Southeast Asian Fighters from Islamic State Leaks: A Historical Snapshot

by Shashi Jayakumar & Cameron Sumpter

Abstract

Recruits entering territory controlled by ISIS came from a staggering array of nations. Upon arrival, the de facto ISIS border authority asked would-be fighters to complete a questionnaire seeking their personal details and experiences. Much of the resulting data from early-2013 to mid-2014 was eventually leaked by a disillusioned IS member in 2016, and analysts have since pored over the material, identifying trends and characteristics among the foreign fighters. The present article uses part of the dataset that concerns the early wave of Southeast Asians who went to pursue militant jihad in the Middle East. It teases out strands, comparing individual data to what is known from other information, and attempts to situate some of the individuals into their milieu back home. It also contrasts this Southeast Asian data to broader studies of others who entered ISIS territory, and attempts to reach conclusions on what the motivations and characteristics of the Southeast Asians may have been compared to the wider dataset.

Keywords: Foreign Fighters, ISIS, Islamic State, Profiles, Radicalisation, South East Asia, Terrorism

Introduction

Sometime in early 2016, a defector from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leaked a sizeable tranche of administrative records concerning approximately 4,000 of the organisation's foreign recruits. The publication of this data was a coup not only for the media, which first published selected documents, but also for the security services. Despite gaps in information (the tranche is only a snapshot from the period from early 2013 to 2014), the overall consensus among experts is that the documents are authentic.[1]

The records shed considerable light on the administrative operations of ISIS, and in particular the General Administration of Borders, the department responsible for foreign jihadi recruits. The majority of the data comprises personal responses to a questionnaire (23 questions in all) completed by individuals entering geographic areas controlled by ISIS. These include standard questions such as date and place of birth, hometown, telephone number, education and blood type.

The fighters came from over 70 nations, with Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey and Egypt making up the top five countries of origin in terms of numbers. Excellent analyses of the wider data set have already been published regarding what the complete tranche says about individuals joining ISIS at that point in time.[2] Publications have also included analyses of regional fighters from North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula[3], and those specifically from Saudi Arabia.[4] This paper attempts a preliminary investigation of what information the tranche contains on Southeast Asian fighters, comparing and contrasting records completed by S. E. Asian recruits, where appropriate, with the data and conclusions from the overall tranche, through reference to previously published analysis.[5]

Background

Southeast Asian Islamist militants have a history of travelling to conflict zones, both on foreign soil and among the outer islands of Indonesia's vast archipelago. In 1984, amid growing interest in the Afghan jihad resisting Soviet invasion, Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam set up an office in northern Pakistan to facilitate the arrival of foreign fighter support. An Afghan Wahhabi mujahidin leader named

Abdul Rasul Sayyaf was put in charge of the new initiative.[6] The following year, two Indonesian clerics named Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Baasyir fled to Malaysia following a government crackdown on subversive Islamist activity in Indonesia. During the 1970s, the pair emerged as leaders of the *Darul Islam* movement, which had been advocating a national Islamic identity and governance to varying degrees since Indonesia's struggle for independence in the 1940s.[7] Soon after settling in Malaysia, Sungkar and Baasyir organised a trip to Saudi Arabia to seek support and funding for their movement's endeavours; and on the way back they made a stop in Peshawar to inquire about training programmes for Southeast Asian militants.[8]

The Indonesian ideologues managed to strike a deal with Sayyaf, and within months the first of what would be ten batches of over 200 Southeast Asian Darul Islam recruits were sent to a camp outside the Pakistani town of Sadda, roughly 40 km from the Afghan border.[9] Instruction included basic military tactics, weapons training and bomb making, and a heavy measure of ideology, particularly from the writings of 13th Century Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyyah.[10] Very few (if any) Southeast Asians actually took up arms against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Rather, their mission was to acquire skills for jihad back in Indonesia, where the nation's secular President Suharto was seen as suppressing Islamist aspirations.[11]

As Pakistan authorities began curbing militancy in the early to mid-1990s, Sungkar moved the training exercises to the southern Philippines, where the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* (MILF) was waging an insurgency on the southern island of Mindanao.[12] The newly established *Jemaah Islamiyah*, which sought a pan-Southeast-Asian Islamic state, installed itself near the local militants' Camp Abu-Bakar, about 100 km south of Marawi City, where Sadda camp alumni continued training and passed on their knowledge to more recent recruits.[13]

When former Indonesian President Suharto's 31-year rule ended amidst a popular uprising in the late 1990s, communal violence broke out in the Maluku islands and later in a central province on the island of Sulawesi. Purist Salafi militants travelled north from Java to 'protect' local Muslims, while Salafi-Jihadists from different groups followed suit—some from various Indonesian islands, others from a training camp in the Philippines.[14] Jihadi involvement evolved into a broader terrorist campaign, including a suicide and truck bomb attack in Bali in 2002 which killed over 200 people. Two Malaysians named Azhari bin Husin and Noordin M. Top, who settled in Indonesia in the 1990s and early 2000s, would go on to lead a string of bombings and plots during the 2000s.[15]

Following a sustained police crackdown on militancy and an organisational cost-benefit analysis of strategy, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) relinquished violence in 2007 to focus on outreach and building its base. But when conflict escalated in Syria in 2011, the organisation's leaders soon saw an opportunity for a small number of its people to train with Syrian-based jihadi militias, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, the al Qaeda-linked group which split from ISIS in 2013.[16] The few JI cadets who made the trip were reportedly well-educated, with strong Islamist credentials, having studied at prominent Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, and generally stayed only for short periods before returning home.[17]

Indonesians who travelled to join ISIS on the other hand, appear to be more of a self-funded bunch of intrepid militants, representing a range of different jihadi organisations back home.[18] In 2016, Greg Fealy wrote there was "no single profile" among would-be ISIS fighters from Southeast Asia; they possessed a range of educational credentials, engaged in various professions and belonged to different age groups—though they tended to be younger than those joining non-ISIS militias.[19] However, Fealy highlighted that one "important generalization" about ISIS recruits from Indonesia and Malaysia was the crucial role played by personal relationships for acquiring information and organising logistics.[20]

The most detailed research on Indonesian 'foreign fighters', and indeed violent extremism in Indonesia more generally, has come from researchers at the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC). In early 2015, IPAC wrote that organisational affiliation among militants in Indonesia was "not a reliable guide"

to which individuals are likely to pledge allegiance to ISIS.[21] However, while recruits derived from different regions and various organisations, Kirsten Schulze points out they were broadly connected by the influence of one man—Aman Abdurrahman, a takfirist ideologue from West Java currently on death row for inciting terrorist violence in Indonesia.[22]

Militants seeking to join ISIS apparently required a letter of recommendation (*tazkiyah*), which was provided after candidates had proven themselves to at least one selection committee.[23] Before September 2014, Aman Abdurrahman was reportedly running committees in several locations from his prison cell, until an associate was arrested and the system was suspended.[24] Potential ISIS recruits were motivated to a lesser or greater degree by several factors. A central narrative that resonated among Indonesians was the "End Times" prophecy, which claimed the Syrian conflict represented a final apocalyptic battle between Muslims and Western crusaders.[25] Further pull factors were the rapid military achievements of ISIS, its successful control of territory, and the subsequent proposition of life in a 'caliphate'.[26]

The number of Southeast Asians who travelled, or attempted to travel, to ISIS-controlled territory has long been contentious, with government agencies releasing different figures, and other numbers emerging from researchers, academics and the international press. Few people from the Philippines or Thailand are thought to have made the trip, as Islamist militants from both countries focused more on conflicts at home, in Mindanao and Patani respectively. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed 50 of its nationals were in Syria as of December 2013, but was apparently uncertain.[27] In June 2015, the Indonesian police counterterrorism unit, Special Detachment 88 (*Densus* 88), had confirmed 202 Indonesians were in Syria and Iraq, but thought there were likely dozens more.[28] By early 2017, Indonesia's counterterrorism agency (*Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme*) stated there were roughly 500 Indonesians fighting with ISIS in Syria, while more had died or failed to make it across the border.[29]

The leaked data from mid-2013 to early-2014 represents only a percentage of these recruits during a time window leading up to al-Baghdadi's caliphate declaration in June 2014. However, the data reveals some interesting dynamics in comparison with the wider global tranche. It confirms some of the initial observations from Indonesia experts cited above, but suggests that early Southeast Asian ISIS recruits were older than suspected - something which also complicates the issue of recommendations, which will be drawn out in the analysis below.

Section 1: Biographical Details

The Southeast Asian data set analysed for this article contains 95 individuals who crossed into ISIS-controlled areas in Syria from Turkey. It includes 90 Indonesians and five Malaysians. All are adult males, except for two 12-year-old boys. One of the questions asked is what kind of combat role they would like to obtain, which suggests the questionnaire was primarily aimed toward those intending to fight for the organisation. A number of women and children from Indonesia and Malaysia are known to have made the trip to the Islamic State's 'caliphate', but none are recorded in the tranche under study.[30] While it is possible the leaked data is from a questionnaire only given to men, IPAC has noted that early ISIS recruits from Indonesia were motivated to fight, so they did not bring family members.[31]

Over the past 15 years, Indonesia's jihadi movement has been relatively splintered due to geographic location, varying strategic emphasis, commitment to different leaders, and pressure from the security services. Despite variations in spelling, individuals in the list who could be identified by name and additional information have known links to a number of these groups, which supports assertions made by IPAC and others in 2015. Given the lack of Arabic and English language skills among the majority of Southeast Asians arriving in Syria, the disparate recruits soon consolidated into a military unit in September 2014, which came to be known as *Katibah Nusantara*, basing itself in the north-eastern Syrian province of Hasakah.[32]

Place of Origin

Each questionnaire included a space for individuals to fill in the street, city and country from which they originated (*see figure 1 below*). The majority of individuals simply listed their home province and country. Almost 80% of the Indonesian recruits (71 individuals) were from Java, which is home to over half the nation's population and contains several districts with long histories of Islamist militancy. Over 30% of the Indonesians hailed from East Java, a province which witnessed a coordinated suicide bombing attack on three churches in May 2018, involving three families with their children in tow.[33] While not directly linked to militants in Syria, the families are alleged to have been members of, or at least closely tied to *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah* (JAD), a loosely connected network of ISIS-supporters in Indonesia.[34]

The most likely reason for the high number of individuals from this region is their personal connection to one successful recruiter named Abu Jandal al Tamimi, whose details appear in the data set; he reportedly returned home to Indonesia at least once to collect more intrepid militants.[35] According to the data, he appears to have arrived in late March 2014 with 18 of the recruits from the data set who hail from East Java. Abu Jandal was also cited by many of the recruits as a vouchsafe, which will be elaborated below.

The remaining 20% of the Indonesian recruits (16 individuals) were mostly from areas which have been associated with Islamist militancy, including Sulawesi (though precise provinces were not specified), South Sumatra, and the Sumbawa city of Bima.[36]

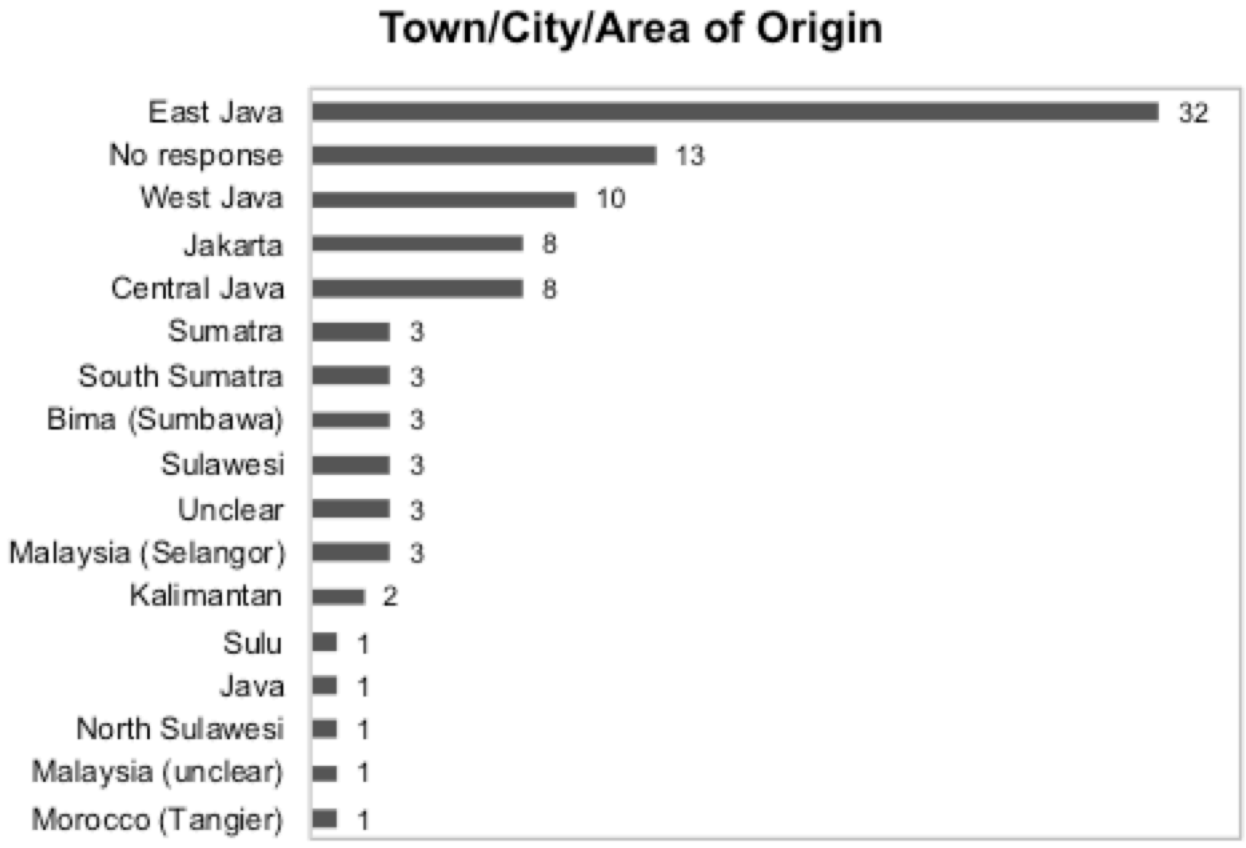

Figure 1

Age and Marital Status

Probably the most distinctive aspect of the Southeast Asian data is the advanced age of the recruits. While the average age at the point of joining was 21 years old for the five Malaysians, the figure rises to 32 among the Indonesians, which is more than five years older than the average age of the 4,173 other recruits in the

full dataset (26-27 years old). Indeed, Indonesian nationals represented the second oldest national cohort after recruits from Algeria.[37] The median was also high, with over 55 percent of the Southeast Asian respondents over the age of 30.

If individuals did not provide their current age, but instead gave both their date of entry and date of birth, it was simple to calculate. Nine individuals did not provide their age or date of entry and date of birth, so it was impossible to discern how old they were upon entry. Among the Southeast Asians, 40 of the recruits stated they were single with no children, while the rest were married – one with two wives and one with three wives. All but four had at least one child. According to the data set, the group of 18 who arrived with Abu Jandal had 56 children between them.

It is possible the higher age among Indonesian recruits is related to relative access to resources. Travel expenses from Indonesia, including flights, ground transportation in Turkey and accommodation en route to the Syrian border have been estimated to cost between $1,000-1,500 (Rp.15,000,000-21,000,000)[38] which is a substantial sum in a nation where the average monthly salary is under Rp.3,000,000 ($215).[39] Perhaps militants in their 30s were more capable of pulling together the money than their younger comrades.

However, a more robust reason for the advanced age of recruits may be the statistical weight of the travelling cohort led by Abu Jandal, who was 39 years old when he crossed into Syria in March 2014. One member of the 18-strong group was a 12-year-old boy, but if this individual is omitted from the set, the average age among them is 37.4 years at the time of crossing. Indeed, the average age of all 30 recruits from East Java (minus two 12-year-old boys) was 37.8 years old. It seems most likely the higher mean age among the Indonesian recruits is influenced by this older group of men all hailing from East Java, who may have represented veteran militants sent to blaze the trail for the several hundred Indonesians who would follow in their footsteps.

Previous Travel Experience

Few of the Southeast Asian recruits reported much international travel experience. As with others in the wider data set, there is ambiguity over the completion of this part of the form. Some respondents submitted only Turkey as a travel destination, while others left this space blank or put "none". All of the individuals on the list crossed into Syria from a point in Turkey, which authorities have identified as a primary route into the caliphate for extremists from Indonesia.[40] One of the Malaysians had also travelled to Jordan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Seventeen of the Indonesians had been to three or four countries, but none had visited more than four. One Indonesian had travelled to the United States, while another had visited the United Kingdom.

Section 2: Education

Each of the registration documents required the individuals to give both their educational qualifications and level of *sharia* (religious) knowledge. Twenty-nine of the recruits from the Southeast Asian contingent claimed a secondary education, whereas 27 had attended at least some portion of a university programme. All those who attended high school, middle school or primary school were classed in the basic category (seven percent). Finally, 34 individuals left the box blank, indicating they either did not attend an educational institution or did not want to reveal their qualifications.

Average levels of education were higher among the group of 18 people who followed Abu Jandal to ISIS-controlled territory in March 2014. Nine members of this group stated they had received university education, seven cited a secondary level, and two a primary education. Of the nine with at least some tertiary education, only one could be considered to be in a 'professional' career – a doctor, while the others said they had been merchants, mechanics or construction workers.

The entire set of leaked documents analysed by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) team shows that 1,028 individuals (25 percent) who responded to the question claimed to have attended some form of post-high school, university, or college-level education, while 2,085 individuals (50 percent) listed either elementary or middle school education.[41] Although the high number of non-responses to education

questions among the Southeast Asians makes any accurate comparison or contrast difficult, it appears that levels of tertiary education were similar to the total average, while substantially fewer stated they had received or completed secondary schooling. In any case, there is quite significant difference among the levels of education the Southeast Asians had attained, therefore little to suggest that a specific educational level had much bearing on likelihood for mobilisation.

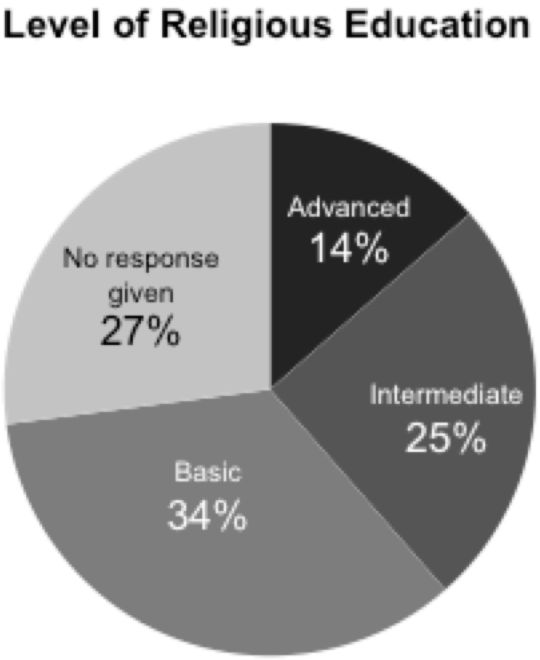

Figure 2

Level of Religious Knowledge

Each of the registration documents also required individuals to reveal their level of *shari'a* knowledge, which was divided into three categories: basic, intermediate and advanced (*see figure 2*). In the full dataset, 70 percent had a basic level of sharia knowledge, while only five percent stated they had an advanced understanding.[42] Southeast Asians appear to have considered themselves generally more advanced than the average recruit, with 33 claiming to have a basic knowledge, 24 reporting an intermediate knowledge and 13 individuals (or 14%) rated their knowledge as advanced. The remaining 26 did not provide an answer to this question.

While the Southeast Asian data set is relatively small (n=95), the percentage of recruits who stated a high level of religious knowledge is substantially greater than that of the wider tranche, in which half of the nations represented (35 of 70) did not have a single fighter who characterised his/her knowledge as advanced. [43]

Subject of Study

Seventeen of the Southeast Asian respondents specified their area of study in the questionnaire. Nine individuals claimed to have studied a subject related to Quranic studies/Arabic Language/Sharia (all Indonesian; six advanced and three intermediate). The rest had studied a range of subjects such as medicine, law, engineering, economics and tourism. All of the more highly educated individuals declared their level of religious knowledge as basic.

What is interesting about the Southeast Asian 'advanced' group is that almost all are listed as having spent time in other countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey. Furthermore, the average age of the Indonesians claiming advanced knowledge of Islam was 24 years old, which is eight years younger than their wider cohort. Their answering in this way is likely the result of recent studies abroad in Islamic doctrine and

jurisprudence.[44]

Indeed, over half of those who stated an advanced knowledge of Islam said they had received university education. Four such names in the list fit the description of young men known to have been studying at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, before the Indonesian Ambassador to Pakistan described them as 'missing' in August 2013.[45] According to the arrival data, three of them crossed into the north-western Syrian city of Azaz from Turkey on 22 August 2013, while the fourth entered at the same point six weeks later. Three of the young men, who were aged between 25 and 27, were from Central Java and one from East Java. According to research from IPAC, one of these students was the son of a religious instructor who had trained along the Afghan-Pakistan border in the mid-1980s, while another was the son of a leading figure in the Indonesian extremist organisation *Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid* (JAT).[46]

Personal connections appear to be a common theme among clusters of individuals who arrived together from Southeast Asia, which is unsurprising given the practicality of individuals with little travel experience supporting each other on a relatively long and uncertain journey.

Occupation

Twenty-three individuals (22 percent) in the Southeast Asia dataset listed no former occupation or claimed to have been unemployed before travelling to join Islamic State. Of the remaining individuals, 17 (16 percent) stated they had worked as merchants; 15 (14 percent) listed themselves as students; and 8 (7 percent) had higher level jobs, including computer company employees, an architect, an industrial engineer, someone working with computer networks, and a doctor. These higher skills (such as management, electronics, medicine) were often noted by the ISIS border authority in the registration questionnaire as the organisation conducted methodical talent scouting to identify recruits capable of contributing to the state building project.[47]

The prominence among the Indonesian recruits of students and lower skilled positions such as merchants is largely in line with analysis of the wider data set, which found the highest proportion of recruits to have been students, self-employed, low-skilled traders or unskilled labourers.[48] The term 'merchants' in the Southeast Asian context could refer to the informal sale of products such as Islamic books, clothing or traditional medicines, which are common sources of income for those associated with jihadi networks in the region, particularly in Indonesia.[49] However, they could also be food cart salespeople who have no specific connection to the extremist movement.

Those in the Southeast Asian data set who cited no job before travelling represent a potentially higher rate of unemployment than the national average in Indonesia, which in 2013-14 was around six percent. However, ambiguity over the stated responses and the relatively small sample size makes it difficult to draw conclusions as to whether joblessness was a factor in mobilisation. Given the costs involved in traveling to Syria from Indonesia, it seems unlikely that socioeconomic hardship was a driver for Indonesians to make the journey to join ISIS, as it appears to have been for recruits from North Africa, for example.[50]

One of the Southeast Asians stated he had been in prison before making the trip to Syria. The man's name is Abdul Rauf and the additional biographical information he provided in the questionnaire clarifies his identification as a former convict who served over eight years for involvement in the October 2002 Bali bombing which killed 202 people in a nightlife district of the popular tourist destination. Released in 2011, Abdul Rauf was reportedly a "model prisoner" who had apparently sought to 'help' Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (in some unspecified way) after he was released, but was ultimately convinced to travel to Syria while visiting an associate named Rois at a maximum security prison; Rois is awaiting a death sentence for his central role in planning the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta.[51]

Section 3: Fighter Profile

When joining the Islamic State, individuals were asked to choose whether they wanted to become a fighter, suicide bomber (*istihhadi*) or kamikaze attacker (*inghimasi*).[52] Only 12 percent of the individuals in the full

dataset expressed a preference for a suicide bomber role, and those who claimed an "advanced" knowledge of *sharia* were less likely to express a desire to fill a suicide role than those with limited knowledge. From the Southeast Asian contingent, all of those who claimed to have an advanced level of *sharia* sought a fighting role. In the full Southeast Asian dataset, 93 of the individuals applied to be fighters, while only two (both Indonesian) chose suicide bomber (*see figure 3*). The remaining six recruits left the question blank. Both individuals who applied to be suicide bombers were married, had a secondary school education, worked as merchants, and used the same smuggler, though they arrived at different times through different points of entry.

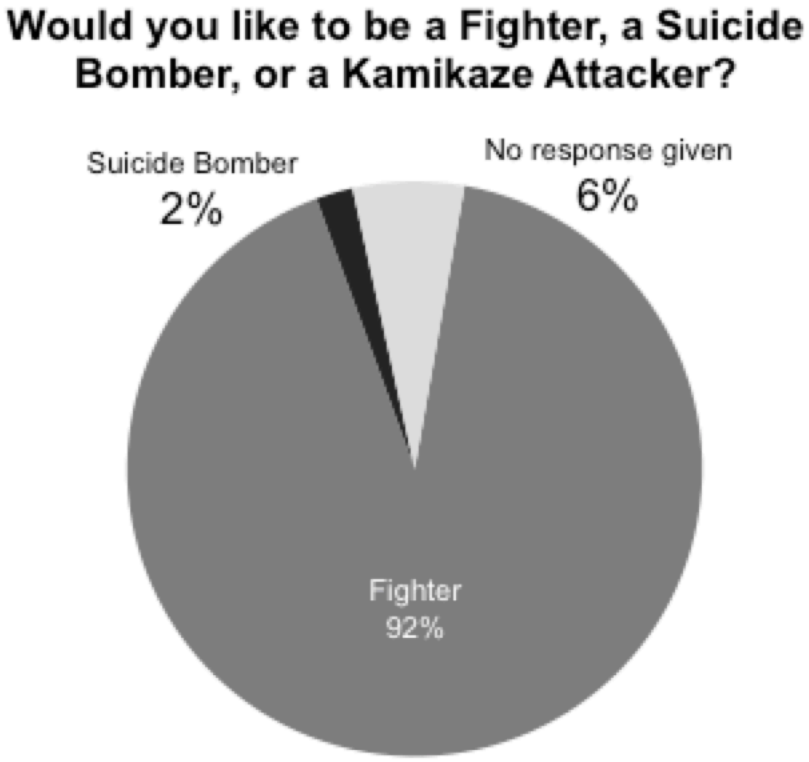

Figure 3

One of the questions posed to recruits is whether they had ever previously participated in jihad. Only four individuals (all Indonesian) claimed to have jihad experience. Two simply replied "yes" to the question, while one claimed to have fought in Yemen, and one specified that he had spent a year fighting for the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* (MILF) in the Philippines. This MILF-linked militant, who recorded his name as Noor Rosikhin, alias Abu Usama Ali al Indonesi, is a known member of a West Java-based extremist group called Ring Banten. He had been arrested twice in Indonesia during the 2000s, but had never been charged. [53] Born in 1975, Noor Rosikhin (also spelled Nur Roskin) would have been in his mid-20s when Jemaah Islamiyah sent Indonesian militants to train in an ungoverned area on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Of the remaining individuals in the Southeast Asian dataset, 83 indicated they had no prior jihadi experience before travelling to Syria, and eight left the question blank. One fighter, a Malaysian, stated he had no previous jihad experience but under a miscellaneous notes category claimed he had spent time with the *Sham al Islam* brigade and after that with *Az al Deen al Qassam*, the military wing of the Palestinian organisation *Hamas*. If true, this 22-year-old would appear to be an outlier as Hamas is not known to have attracted foreign fighters in recent years. Indeed, Hamas has no policy of welcoming overseas militant volunteers and it would have been extremely difficult to enter the Gaza Strip or West Bank without a legitimate reason, so it is hard to see how the young Malaysian could have spent time on the ground with the organisation.

Crossings and Smugglers

The Southeast Asian recruits in the data set reached Syria through four different entry points, all from Turkish territory (*see figure 4*). The most common crossing was into the Syrian border town of Tel Abyad, 100km to the north of Raqqa city, with 35 recruits entering across points along the nearby border. The next most popular entrance point with 32 crossings was 100 km further east, into the Syrian city of Jarablus, which flanks the river Euphrates. Twenty-one people in the sample of Southeast Asians crossed 100 km further east still, near the city of Azaz, 50 km north of Aleppo, while three outliers crossed the border 50 km to the east of Aleppo, into the town of Atimah. In the wider data set, 19 different areas were used as entrance points into Syria, though as with the Southeast Asians, the vast majority entered into Tel Abyad, Jarablus or Azaz.

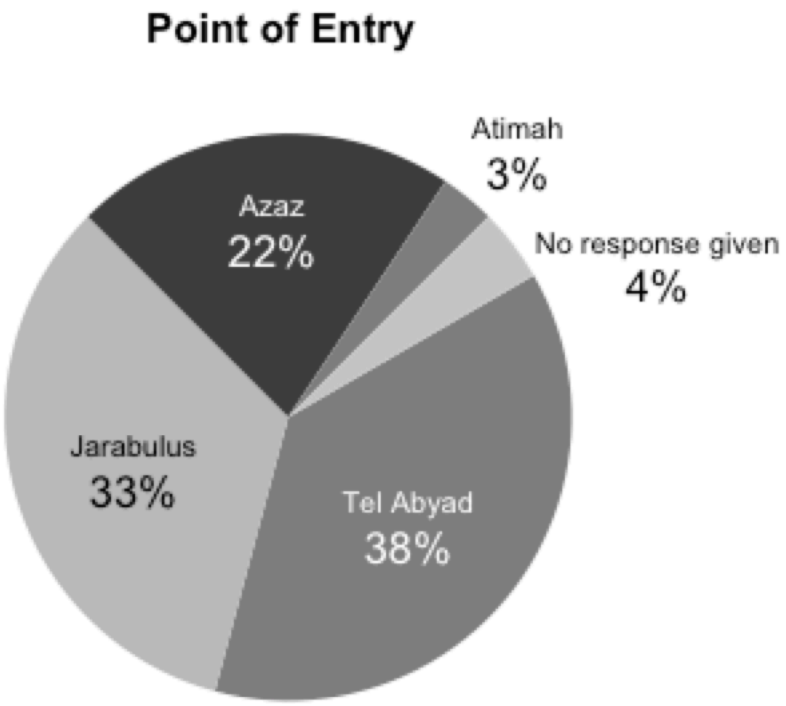

Figure 4

One smuggler was responsible for facilitating 52 of the 95 Southeast Asian crossings into Syria. This individual, Abu Mohammad al-Shamali, is a significant figure, at times going by the name Tarrad Mohammad al-Jarba. A British newspaper report from 2016 stated al-Shamani was responsible for transferring over 6,000 recruits over the border into Syria, which apparently represented one-third of the foreign fighters who had joined ISIS to date.[54] An Iraqi by birth, al-Shimali has been publicly identified as the Islamic State's Border Chief and an important figure in the group's Immigration and Logistic Committee. [55]

The fact that the Southeast Asians both entered Syria around the same areas as most other recruits and largely went through the most popular people smuggler may not be surprising. Hailing from 10,000 km away, few of the Southeast Asians would have knowledge of the region and they likely shared contacts and information among themselves which produced minimal variation between the routes taken.

Vouchsafing

The Southeast Asian recruits indicated a total of 22 different individuals who had vouched for them. The majority of names listed are aliases of Indonesian extremists, some of whom are well known. Most frequently cited was Abu Jandal al Tamimi, whose real name is Salim Mubarok. He apparently vouched for 30 of the recruits in the data set. Abu Jandal, who was killed in late 2016 near Mosul, Iraq, was from the city of Malang in East Java and had been a member of a purist Salafi militia which fought in communal conflicts

in Indonesia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Proficient in Arabic, Abu Jandal became an important go-between for Indonesians seeking to enter the caliphate and reportedly returned to Indonesia two or three times from the Middle East to recruit more manpower.[56]

As mentioned above, Abu Jandal appears to have sent a group of 18 people (17 men and one 12-year-old boy, all from East Java) across the border from Turkey into Tel Abyad, Syria, on 24 March 2014. All 18 people who preceded him over this crossing cited Abu Jandal as having vouched for them, with Abu Jandal then crossing through the same area himself six days later with his 12-year-old son and one other man.

The prevalence of would-be Southeast Asian militants travelling together highlights the trend of horizontal peer-to-peer mobilisation, which has been noted elsewhere, such as among disenfranchised youth in Western European cities.[57] While Indonesians and Malaysians who travelled to the Pakistan-Afghan border from the 1980s were largely recruited by the organisation Darul Islam, which covered their travel costs, those attempting to join ISIS in Syria appear to have organised themselves through localised networks and often travelled in pairs or small groups.[58] The contemporary cohort of intrepid jihadis from Southeast Asia supposedly needed to provide the name of at least one respected leader who had ostensibly 'vouched' for them. However, it seems personal relationships with other travellers were more consequential in terms of reaching ISIS-controlled territory, at least in the early days, than the direction of jihadi leadership back home.

Abu Jandal cited Abu Bakr al Indonesi, Sheik Oman Abdul Rahman and Abu Slimane as having vouched for him. Abu Bakr is most likely Abu Bakar Baasyir, one of the founders of Jemaah Islamiyah, who has spent much of the past 15 years in prison. Interestingly, Baasyir did not pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and its caliph until July 2014, months after the men entering Syria claimed he was vouching for them.[59] 'Abu Bakr' was also the vouchsafe of the four students who had disappeared from their Islamabad university in August 2013, as well as a group of nine men who entered near Azaz on 14 October. All those who put down Abu Bakr's name entered through Azaz.

The Sheik Oman Abdul Rahman referred to by Abu Jandal is unlikely to be the late 'Blind Sheik' who died in US custody in 2017, but rather an alias of Southeast Asia's most notorious ideologue in recent years, Aman Abdurrahman, who also goes by the alias Abu Suleman al Arkhbili (or Abu Slimane). He was cited by 14 individuals on the list. Like Baasyir, Aman Abdurrahman has spent a majority of the past 15 years in prison but still managed to remain the most influential figure among jihadi networks in Indonesia, if not the entire region.[60] Also fluent in Arabic, Aman has translated dozens of jihadi texts into Bahasa Indonesia over the years, which were then smuggled out of prison by his followers and dispersed in various forms. This commitment to spreading propaganda, including his own writings, is said to have won the West Java cleric respect among Islamic State leaders.[61]

Another name which appears 15 times as having vouched for the recruits is Abu Miqdad al Indonesi (or Muqdad/Maqdad). The most prominent Indonesian known to use this alias is a man named Mohamad Sibghotullah, who spent three years in prison from 2011-2014 for involvement in a terrorist training camp. Soon after he was released in early 2014 for good behaviour and for cooperating with state-run de-radicalisation programmes, Sibghotullah attempted to travel to Syria to join the caliphate but was intercepted by police in Malaysia and sent back to Indonesia.[62]

One 21-year-old from Surabaya stated he had been vouched for by Abu Suhaib al-Fransi, a French convert in his 60s who had been involved with Jabhat al-Nusra but later switched sides to ISIS. The young Indonesian represents an outlier in other ways; for instance, he stated he had spent four months in Turkey before crossing into the Syrian town of Atimah, east of Aleppo in December 2013.

Interestingly, al-Faransi did not join ISIS until after the declaration of the caliphate, seven months later, in June 2014, which suggests that at this early stage of the so-called Islamic State, there was a certain fluidity in administrative protocol. It seems that names who were 'recognised' in some sense as being trustworthy could carry weight and influence, and facilitate passage, as appears to be the case here; actually being a card-carrying ISIS member was not of primary importance. This may explain why many of the Indonesians who

entered through Azaz provided Abu Bakar Baasyir's name before the elderly cleric had pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi's caliphate. Perhaps they had joined another group active in the Aleppo region first, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, and then decided to join ISIS at some later point.

However, it is fair to say that over the past 15 years Baasyir has been the most famous jihadi ideologue in Southeast Asia, given his leadership position in Jemaah Islamiyah during the first Bali bombing in 2002. It is therefore possible that recruits cited his name as they thought it would more likely be recognised by jihadis in the Middle East. While recommendation from a trusted ISIS recruiter is thought to have been required for acceptance into territory controlled by the organisation, it is not clear that such references were stringently vetted, at least in the early days of 2013 to early 2014.

Conclusions

Sifting through the evidence provided by what is left of the Islamic State's bureaucratic records, and attempting to understand the trajectories and eventual fates of those on the terrorist organisation's books, is a task that will occupy analysts for years to come. The data set on Southeast Asian recruits analysed here is admittedly limited, offering only a snapshot of ISIS recruitment for a period of less than one year leading up to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of a 'caliphate' in June 2014, but represents a small contribution to the overall effort.

Given the number of Southeast Asians present in the data is smaller than that of other regions and nations, such as North Africa or Saudi Arabia, for example, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions based on a quantitative assessment. As with data on fighters from dozens of other nations, that regarding the Southeast Asians also contains unanswered questions, ambiguous responses and spelling inconsistencies, which all limit opportunities for making concrete claims about the type of fighters entering ISIS-controlled territory during this period.

The data set contains no information on individuals from other Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines or Singapore, from which small numbers of militants are known to have travelled to join or fight for ISIS.[63] It is possible recruits from these nations entered at a different time, or that the list of Southeast Asians analysed here is incomplete, even for the stated period. This is also true of the Southeast Asian children – particularly from Indonesia – who were trained as soldier 'cubs'. The data set includes two 12-year-old boys, but it appears the personal details of women and children were either not recorded at all, or were recorded using a separate questionnaire.

Despite these important caveats, the data set provided interesting insight into aspects of Southeast Asian ISIS recruits. Notably, the Indonesian militants (who make up the majority of this tranche) are five to six years older than the average recruit who entered ISIS territory during this time. The most likely reason for this discrepancy is the group of older jihadis from East Java, who either travelled with Abu Jandal or claimed he had vouched for them. They may well represent a veteran cohort of pathfinders for other less experienced recruits to follow.

Socio-economic indicators became a point of contention in attempts to identify the drivers to travel for jihad in Syria in Iraq.[64] Studies which have attempted, for example, to analyse data for North African recruits have suggested that in particular provinces, economic hardship and marginalisation may have played a role in mobilising individuals to join ISIS—something which does not appear to be the case for Southeast Asians who successfully made the trip.[65] This is not to say there is an important difference between processes of radicalisation among people in the Maghreb and Indonesia, nor that Southeast Asian ISIS recruits have a unique socio-economic profile, as there may well have been other Indonesians who wanted to make the trip but were unable to collect enough money. However, the data on age, education and occupation among the Southeast Asians suggests that economic hardship was not a driver for recruits from this region seeking to join ISIS.

Indonesian recruits were also more likely to claim advanced religious knowledge than the average recruit in the wider data set. Those who stated this higher knowledge were considerably younger compared to their compatriot recruits and many had recently studied in the Middle East or Pakistan. These younger Indonesians studying abroad possibly had access to greater financial resources to make the trip to Syria than their age-group peers back home, and if not, they were certainly closer to their intended destination which would have made the journey less expensive.

Another point of interest was the diversity of vouchsafes provided by the Indonesians, which suggests that, initially, specific recommendations may have been less important than previously thought. Aman Abdurrahman is known to have been respected among ISIS officials in Syria, but he did not pledge allegiance until April 2014. Perhaps early recruits simply used his name anyway, as he was the most respected ideologue in Indonesia at the time. Information on vouchsafes and previous experiences by one or two on the list suggests that a small number may have been in the region for some time, possibly having initially gone to work with charitable organisations and subsequently became involved in militancy, either on their own accord or through relationships developed on their travels.[66]

Finally, the Southeast Asians on the list which could be identified, either directly by name or through a combination of the responses they provided, have had known links to a number of different Islamist extremist groups in Indonesia. On one hand this highlights the fractured nature of the jihadi movement in Southeast Asia over the past decade or so, but on the other it shows how the rapid success of ISIS in Syria and Iraq managed to bring disparate networks together to fight under its flag, even from thousands of miles away.

About the Authors:

Shashi Jayakumar *is Senior Fellow and Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. Dr Jayakumar was educated at Oxford University where he studied History (BA 1997, D.Phil, 2001). Before heading CENS, he was a member of the Singapore Administrative Service from 2002-2017. His research interests include extremism, social resilience, cyber, and homeland defence.*

Cameron Sumpter *is a Research Fellow in the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. He holds an MA with first class honours from the University of Auckland. His research interests include prison-based disengagement strategies and civil society initiatives to prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE). Cameron conducts regular fieldwork on these issues in Indonesia.*

Notes

[1] The most substantive overall assessment of the documents, is Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point* (April 2016), pp.2-3; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail/ (accessed 15/1/18).

[2] Dodwell, Milton & Rassler p 14; Mike Giglio, Munzer al-Awad & Mitch Prothero, "Leaked ISIS Documents Tell the Stories of Hundreds of Foreign Jihadis," *Buzzfeed News* (19/3/16). URL: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/leaked-isis-documents-tell-the-stories-of-hundreds-of-foreig (accessed 3/4/19).

[3] David Sterman & Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad is Local (Vol.2): ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula," *New America* (April 2018).

[4] Abdullah bin Khaled Al-Saud, "Saudi Foreign Fighters: Analysis of Leaked Islamic State Entry Documents, ICSR Report (2019).

[5] The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), King's College London.

[6] Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 119.

[7] Ken Conboy, The Second Front (Jakarta: Equinox, 2006), pp. 32-33.

[8] Solahudin, The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), p. 131.

[9] Ibid., p. 134.

[10] Ken Conboy, The Second Front (Jakarta: Equinox, 2006), p. 45.

[11] Solahudin, The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), p. 134.

[12] Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Radical Muslim Terrorism' in the Philippines'; in: Tan, A. (Ed.) *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2007), p. 236.

[13] International Crisis Group, *Asia Report No. 63* (26/8/03).

[14] John Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

[15] See: International Crisis Group, *Asia Briefing No. 95* (27/8/09).

[16] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13*

(24/9/14), p. 15.

[17] Greg Fealy & John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," USAID Report (6/1/16), p. 12; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13* (24/9/14), p. 15.

[18] Sidney Jones and Solahudin, 'ISIS in Indonesia', in Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Eds.) *Turning Points and Transitions: Selections from Southeast Asian Affairs 1974-2018* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), p. 357; Kirsten E. Schulze, "The Jakarta Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Indonesia," *CTC Sentinel* 9:1, (January 2016).

[19] Greg Fealy & John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," USAID Report, (6/1/16), p. 12.

[20] Ibid., p. 12.

[21] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Support for 'Islamic State' in Indonesian Prisons," *IPAC Report No.15* (19/1/15), pp. 16-17.

[22] Kirsten E. Schulze, "The Jakarta Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Indonesia," *CTC Sentinel* 9:1 (January 2016).

[23] Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and Local Dimensions of the ISIS Phenomena in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Asian Security* 15:2 (2018), p. 10.

[24] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Support for 'Islamic State' in Indonesian Prisons," *IPAC Report No.15* (19/1/15), p. 15.

[25] Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and Local Dimensions of the ISIS Phenomena in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Asian Security* 15:2 (2018), p. 3.

[26] Greg Fealy & John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," USAID Report (6/1/16), p. 17.

[27] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict," *IPAC Report No.6* (30/1/14), p. 6.

[28] Greg Fealy & John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," USAID Report (6/1/16), p. 6.

[29] Haeril Halim & Marguerite Afra Sapiie, "Fear of more local attacks as Indonesian militants fail to emigrate," *The Jakarta Post* (11/1/17). URL: https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/01/11/fear-of-more-local-attacks-as-indonesian-militants-fail-to-emigrate.html (accessed 21/3/19).

[30] See Benjamin Soloway & Henry Johnson, "ISIS is Training Indonesian 'Cubs of the Caliphate' to Kill for the Cause," *Foreign Policy* (19/3/16). URL: https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/19/isis-is-training-indonesian-cubs-of-the-caliphate-to-kill-for-the-cause/ (accessed 21/3/19).

[31] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Managing Indonesia's Pro-ISIS Deportees," *IPAC Report No.47* (17/7/18), p. 3.

[32] Jasminder Singh, "Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit," *RSIS Commentary* (26/5/15). URL: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15126-katibah-nusantara-islamic-states-malay-archipelago-combat-unit/#.XPRMtYgzZnI (accessed 10/4/19).

[33] Sidney Jones, "Surabaya and the ISIS family," *Lowy Interpreter* (15/518).

[34] Kirsten E. Schulze, "The Surabaya Bombings and the Evolution of the Jihadi Threat in Indonesia," *CTC Sentinel* 11:6 (June/July 2018).

[35] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13* (24/9/14), p. 12.

[36] International Crisis Group, "Indonesian Jihadism: Small Groups, Big Plans," *Asia Report No 204* (19/4/11); Ihasan Ali Fauzi & Irsyad Rafsadie, "Rejecting elections: warning signs of a dangerous trend in Bima," Indonesia at Melbourne (16/4/19). URL: https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/rejecting-elections-warning-signs-of-a-dangerous-trend-in-bima/ (accessed 22/4/19).

[37] Dodwell, Milton & Rassler, op. cit., p. 14.

[38] Julie Chernov Hwang & Hoor Huda Ismail, "There and Back Again: Indonesian Fighters in Syria," *The Middle East Institute* (27/1/15). URL: https://www.mei.edu/publications/there-and-back-again-indonesian-fighters-syria# (accessed 23/4/19).

[39] See Bank Indonesia data: URL: https://www.bi.go.id/sdds/ .

[40] See: Ina Parlina, "Sixteen Indonesians trying to reach Syria did not use travel agency," *The Jakarta Post* (13/3/15). URL: https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/03/13/sixteen-indonesians-trying-reach-syria-did-not-use-travel-agency.html (accessed 12/4/19).

[41] Dodwell, Milton & Rassler, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

[42] Ibid., p. 18.

[43] Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce*: *An Inside Look at the Islamic State's* Foreign Fighter Paper Trail. Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (April 2016), p. 19.

[44] While a number of young Indonesians pursue Islamic religious studies abroad, a 2016 study from the Lowy Institute which interviewed 47 Indonesians studying in Egypt and Turkey found strong support for democracy and no support for ISIS. See: Bubalo, Jones & Nuraniyah, "Indonesian students in Egypt and Turkey" *Lowy Institute* (April 2016). URL: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/indonesian-students-egypt-and-turkey (accessed 22/4/19).

[45] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Weak, Therefore Violent: The Mujahidin of Western Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.5* (2/12/13), p. 16.

[46] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict," *IPAC Report No.6* (30/1/14), p. 7.

[47] Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce*: *An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail*. Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (April 2016), p. 24.

[48] Ibid., p. 23.

[49] See: International Crisis Group, "Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's Publishing Industry," *Asia Report No 147,* (28/2/08).

[50] David Sterman & Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad is Local (Vol.2): ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula," *New America* (April 2018). URL: https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-local-volume-ii/ (accessed 4/3/19).

[51] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13* (24/9/14), p. 11.

[52] For background on this role, see: Charlie Winter, "War by Suicide: A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State's Martyrdom Industry," *ICCT Research Paper* (February 2017). URL: https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICCT-Winter-War-by-Suicide-Feb2017.pdf (accessed 07/03/19); and: Cameron Colquhoun, "Inghimasi – The Secret ISIS Tactic Designed for the Digital Age," *Bellingcat* (1/12/16). URL: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/01/inghimasi-secret-isis-tactic-designed-digital-age/ (accessed 7/3/19).

[53] Ibid., p. 18.

[54] Josie Esnor, "Leaked Islamic State files reveals the 'borders chief' who helped funnel terrorists into Syria," *The Telegraph* (26/5/16). URL: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/26/leaked-islamic-state-files-reveal-the-borders-chief-who-helped-f/ (accessed 21/2/19).

[55] Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "U.S. Offers $5 Million Reward for Senior ISIS Figure," *New York Times* (18/11/15). URL: https://www.nytimes.com/live/paris-attacks-live-updates/u-s-offers-5-million-reward-for-senior-isis-figure/ (accessed 23/4/19).

[56] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13* (24/9/14), p. 9.

[57] See Rik Coolsaet, "What drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case," Egmont Paper 75 (March 2015). URL: http://www.giis.ugent.be/media/15007/coolsaet-egmont_paper.pdf (accessed 2/5/19).

[58] See: Sidney Jones and Solahudin, 'ISIS in Indonesia', in: Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Eds.) *Turning Points and Transitions: Selections from Southeast Asian Affairs 1974-2018* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), p. 357.

[59] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Support for 'Islamic State' in Indonesian Prisons," *IPAC Report No.15* (19/1/15), p. 9.

[60] Cameron Sumpter, "Aman Abdurrahman: Leading Indonesia's Jihadists from Behind Bars," *The Diplomat* (2/3/18). URL: https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/aman-abdurrahman-leading-indonesias-jihadists-from-behind-bars/ (accessed 15/4/19).

[61] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Support for 'Islamic State' in Indonesian Prisons," *IPAC Report No.15,* (19/1/15).

[62] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesia's Lamongan Network: How East Java, Poso and Syria are Linked," *IPAC Report No.18* (15/4/15), p. 5.

[63] See Joanna Seow, "Singaporean ISIS fighter shown executing man in video," *The Straits Times* (31/12/17). URL: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-isis-fighter-shown-executing-man-in-video (accessed 10/3/19). Also, a small handful of recruits are also thought to have come from Thailand and Cambodia. See: Alice Cuddy, "Cambodian jihadists among us: ISIS video," *The Phnom Penh Post* (23/6/14). URL: https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodian-jihadists-among-us-isis-video (accessed 10/3/19).

[64] See J.M Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), p. 114.

[65] See: David Sterman & Nate Rosenblatt, "All Jihad is Local (Vol.2): ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula," *New America* (April 2018). URL: https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-local-volume-ii/ (accessed 04/03/19).

[66] See: V. Arianty, "Indonesian Jihadists and Syria: Training Ground?" *RSIS Commentary* (14/10/13). URL: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/2081-indonesian-jihadists-and-syria/#.XRR9SY8RXIU (accessed 10/3/19).