1998 opened up new opportunities for JI to pursue its aims in Indonesia. Prior to May 1998, JI had concentrated on *dakwah*, building 'pure' Islamic communities and sending *mujahidin* for training abroad. Most of the senior JI activists, including the core of Afghan alumni continued to focus on *dakwah* rather than pursuing

a path of militant jihad. Nevertheless, from late 1999 onwards, elements of JI worked in a low-key fashion on supporting local jihad in Maluku and Sulawesi. And throughout 2000 splinter factions of JI, undetected, carried out a series of terrorist bombings. At the same time JI leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir was pursuing a strategy of working openly through Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia to unite jihadi and non-jihadi radical Islamists and to push for political change (Barton 2004:65-66).

The violence in Ambon, in the province of Maluku, that broke out in late 1999 saw more than 10,000 lives lost in the decade that followed (Barton 2004:77; ICG 2003; Sholeh 2006). The communal conflict ignited a powerful propaganda drive for the recruitment of *mujahidin*. While the high-profile militia Laskar Jihad with 7,000 fighters drawn mostly from Java got most of the attention (Noorhaidi 2006) it was a smaller, less observed militia associated with JI, known as Laskar Jundullah or Laskar Mujahidin, which played a significant role despite the smaller number of well-trained fighters (Barton 2010; Barton 2015; Barton 2018a). JI worked with the Islamic charity KOMPAK to recruit and support *mujahidin* in Ambon (Noorhaidi 2006:32-55).

In 2000, when most of the attention focused on the communal conflict in Maluku, the second front for jihad was erupting in the city of Poso in Central Sulawesi simultaneously. Communal conflict had broken out in Poso on the island of Sulawesi, northeast of Java and due west from Maluku, in late 1998, in the wake of the collapse of the Suharto regime. Several extremist Islamist militias emerged in the midst of the fighting in Poso but, in time, Laskar Jihad, which despite its name was an ultra-nationalist rather than a global jihadi group, faltered and thus offered JI the opportunity to take advantage.

In hindsight, the evolution of JI as a jihadi terrorist group appears clear. Up until the Bali bombing in on 12 October 2002, however, the group's terrorist activities were not at all clear to outsiders and were deeply contested by insiders. Whereas Abudullah Sungkar had been a highly charismatic and respected religious leader, many within JI were sceptical of Abdullah Ba'asyir as his replacement. At the time of his death in Indonesia in late 1999, Sungkar had established a clear direction for JI away from immediate violence and open conflict. Instead, he chartered a course of consolidation, arguing that in post-Suharto Indonesia it was neither the time, nor the place for a campaign of jihadi conflict (Hefner 2000).

Sungkar's death, and the eruption of communal violence in Ambon and Poso, saw less patient, more militant, elements in JI move, largely autonomously, but with the blessing of Ba'asyir, towards direct action. Apart

from *mujahidin* being sent to Ambon and Poso a mysterious series of unclaimed attacks occurred which only later came to be associated with JI.

On 1 August 2000, a powerful bomb blast destroyed the car of the Philippines ambassador as he was returning to his official residence in Menteng, central Jakarta. The ambassador was badly injured and had his Mercedes not been heavily armoured, he would certainly have been killed. On 13 September, a powerful bomb was detonated in the underground car park of the Jakarta Stock Exchange, killing 15 people. Responsibility for the attack was never claimed and at the time neither the attack on the Philippines ambassador, nor attack on the stock exchange were attributed to JI.

On Christmas Eve, a series of near-simultaneous explosions occurred outside churches in Jakarta and in eight other cities, killing 18 people and injuring dozens. Years later the bombings were attributed to the JI bomb-maker, prominent Afghan alumnus and charismatic recruiter Hambali (aka Riduan Isamuddin), currently detained in Guantanamo Bay because of his alleged links with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. Like the other attacks that year, these attacks remained a mystery and JI was little suspected of having either the capacity or intention to orchestrate a series of sophisticated terrorist attacks.

A week later, on 30 December 2000, explosions in Manila killed 22 people. Less than two months after the attack in Manila, in February 2001, authorities in Singapore uncovered a sophisticated JI network in the city state which had been lobbying for support from al Qaeda to attack American military personnel from US naval vessels visiting Singapore. They had been alerted by the Americans after al Qaeda documents were discovered in an al Qaeda safe house in Afghanistan detailing an al Qaeda funding bid. One year later, on 12 March 2002, three JI militants were arrested in Manila, and found to be carrying C4 military-issue plastic explosives.

Then in August 2002, respected researcher Sidney Jones and her team, at the Southeast Asian office of the International Crisis Group in Jakarta, published a remarkable report about JI's Ngruki network of jihadi militants (ICG 2002). The following month, *Time* magazine published a lengthy expose with an al Qaeda leader arrested outside Jakarta, detailing JI's extensive links with al Qaeda in Indonesia and the Philippines. Weeks later, on 2 October 2002, a JI bomb exploded in Zamboanga, in western Mindanao, killing three people. Just ten days later, in Bali, Indonesia, an improvised explosive device (IED) in a backpack was detonated in crowded bar, followed by a massive vehicle borne IED (VBIED) in a Mitsubishi minibus being detonated outside the Sari Club, in the tourist district of Kuta. The VBIED explosion resulted in the thatched roof of the Sari Club

being instantly consumed in a massive fireball that generated intense heat. The paired explosions saw 202 people killed and hundreds more injured.

Careful post-blast forensic investigations in Bali by the Indonesian Police, assisted by the Australian Federal Police, led to a breakthrough that resulted in dozens of arrests and revealed clear evidence of an extensive JI terrorist network (Barton 2004:8-12). As a result, the capacity of the ‘bombing faction’ in JI, led by Hambali, was substantially reduced. Nevertheless, JI continued a campaign of bombings throughout the decade.

On 11 August 2003, Hambali was finally arrested in Thailand, where he had been planning a major terrorist attack (Barton 2004:58). One week earlier, on 5 August 2003, JI bombers had carried out a suicide attack with an explosives-packed van on Jakarta’s prestigious JW Marriott Hotel which killed 12 (Barton 2004:58). One year after the attack on the JW Marriott, on 9 September 2004, JI suicide bombers detonated a massive IED in a delivery truck outside the entrance of the Australian embassy in Jakarta. Nine people adjacent to the entrance were killed but many more lives would have been lost, if the embassy had not been extensively ‘hardened’ with new blast walls and reinforced windows fitted in the wake of the Bali bombings in 2002, in which 88 Australians had been killed. The attacks continued the following year, with 6 people being killed in an explosion on the island of Ceram, Maluku, on 16 May 2005. Two weeks later 22 lives were taken by an explosion in Tentena, near Poso, in Central Sulawesi on 28 May. On 1 October 2005, JI returned to using suicide bombers against foreign tourists in Bali, with three bombers wearing IED-filled backpacks, leading to the death of 20 people dining in restaurants on Jimbaran beach, south of Kuta.

By the end of the decade the new counterterrorism unit of the Indonesian police – Special Detachment 88 – had successfully arrested JI’s key bomb-makers and recruiters and largely countered the group’s capacity for large-scale attacks (Barton 2018b).

JI’s last major attack, before its subsequent resurgence after the rise of ISIS and the Islamic State movement, occurred in Jakarta on 17 July 2009. Employing a colleague working as a florist inside the Ritz-Carlton hotel to bring explosive material into the hotel JI bombers assembled IEDs on site. Then they made use of an underground tunnel connecting the Ritz-Carlton and the JW Marriott Hotel to carry out suicide attacks with small IEDs carried in backpacks. The explosions detonated five minutes apart killed seven people and injured 50.

In February 2010, a substantial terrorist training camp linked to JI and other jihadi groups was discovered in Aceh within weeks of having been established. This led to a fresh round of arrests and prosecutions, including

that of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, and resulted in JI terrorist activity in Indonesia being greatly diminished during the first half of the new decade. In hindsight, it was only with the rise of IS and the conflict in Iraq and Syria, that JI was able to attract a new generation of recruits.

Detachment 88 became enormously effective in detecting and disrupting terrorist plots. Since its formation 15 years ago, it has arrested more than 1,400 alleged terrorists. Of these, approximately 808 were arrested between 2015 and early 2018, with a further 376 arrests made in 2018 alone. A further 24 people were killed during violent confrontations (Azman and Arianti 2019).

The vast majority of those arrested were successfully prosecuted and sentenced. Together with the establishment of Special Detachment 88 (Detasemen Khusus – Densus) a new national agency was established – the National Agency for Combating Terrorism (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, BNPT) to manage the strategic coordination of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes.

This tactical CT success is remarkable but it has itself generated its own problems. Indonesian prisons are crowded, poorly-resourced and well over-capacity. In Indonesia more than 250,000 people are detained in around 500 prisons – roughly twice the design capacity of the prisons. And the prisoner to prison guard ratio is around 55 to 1, making the management of terrorism detainees extremely difficult (Kfir 2018).

### *The Evolution of the Islamic State Movement*

Just as the first wave of FTFs in Southeast Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s was tied to the rise of al Qaeda, the second – and larger – wave of FTFs, from 2013 to 2018, was tied to the rise of ISIS. Consequently, it is not possible to understand the emergence of the phenomena of Southeast Asian foreign fighters without the emergence and development of ISIS.

ISIS – the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (al-Sham), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), but now correctly known simply as the Islamic State (IS) – arose out of what was commonly known as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a group that emerged under the leadership of Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004 and which later referred to itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). AQI/ISI quickly became a formidable insurgent group under the fearsome leadership of al-Zarqawi (Cockburn 2015; Fishman 2016; Fawaz 2016; McCants 2015a, Stern and Berger 2015; Warrick 2015; Wassertein 2017; Weiss and Hassan 2016; Wood 2018). Circumstances following the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 led to 'perfect' storm conditions

for the emergence of multiple insurgencies. In the midst of a chaotic dynamic of competing insurgencies, AQI came to assert itself as the predominant and most formidable of all the insurgent groups. Ironically, prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 it appears that al Qaeda had no or very little presence in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi himself was Jordanian and was linked with al Qaeda in Jordan, which included the orchestration of the Marriott hotel bombings of 2005 in Aman (McCants 2015b).

As the civil war in Syria opened up a new front this group transformed itself into the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria. It came to dominate not just the conflict but also the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters, both in their source countries and amongst those newly arrived across the border from Turkey (Byman 2019; Zelin 2020).

The complex developments of the conflict in Iraq and Syria can be better understood by setting it alongside the evolution of ISIS broken down into five distinct phases:

- i.) AQI – The foundation of al Qaeda in Iraq (1999 - 2006)
- ii.) ISI – The fall and rise of the Islamic State of Iraq (2006 - 2013)
- iii.) ISIS – The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (2013 - 2014)
- iv.) IS 1.0 – The Islamic State Caliphate (2014 - 2018)
- v.) IS 2.0 – The Islamic State Insurgency (since 2018).

Iraq's de-Ba'athification process of May 2003 to June 2004, during which senior technocrats and military officers linked to the Ba'ath party (the vehicle of the Saddam Hussein regime) were removed from office, set the stage for many to join counter-occupation insurgent groups – including AQI (Cockburn 2015). The insurgent groups all benefitted from the substantial reduction in capacity – in the form of manpower, institutional memory, specialist expertise and leadership – that befell the Iraqi Security Forces. Some, especially AQI, also benefitted from the flow of many of those frustrated leaders and experts into the ranks of the insurgents.

Without the sacking of a large portion of Iraq's military and security leaders, its technocrats and productive middle-class professionals, it's not clear whether this group would have come to dominate so comprehensively. These alienated Sunni professionals gave AQI, as well as IS, much of its core military and strategic competency.

AQI was almost totally destroyed after the Sunni awakening began in 2006, despite the windfall opportunity presented to al-Zarqawi by the frustration of Sunni interests by Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government from 2006 to 2014, perceived to deprive them of any immediate hope for

the future and confidence in protecting their families and communities (Cockburn 2015, Gerges 2016; Wasserstein 2017).

But in 2010, the greatly underestimated Abu Bakr al Baghdadi took charge of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and began working on a sophisticated long-term plan. Elements of the strategy went by the name of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign. Over the 12 months to July 2013, this strategy entailed the movement literally breaking down the prison walls in compounds around Baghdad which held hundreds of hard-core al Qaeda fighters.

Al Baghdadi recognised the opportunities afforded by the civil war in Syria and dispatched one of his trusted deputies, al-Jaulani, to set up a new jihadi militia in northern Syria. This group, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), was very effective in building local support and in drawing in foreign fighters. Al Baghdadi encouraged JaN in Syria and its recruitment of foreign fighters throughout 2012 and 2013 but in the latter part of 2013 he initiated attempts to merge JaN with ISI. His erstwhile protégé Abu Mohammad al-Jaulani resisted this and protested to al Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri initially encouraged both sides to work out the differences but in February 2014 became impatient with al Baghdadi and declared that whilst JaN would continue as an al Qaeda affiliate, al Qaeda would have no further association with ISI. In response, al Baghdadi transformed ISI into ISIS, and enjoyed considerable success in winning over many of the former JaN members, including the bulk of their foreign fighters to join ISIS (McCants 2015b).

Then, a series of events turned IS from an insurgency employing terrorist methods into a becoming nascent rogue state. These included: the occupation of Raqqa on the Syrian Euphrates in December 2013; the taking of Ramadi a month later; consolidation of IS control throughout Iraq’s western Anbar province; and, finally, a sudden surge down the river Tigris in June 2014 that took Mosul and most of the towns and cities along the river north of Baghdad within less than a week.

IS’s declaration of the caliphate on 29 June 2014, was a watershed moment, which is only now being properly understood. In its ground operations, including the governing of aggrieved Sunni communities, IS moved well beyond being simply a terrorist movement. It came to function as a rogue state ruling over around 5 million people in the northern cities of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and defending its territory through conventional military means.

As noted above, throughout 2013 into the first half of 2014, ISIS carried out a campaign of attacks across Iraq and Syria making extensive use of vehicle-based IEDs and suicide bombing missions. Al Baghdadi had early on

determined that in order to build up ISIS to optimum fighting strength, he needed to engineer the jailbreak of the senior al Qaeda leaders who were kept in half a dozen prisons around Baghdad. From July 2012 until July 2013, he carried out a campaign, designed to work towards the freeing of al Qaeda leaders in detention. This culminated in a series of dramatic jailbreaks in July 2013 that saw many hundreds of al Qaeda senior fighters and other terrorist fighters broken out of jails across Iraq. Many of these joined with ISIS. At the same time, ISIS played on disaffected Sunni communities in northern Syria and northern Iraq, particularly in Anbar province in the west of Iraq, and was successful in getting many former Iraqi security force leaders to join with ISIS.

During the first half of 2014, ISIS took over most of the Euphrates River towns and cities in al-Anbar province in the west of Iraq. Then, in June 2014 it launched a *blitzkrieg* of rapid strikes running down the length of the Tigris River in northern Iraq. On 10 June 2014 ISIS successfully invaded and occupied Mosul – Iraq's second-largest city – and over the space of a week was able to take charge of most of the settlements along the northern Tigris River Valley.

With increasing success, IS was able to attract supporters from all over the world, many of them coming as what has become known as foreign fighters.

### *Foreign Terrorist Fighters before the Caliphate*

Many of those who travelled to Syria to render assistance in rebel held areas in the first year or two of the civil war did not have a clear sense of which groups they were joining and in what ways they were aligning themselves. Almost everyone claimed to be involved in humanitarian relief action and initially few described themselves as joining militias (Yassin-Kasab and al-Shami 2016). This quickly began to change, however, as many were drawn into direct military action (Berger 2018; Byman 2019; Wood 2018; Warrick 2015; Zelin 2020).

Whatever the initial causes of the conflict across Syria, fighting and territory were quickly controlled by organised militias. Some of these militias presented themselves as being non-sectarian but were quickly overpowered by more organised and determined militias aligned with Islamist extremist movements. Many had sympathies and connections with al Qaeda, but the most powerful direct presence in the region consolidated around the group then known as al Qaeda in Iraq or as the Islamic state in Iraq.

Over the previous twelve months ISIS had been very effective in drawing in foreign fighters to the point where it was estimated that by the end of 2013 more than 12,000 foreign fighters had come to join with jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq with most of them joining ISIS and a smaller number joining JaN. In the period from the declaration of the caliphate on 29 June through until the end of 2014, however, the number of foreign fighters coming to fight with ISIS more than doubled. One half of these foreign fighters came from surrounding Arab and North African states but around a quarter of them came from Europe, the UK, Australia, and other Western democracies, or from Asia and the Caucasus. Recruitment of Southeast Asians to join ISIS and JaN had been significant throughout 2013 and the first half of 2014, and accelerated sharply after the declaration of the caliphate (Byman 2019).

### *IS and Foreign Terrorist Fighters*

The conflict in Syria garnered international support and attention at a much higher level than the previous decade of conflict in Iraq had been able to do. As it consolidated its territorial holdings, ISIS was now able to attract thousands more foreign fighters from not just the middle east and northern Africa but also the Americas, Europe and Asia, to travel, mostly via Turkey, to join its ranks in Syria. Turkey actively facilitated foreigners entering into the conflict zones in Syria in part because the government in Ankara had become convinced that the toppling of the regime in Syria was both possible and desirable.

After the *blitzkrieg* march of ISIS across northern Iraq, through Mosul and down the Tigris, cumulating with the declaration of the Caliphate on 29 June the flood of foreign fighters joining the ranks of ISIS became a raging torrent with at least 6,300 joining in July 2014 alone. It is estimated that by the end of 2017 more than 42,000 foreign fighters had joined its ranks. Around one quarter of this number came from surrounding Arab states and from Turkey, another quarter came from North Africa, and a further quarter from Europe, with the remaining quarter being drawn from Asia (Byman 2019).

The conflict in Afghanistan in which jihadi militias later aligned with al Qaeda – the organisation born out of the struggle to end the Soviet military occupation – were supported by foreign fighters, served as a kind of template for what happened in Syria and Iraq under JaN and ISIS. There were, however, a number of key differences. One is that the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s ‘only’ attracted around 4,000 or so foreign fight-

ers, most of whom saw very little frontline combat action. At least an equal number came later to train with al Qaeda. The intention had always been for them to go back home and take the jihad with them (Berger 2018; Byman 2019; Hegghamer 2020).

After al Baghdadi declared the founding of the Caliphate, and announced that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria would henceforth be known simply as The Islamic State, thousands from around the world were drawn to come and be part of this *imagined utopian project*. Unlike the case with al Qaeda in Afghanistan, they were not subject to elaborate screening processes and months of arduous religious instruction in military training (Berger 2018; Byman 2019; Wood 2018).

### *Southeast Asian Foreign Terrorist Fighters*

As has been discussed above, the phenomenon of foreign fighters leaving the comforts of home to join with their jihadi brothers on the battlefield is decades older than ISIS. The first significant recruitment of foreign fighters occurred in the 1980s, when Afghans were fighting Soviet military occupation in Afghanistan. The flow of foreign fighters to Afghanistan continued on after the Soviet withdrawal and only tailed-off after 1993.<sup>1</sup>

A second wave of foreign fighters, including many of those who had earlier travelled to Afghanistan, flocked to the conflict in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. And in the latter part of the 1990s, the conflict in Somalia drew many foreign fighters to join with groups like al-Shabaab. Most of the foreign fighters recruited to fight in Somalia were ethnic Somalis, of whom it is thought that as many as one million were living in diaspora communities around the world. A number of Australian Somalis were drawn to this conflict and in 2006, three were arrested because of their plans to carry out attacks in Australia after their attempts to travel to Somalia were thwarted.

Whilst it was clear in 2013 that Southeast Asians and Australians were being recruited to fight with ISIS in Syria it was only in 2014, however, that concerns intensified. One reason for increased concern was an aware-

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1 In Southeast Asia the so-called “Afghan alumni” formed the leadership core of jihadi groups like Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf group. It is thought that around thirty Australians went to Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s and that about twenty-four returned to Australia and continued involvement with extremist Islamist groups (Barton 2018a). Eight or nine individuals who travelled to Afghanistan from Australia became so extensively involved in Islamist extremism that they were arrested and prosecuted for the activity in subsequent years.

ness of the risk that Southeast Asians fighting in Syria or Iraq with groups like JaN or ISIS further radicalised through the foreign fighting experience, would return home hardened and with new combat skills (Barton 2018a).

The mindset of most foreign fighters from Southeast Asia, whom by late 2013 and 2014 were clearly aligned with either al Qaeda or ISIS – and overwhelmingly after the declaration of the caliphate – was that they were leaving their country of origin for good never to return. The romantic allure of joining the caliphate was as intoxicating as was the prospect in being involved in the apocalyptic conflict at the end of history. Consequently, irrespective of whether they became a martyr, which most welcomed, or lived to fight and serve the caliphate, few had any thoughts of ever returning to their country of origin (Byman 2019).

This had enormous bearing on the logistics of preparation for departure. Many, for example, took out personal bank loans or credit card withdrawals with no intention of ever repaying the money taken on credit. The journey of many younger travellers and most of the foreign fighters, who were in their twenties and increasingly in their teens, was facilitated by recruiters. These had not only indoctrinated and welcome them into an exclusive underground movement, but also had purchased airline tickets and made other logistical arrangements. Very often travel appears to have been paid for and facilitated by such predatory recruiters in these networks. Individuals thus could be moved in the space of just a few months or possibly less, to a point, where they accepted the offer of an air ticket and were prepared to go and join fighters in the Middle East (Kenney 2018).

In the past it was thought that radicalisation took a long period of time, as indeed the sort of radicalisation associated with groups like al Qaeda involved careful filtering of candidates and an intense focus on indoctrination. This appears to have differed greatly with IS, where the focus was on rapid building of trust and persuasion to leave home – to make *hijrah* – to join with the fighters in Syria and Iraq (Byman 2019; Kenny 2018, Zelin 2020).

### *An Outlook into the Region: Aceh, Thailand's Pattani insurgency and IS in the Philippines*

Whilst most terrorist movements appear to have their origins in *local* grievances and local struggles it is remarkably difficult to transform local grievances into becoming part of a *global* struggle. Very often attempts to flip local fighters over to a global cause fail. The Free Aceh Movement

(Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM) is one case in point. The GAM insurgency on the north-western tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra rolled on for decades through the 1970s, 80s and 90s until the earthquake and tsunami of December 26, 2004 lead to a breakthrough that ultimately saw a brokered peace. For more than a decade Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other globally-oriented terrorist groups attempted to gain traction in the Aceh, but failed completely. As late as 2010, JI and like-minded groups established a short-lived terrorist training camp in the province, but failed to understand how unwelcome their presence was to local conservative Islamic communities.

Whilst GAM framed its struggle as a defensive jihad, this understanding of the struggle came out of a conservative Muslim understanding from a very traditionalist culture which found the austere fundamentalism of Saudi-style Salafism to be a complete anathema. When outsiders come to your village and attempt to influence you to join their global struggle whilst simultaneously condemning your piety and declaring your understanding of Islam as being illegitimate and based on ignorance, then it is little wonder that they should fail to make converts to their cause!

The same dynamics continue today in the Pattani Malay deep south of Thailand. There, an ethno-nationalist insurgent conflict has also been continuing unabated for decades. As with the conflict in Aceh, the Pattani insurgency is very much about local identity in recognition of local rights, in this case the rights and identity of the Pattani ethnic Malay Muslims living as a small minority community on the southern fringes of Buddhist Thailand.

This is not to say, however, that there is no risk of the Pattani insurgents eventually finding common purpose in a global struggle led by al Qaeda, or IS, or some splinter group. The longer the conflict endures and local grievances remain unaddressed, the greater the danger that a generation of fighters will emerge, who can be persuaded to identify with a global insurgency.

This is very much what happened in the Caucasus, where Chechen and Dagestani insurgents pivoted quickly from fighting Russian forces in the name of local and ethnic identity to becoming enthusiastic and highly effective members of the global jihadi cause.

The situation, however, is very different in southern Philippines where in mid-2014 the notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and three other militant groups joined forces to swear allegiance to IS. At the time, it looked like a branding exercise to help rebuild a sense of legitimacy lost after years of revealed criminal behaviour centred around kidnapping for ransom. By the time that Marawi, the largest Muslim city in the Philippines, was taken

in a siege by local militants acting in the name of IS on 23 May 2017, however, it became clear that the alliance with IS was a matter of real consequence.

The IS insurgents managed to retain control of the city for a full five months, effectively employing tactics and methods refined in urban warfare in Iraq. The siege saw more than 1,100 lives lost and a much larger number wounded. This included at least 980 suspected militants, of whom at least 44 were foreign nationals (Yusa 2018). The siege was only brought to an end by a combination of aggressive ground attacks, indiscriminate artillery bombardment, and even less discriminate aerial bombing. The result was a city physically destroyed and more than 1.1 million people displaced. To the present time, several hundred thousand people live in miserable conditions in IDP camps. Most of the inhabitants are unable to return home and the promised reconstruction of the city is yet to begin in earnest. It seems unlikely that the insurgents, who campaigned with considerable expertise, would have realistically expected to hold the city indefinitely. Consequently, it is reasonable to suppose that their actions were designed to provoke such a response, with urban destruction being leveraged to make the involved communities even more vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation. The disciplined and effective way, in which the Islamists fought and maintained control of the city using pre-planted caches of weapons and supplies, suggests they are working towards a clear strategic end.

### *Discussion*

Radicalisation to the cause of the Islamic State movement in Western Europe has seen recruiters largely target second generation Muslim migrants. Personal alienation and a sense of not being accepted in broader society appear to have been bigger personal factors than unemployment or poverty, per se. Some al Qaeda networks figure in the recruitment networks but most of those radicalised do not appear to have had extensive prior association with Salafi-jihadi extremism.

In Southeast Asia, however, social networks linked to Salafi-jihadi movements earlier aligned with al Qaeda such as Jemaah Islamiyah, have played a dominant role. This has seen long-established extremist social networks lifted by the rising tide of IS. These reenergised networks and their spin-offs have played a key role in the recruitment of supporters and FTFs for IS. In this role, they have also benefited from the strength of the IS brand resulting in leaders and networks such as Abu Bakar Ba'asyri and Je-

maah Islamiyah gaining renewed legitimacy and prominence. This is true both for those elements of the JI extended network that have aligned with IS and for those elements that have remained aligned with al Qaeda, following it in supporting Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria when it split from ISIS.

The recruitment of FTF and other supporters, including women and children, has been a key focus for these reenergised violent extremist networks. But it has not been the only focus. Police in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia have been busy for the past two decades dealing with a very resilient domestic terrorist threat. In its first decade Indonesia's Detachment 88 has developed into one of the most effect counterterrorism forces in the world. It has been able to contain the threat of terrorism but unable to eliminate it.

In the wake of the declaration of the IS caliphate it has had to deal with new levels of intensity and ambition in domestic terrorist cells. Detachment 88 personnel have been able to intercept and interrupt the vast majority of terrorist plots but the successful family suicide bomb attacks on Churches in Surabaya in May 2018 revealed the nature of the challenges that they are facing. The cluster of attacks, which killed 28 and injured 57, were carried out by local cells of Jamaah Asharut Daulah (JAD) an umbrella network of more than twenty extremist groups supporting IS (Abuza and Clarke 2019; UNSC 2020). Most of the successful terrorist attacks in Indonesia over the decade have consisted of single actor attacks on police posts. The use of mothers and children in suicide attacks on churches marked a grim turning point. With travel to join the caliphate in the Middle East no longer possible, the tactics and techniques of IS terrorist attacks in the Middle East were imported to Southeast Asia.

The same pattern had occurred during the siege of Marawi twelve months earlier in Mindanao where urban warfare techniques from Raqqa and Mosul were employed in the largest Muslim city in the Philippines. Throughout all of the decades of insurgent and terrorist violence that the Philippines has endured suicide bombings have not featured until the arrival of IS. The siege of Marawi saw the techniques of IS imported to the Philippines. One year later, in July 2018, an explosives-packed van driven by a Moroccan IS FTF exploded at a security checkpoint in Lamitan, on the ASG island stronghold of Basilan, in the Sulu archipelago, to the west of Mindandao (Yusa 2018). Then in January 2019 a pair of suicide bombers launched a suicide bomb attack on the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, on the island Jolo, also in the Sulu archipelago, killing 22 and injuring over a 100.

In Malaysia authorities have been dealing with a proportionally similar level of terrorism threat to that facing the Indonesians. Special Branch of

the Royal Malaysian Police heads counterterrorism operations. Special Branch has interrupted at least 26 cells planning terrorism attacks and arrested of more than 519 terrorism suspects (as at July 2019).<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, 131 of those arrested on terrorism charges were foreigner nationals from 21 countries (with most coming from Indonesia and the Philippines).<sup>3</sup> And whilst Special Branch has so far managed to prevent any successful attacks within Malaysia it is significant that Malaysians have figured consistently in terrorist plots and attacks in Indonesia and in the Philippines. After the VBIED van attack on Basilan, for example, the bodies of six Malaysia FTFs were recovered from the wreckage.

### *Conclusion*

The reasons for the proportionally smaller number of FTFs joining the IS caliphate from Southeast Asia than from Western Europe remain unclear. What is clear though is that IS radicalisation in Southeast Asia has occurred largely through existing Salafi-jihadi extremist networks and has come on the top of decades of radicalisation to violent extremism in the name of jihad beginning well before the emergence of al Qaeda and IS. This pattern of radicalisation stretches back seven decades to the Dar'ul Islam movement in Indonesia and three decades ago saw an earlier wave of returning FTFs from the conflict in Afghanistan establish the JI network across Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Clearly, IS radicalisation in Southeast Asia goes well beyond the outflow of FTF recruits to Syria and Iraq. The rise of the IS caliphate injected energy into extensive extremist networks, building on well-established groups and driving the evolution of new ones. In some cases, the demise of the IS caliphate and the closing-off of opportunities to join the IS struggle has seen radicalised Southeast Asians turn to local opportunities for jihad. It seems likely that the three JAD-families involved in the Surabaya attacks of May 2018, for example, would have attempted to join the caliphate in Syria and Iraq if that had been possible. And in the case of the suicide bombing of the cathedral on Jolo in January 2019 it was established that the attack was carried out by Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani Saleh, a husband and wife JAD team from Indonesia. The couple had travelled to Turkey with their three children in 2016 and attempted to cross into Syria

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2 Chew. South China Morning Post, 18 June 2019.

3 Rodzi. Straits Times, 27 September 2019.

to join the caliphate but were repatriated to Indonesia by Turkish authorities in 2017 (Paddock and Gutierrez 2019).

The romantic, utopian, allure of traveling to join the IS caliphate in Syria and Iraq has exerted a powerful pull on both long-established extremists and the newly radicalised around the world. What is often overlooked, however, is that the core of the IS narrative is not simply a vision for a caliphate in the Middle East but rather for a global insurgency. In Southeast Asia, IS has successfully built on foundations laid by al Qaeda before it, to transform local grievances and regional conflicts and to integrate them, in the minds of true believers, into vital components of a global insurgency. And unlike the physical caliphate this project is set to endure, contributing to a living legacy of radicalisation for decades to come.

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