

# **INDONESIANS AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

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The conflict in Syria has captured the imagination of Indonesian extremists in a way no foreign war has before. For the first time, Indonesians are going overseas to fight, not just to train, as in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and 1990s, or to give moral and financial support, as in the case of Palestine. The numbers are still limited – the Indonesian foreign ministry estimated about 50 in December 2013 – but they could rise.

Four factors explain why the conflict has attracted such attention. First, the enthusiasm for Syria is directly linked to predictions in Islamic eschatology that the final battle at the end of time will take place in Sham, the region sometimes called Greater Syria or the Levant, encompassing Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. Indeed within some extremist circles, the Syrian conflict is known as the “one-way ticket jihad” because anyone goes there to fight will be able to stay and see Islam’s final victory.

Second, thanks to a best-selling book, *The Two-Arm Strategy*, translated from Arabic into Indonesian, many extremists believe that the chaos and suffering produced by the Arab Spring can be exploited in a way that will lead to the restoration of an Islamic caliphate.

Third, the atrocities of government forces against Sunni Muslims have been given wide play in the local media, including radical websites, playing into a campaign that was already underway before the conflict erupted to portray Shi’a Muslims, represented by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as deviant and murderous.

Finally, Syria is easier to reach for Indonesians, especially through Turkey, than any other major conflict feeding the global jihad.

As a result, Indonesians from different radical streams are going or trying to go to Syria. The most important is Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the once-powerful regional organization responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings that after 2007 disengaged from violence in Indonesia and was accused by other militants of abandoning jihad. From late 2012 to January 2014, JI’s humanitarian wing, Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI), sent ten delegations to Syria, bringing in cash and medical assistance to the Islamist resistance in a way apparently designed to open channels for more direct participation in the fighting. Other salafi jihadis, including from various Darul Islam factions, are also trying to go, as are members of the non-violent salafi community.

The Syrian conflict has also caused divisions among Indonesian jihadis, however. The tensions between two of the most hardline Islamist factions there, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and the al-Nusrah Front, have carried over to Indonesia, where each side has its supporters. Divisions have also emerged in Indonesia between those who see the conflict in Shi’a-Sunni terms and those who say these sectarian differences are being deliberately fanned by the West to mobilize opposition against the Assad government because of its strong opposition to Israel.

These differences could weaken the overall impact of the conflict on Indonesian extremists and keep them divided. Nevertheless, the danger remains that fighters returning from Syria could infuse new energy into Indonesia’s weak and ineffectual jihadi movement.

## II. SYRIA AND THE END OF THE WORLD

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Indonesian jihadis, like their counterparts elsewhere, see Syria as different from other conflicts because of the place of “Sham” – greater Syria – in predictions (*nubuwwat*) about the end of the world.

Long before the current conflict erupted, extremist groups were fascinated by discussions about the end of time. In 2003, al-Aqwam, a company affiliated to Jemaah Islamiyah, published

a best-seller called *Tumult at the End of Time* (Huru-Hara Akhir Zaman) by Amin Muhammad Jamaluddin. The book caused a stir by claiming that various political conflicts in the Muslim world, including the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, were indicators of the coming apocalypse, and that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were the bearers of the “black banners of Khorasan” that would be signs of the coming of the Mahdi, the Islamic redeemer, in the final battle between good and evil. After the book’s success, jihadi publishing houses competed to get out new books on the same theme, and the return of the Mahdi became a popular topic in radical discussion groups.<sup>1</sup>

The scramble to predict the end of the world came to a head in 2005, when an activist of Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), then led by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, organized a committee to welcome the Mahdi, because of a *hadith* – a report of words or deeds of the Prophet that collectively are a major source of Islamic law – that said he would return to earth when both solar and lunar eclipses occurred during the holy month of Ramadan. Both eclipses took place, but the Mahdi never came.

Nevertheless, belief among jihadis that the end of the world was near continued unabated, and the conflict in Syria only reinforced it. Several *hadith* state that the final war for control of the world, called Al Malhamah Qubra, will begin in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The war will pit Muslims against the “Romawi” – literally the Romans – with a final battle between the Mahdi and Dajjal, sometimes defined as the Islamic Antichrist, which the Mahdi will win.

One frequently-cited *hadith* states that the Prophet once said, “You Muslims will fight on the Arabian Peninsula and Allah will give you victory. You will fight the Persians and Allah will give you victory. You will fight the Romans and Allah will give you victory. Then you will fight Dajjal, and Allah will defeat him for you.”<sup>3</sup>

Indonesian jihadi groups interpret the reference to the Arabian peninsula as meaning the Arab Spring revolts against “apostate” Arab leaders and to Persia as meaning the war against Shi’a, including against the Assad government. As for the Romans, jihadis see them as represented today by the West, including America, Australia and Europe.

Jihadis cite another *hadith* which explains that at the end of the world, the Romans will come to the aid of the Muslim faithful and sign a peace agreement with them. Roman treachery, however, will cause the collapse of the agreement and trigger a new war. Indonesian jihadis see this *hadith* as a prophecy of Western support for the Syrian rebels against Assad, which may extend to eventual brokering of a peace agreement. But after the peace, Muslims will be ready to fight America and its allies again because they will be the traitors of the prophecy. After the West is defeated, Muslims will take on Dajjal.<sup>4</sup>

### III. THE “TWO-ARM STRATEGY”

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The Syrian conflict is also attractive to Indonesian extremists because it enables them to apply the so-called “two-arm strategy”, the title of a book that has become a runaway hit in the jihadi community. The book is based on a strategic memorandum written by an al-Qaeda figure using

1 One of the most prolific writers about the end of the world is Abu Fatiah al-Adnani, a teacher at al-Mukmin *pesantren*, in Ngruki, Solo. One of his 2008 books, *Global Warming*, noted that climate change was one indicator that the end of the world was near; another was the arrival on the pop music scene of Britney Spears.

2 Sometimes referred to as the Islamic Armageddon, Al Malhamah Qubra was also the name of an Indonesian facebook page, since blocked, that in May 2013 produced a list of Buddhist sites throughout Indonesia and urged that they be attacked to avenge Muslim deaths at Buddhist hands in Myanmar.

3 Quoted in “Arab Spring Detonator Perang Akhir Zaman,” *An-Najah*, No.97, December 2014.

4 Some see more than one Dajjal and include Bashar al-Assad himself. See [dakwahwaljihad.wordpress.com/2012/04/18/mereka-adalah-dajjal-masa-kini/](http://dakwahwaljihad.wordpress.com/2012/04/18/mereka-adalah-dajjal-masa-kini/).

the name Abdullah bin Muhammad who was planning to present it to Osama bin Laden, but bin Laden was killed before he could do so. He then made it public through al-Ma'sada Media (Voice of Shumukh Islam).<sup>5</sup>

He argues that the violent anarchy produced by the Arab Spring has led to the best opportunity ever for the restoration of the caliphate, and the place to begin is in Syria and Yemen. He points to the drastic decentralisation of power in the Middle East among regime remnants, militaries, Islamic parties, secular oppositions, revolutionary youth and other groups, and predicts that this will lead to prolonged domestic and regional conflict with widespread suffering, including displacement and famine. It will also lead to the further weakening of American power over governments in the region, at a time when the America is already being weighed down by the sheer costs of its military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The combination of political chaos and a weakened America, he argues, gives an opening to the jihadi community to respond to the security and humanitarian needs of the civilian population in the Arab world in a way that can win hearts and minds. He is not talking about sophisticated governance. He points out there is a reason that the "jihadist experiment" has succeeded in poor, war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Somalia rather than in Dubai and Riyadh; the population has very basic needs of food, water, fuel, medicine and rudimentary security that the movement can provide. But the restoration of the caliphate cannot start in what he calls "politically dead" areas like Sudan and Mauritania that are of little importance to the Islamic street. Instead it must start in an area of vital interest, near to areas of religious influence, with natural barriers for defence and secure bases. The two places that have these qualities are Syria and Yemen.

The reasons are many:

- Both are the subject of end-of-the-world prophecies.
- Both are critical to the expansion of Islam's power as several *hadith* make clear. One quotes the Prophet Muhammad as saying, "Allah put Sham in front of me and Yemen behind me and said to me: 'O Muhammad! I have put in in front of you the spoils of war and the source of your livelihood, and in back of you I have given you reinforcements...'"<sup>6</sup>
- Both border on Islamic holy sites, with Sham including the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and Yemen connected through the Hejaz to Saudi Arabia and the twin holy cities of Mecca and Medina.
- Both have been important sources of manpower for the global jihad since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.

Having two fronts is like having two arms that can work together, Abdullah states. It is harder for the enemy to fight a two-front war when both are important: jihadis in Sham threaten Israel and jihadis in Yemen threaten oil wells. The jihadi effort in Yemen can benefit from the conflicts in Somalia and Sudan, while Syria can take advantage of arms and other supplies coming in from Iraq, Turkey, Egypt and North Africa.

The Indonesian version of the memorandum, published as *The Two-Arm Strategy (Strategi Dua Lengan)* appeared in June 2013, and programs to discuss the contents, in the form of book launchings, immediately took place across Java, several of them led by JI cleric Abu Rusydan. The book's popularity transcends local organizational divisions, and some of the discussions

5 A full English version can be found online at [archive.org/stream/mdhkrh-strtyh/memo\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/mdhkrh-strtyh/memo_djvu.txt).

6 Quoted in Abdullah bin Muhammad, *Strategi Dua Lengan*, Jazera Press, 2013, p.63.

have featured jihadi and non-jihadi speakers on the same panel.<sup>7</sup> The book itself makes a call for unity among all Muslims. For an Indonesian audience, it is interesting that it mentions Hizbut Tahrir as a group that has given much thought to the restoration of the caliphate. It would be interesting to know if this has led to any discussions of cooperation on Syria between Hizbut Tahrir and JI, two organizations whose relationship in Indonesia has often been strained.

#### IV. FUNDRAISING AND PUBLISHING

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It is perhaps no coincidence that *Strategi Dua Lengan* was published in mid-2013 by Jazera Press, the publishing house owned by one of JI's leading intellectuals, Bambang Sukirno. Sukirno, who published the blockbuster diatribe of Bali bomber Imam Samudra in 2004, has led several of the JI humanitarian missions to Syria that may be trying to help put the strategy into practice.

The missions have taken place under the auspices of Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI), many of whose leaders are JI intellectuals and teachers, many of them alumni of the al-Mukmin pesantren in Ngruki, Solo, the school set up by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and JI founder Abdullah Sungkar.<sup>8</sup> They preach that providing material support to the jihad in Syria is as important as fighting there, and one way to this is through donations to HASI.<sup>9</sup> The usual fund-raising method is to hold well-publicised public discussions (*tabligh akbar*) on Syria designed to attract as many people as possible, and conclude the program with a call for contributions. From 2012 to the end of 2013, JI held 60 such discussions around Indonesia raising anywhere from Rp.10,700,000 (about \$1,070) in Klaten, Central Java in June 2013 to over Rp.130,000,000 (about \$10,700 with the decline of the rupiah) in Bandar Lampung five months later. HASI also solicits on-line donations over its website, [www.hasi.or.id](http://www.hasi.or.id).<sup>10</sup>

Much of the funding takes the form of medical assistance and is channeled to the Salma Field Hospital in Latakia, where HASI sends doctors and nurses on one-month tours of duty. Its teams also distribute food aid and clothing in the areas of Jabal al-Akrad and Idlib, south of Aleppo, and have a mobile medical clinic traveling around conflict-affected villages and displaced persons' camps.<sup>11</sup> Together jihadi groups have provided generators and built a bread factory and schools in the area. Following the two-arm strategy, JI leaders hope that this kind of assistance will raise their credibility with the populace and lead to support for the jihadi movement.<sup>12</sup> They were encouraged in December 2012, when after the U.S. declared the al-Nusrah Front a terrorist organization, thousands in the city of Binnisy, Deir Ezzur province in the eastern part of Syria turned out to protest.<sup>13</sup>

Many other Indonesian extremist organizations are also raising money including JAT and MMI, as well many salafi groups, not to mention mainstream organizations whose members,

7 Abu Rusydan appeared in one program with Muhammad al-Khaththath, head of the hardline civil society coalition, Forum Umat Islam (FUI). For a video of the event, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCMQuQtCeAc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCMQuQtCeAc). JAT also held several discussions on the book, including one on 29 December 2013 in Mesjid al-Muhajirin, Grogol, West Jakarta that featured former JI member Abu Fida from Surabaya and Amir Machmud, whose son is believed to be in Syria.

8 Hilal Ahmar means "Red Crescent" in Arabic but there is no connection between HASI and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In addition to Sukirno, another teacher active in HASI is Imtihan Syafii, a prolific translator who teaches at Universitas An-Nur, Solo.

9 "Jihad Bebaskan Bumi Syam" *An-Najah*, No. 93, July 2013.

10 See [www.kiblat.net/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Kasur-14.pdf](http://www.kiblat.net/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Kasur-14.pdf).

11 See [www.hasi.or.id/tim-relawan-ke-10-hasi-berangkat-ke-suriyah.html](http://www.hasi.or.id/tim-relawan-ke-10-hasi-berangkat-ke-suriyah.html).

12 IPAC interview with JI member, Jakarta, January 2014.

13 The protest was covered in depth in JI magazine *An-Najah* and by other Muslim media as well. See Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia's take on the issue, for example, at [m.hizbut-tahrir.or.id/2012/12/11/analisis-takut-negara-islam-tegak-amerika-tuding-mujahidin-suriyah-teroris/](http://m.hizbut-tahrir.or.id/2012/12/11/analisis-takut-negara-islam-tegak-amerika-tuding-mujahidin-suriyah-teroris/).

horrified by the reporting on television, are willing to make generous donations.<sup>14</sup> HASI is making appeals on a new website designed for cross-organisational appeal, *kiblat.net*. *Muslimdaily.net*, a site close to the Ba'asyir family, announced the launching of a new organization, National Committee of Indonesian Muslims for Syria (Komite Nasional Muslim Indonesia untuk Suriah) in March 2012, also with bank account numbers for online donations.<sup>15</sup>

If jihadi groups are using humanitarian aid as a way of helping to pave the way for the political victory of the jihadi movement, anti-Shi'a sentiment seems to be driving the fund-raising efforts of non-jihadi salafi groups. They see Shi'ism not just as a doctrinal abomination but also as a physical threat – and not just in Syria but also in Yemen. In the upheaval following the Arab Spring in Yemen, the famous salafi pesantren, Darul ul-Hadith, in Dammaj, was attacked by Shi'a forces and two Indonesian students were killed. Two more were killed and five wounded in another attack in Dammaj in November 2013 that was given wide publicity in Indonesia.<sup>16</sup>

In Syria, an aid station of an Indonesian salafi group called Peduli Muslim (Muslim Care) has been set up in Jabal Jawiyah, Idlib. The group, which is close to the Indonesian branch of the Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society, known in Indonesia as at-Turots, has sent at least four aid missions to Syria.<sup>17</sup> The third mission, which left in October 2013, brought aid valued at around Rp.4 billion (about \$331,000).<sup>18</sup>

Another salafi relief effort called Misi Medis Suriah (Medical Mission to Syria) was set up by activists of the Yogyakarta chapter of al-Irsyad, an organization for Indonesians of Yemeni descent. By late 2013, it had sent five missions to Syria. Many of the activists were students of Yazid Isa at-Tamimi, the founder of al-Sofwa in Jakarta, a salafi institution where the radical ideologue Aman Abdurrahman once taught.

Websites, Facebook pages and print media about Syria have also proliferated in the radical community. They feature news about the brutality of Syrian government forces and pro-Assad militias toward Sunni villagers, often with a heavy anti-Shi'a spin. The May 2013 massacres in al-Bayda and Baniyas, in which more than 200 civilians including women and children died, drew particular attention, as did the use of chemical weapons in East Ghouta in August 2013.<sup>19</sup>

The *Ji* magazine *An-Najah* frequently focuses on Syria, and included a summary of *Strategi Dua Lengan* in its August 2013 issue. *Ji* intellectuals are also publishing a more analytical online journal called *Syamina* (*syamina.org*), looking at various conflicts around the globe leading to the oppression of Muslims, with an emphasis on Syria. And *Strategi Dua Lengan* is not the only book on Syria to become a bestseller: *Syria, Land of Jihad* (Syam Bumi Jihad), by Muhammad bin Said al Barudi, translated from the Arabic in 2013 is also doing well. Also, perhaps in an effort to repeat the success of a book by the late Palestinian scholar Abdullah Azzam, who briefly served as Osama bin Laden's mentor, a new publication called *Ayaturrahman Fie Jihad Suriah* was published in 2013 with stories of the miracles experienced by *mujahidin* in Syria. Azzam's

14 MMI in Padang, West Sumatra, for example, formed a solidarity team for Syria led by Umar Abu Hani that has been active raising funds in West Sumatra and Riau. It has also sent humanitarian aid missions to Syria, working together with Misi Medis Suriah. The latter also raises funds online through its website, *pedulisuriah.com*.

15 See [muslimdaily.net/artikel/suratpembaca/komite-nasional-muslim-indonesia-untuk-suriah-sudah-dibentuk.html](http://muslimdaily.net/artikel/suratpembaca/komite-nasional-muslim-indonesia-untuk-suriah-sudah-dibentuk.html).

16 See [sunnii.wordpress.com/2011/11/30/dua-penuntut-ilmu-darul-hadits-dammaj-asal-indonesia-tewas-terkena-serangan-roket-pemberontak-syiah-yaman/](http://sunnii.wordpress.com/2011/11/30/dua-penuntut-ilmu-darul-hadits-dammaj-asal-indonesia-tewas-terkena-serangan-roket-pemberontak-syiah-yaman/) and [m.news.viva.co.id/news/read/462597-lembah-dammaj-yaman-kembali-membara--dua-santri-wni-tewas](http://m.news.viva.co.id/news/read/462597-lembah-dammaj-yaman-kembali-membara--dua-santri-wni-tewas).

17 The group is led by Abu Saad Muhammad Nurhuda and operates under the auspices of the al-Atsari Islamic Education Foundation in Yogyakarta. The foundation is close to the at-Turots school in Yogyakarta led by the well-known scholar, Abu Nida. It broadcasts funding appeals over Radio Roja and TV Yufid, both owned by a man close to salafi leader Yazid Jawas.

18 See [dunia.news.viva.co.id/news/read/451661-rakyat-indonesia-kirim-ratusan-hewan-kurban-untuk-suriah](http://dunia.news.viva.co.id/news/read/451661-rakyat-indonesia-kirim-ratusan-hewan-kurban-untuk-suriah).

19 Human Rights Watch gave a death toll of 248 for the al-Bayda and Baniyas massacres and said that in Eastern Ghouta, the local council in one neighborhood alone had a list of 734 persons who were killed. See [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria\\_cw0913\\_web\\_1.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf).

book, which had similar stories about Afghanistan in the 1980s, helped spark the interest of many Indonesians in going to train there.

## V. INDONESIAN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

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Of the estimated 8,000 foreign fighters from 74 countries now believed to be involved in the Syrian conflict, some 50 are thought to be Indonesians, but no one knows for sure, and the Indonesian foreign ministry, which first mentioned the figure in December 2013, is not sure itself of its accuracy. Five of seven men identified in 2013 as having gone to fight are Ngruki graduates, consistent with JI's prominent role in Syria. None left directly from Indonesia but rather from schools in Yemen and Pakistan where they were studying. At least one man from the ex-Abu Umar network is also believed to be in Syria. Most of the Indonesians have joined through contacts in Ahrar al-Sham, but a few Indonesians are known to be with a rival (and more hardline) group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). As will be discussed below, splits in jihadi ranks in Syria are causing problems for Indonesian supporters at home.

### A. *Riza Fardi and other JI-linked fighters*

The most publicized case has been that of Riza Fardi, also called Abu Muhammad al-Indunisi, whose death was announced on 28 November 2013 by the twitter account of the Suqor al-Izz Brigade (@Sqoor\_Al3z), with which he was fighting, and subsequently by a tweet from the al-Qaeda media, Shoutul Jihad (@almohager000). It was then picked up by radical websites in Indonesia and further broadcast by mobile phone texting.

According to a Ngruki alumni Facebook page, Riza was from West Kalimantan and graduated from Ngruki in 2006. He taught at Ngruki for a year, then in 2007 went with several other Ngruki graduates to Yemen, where he studied at al-Iman University in Sana'a. He was still there in 2010 when two Indonesians, arrested in Yemen for visa violations, were deported and interrogated by counter-terrorism police about their contacts there.<sup>20</sup> He is believed to have left in 2012 for Syria where he joined the Suqor al-Izz Brigade, founded and led by Saudi national Sheikh Abdul Wahed, known by his nom de guerre, Saqr al-Jihad (Hawk of Jihad). Saqr al-Jihad was one of the early "Arab Afghans" to join the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s and later took part in the wars in Bosnia and Chechnya. He made his headquarters in the hills outside Latakia; one of the roles of his brigade was to guide other foreign fighters into Syria from the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>21</sup> The brigade is one of five rebel groups cited by Human Rights Watch as being responsible for human rights violations against civilians in the Latakia area in August 2013.<sup>22</sup>

Riza Fardi also reportedly taught in Aleppo where he was known as a quiet religious scholar. He always wanted to go the frontlines, however. The tweets announcing his death said that he had been killed in a battle in East Ghouta, near Damascus, on 25 November 2013. Later, however, a Suqor al-Izz commander clarified that he had died in Sheik Said district, Aleppo, saying that the brigade only operated in the northern part of the country and had no forces near the capital.<sup>23</sup>

On 25 November, jihadi forces had been surrounding Sheik Said for a week. The district was still controlled at that stage by Assad's forces and they offered heavy resistance. The jihadi coali-

20 Transcript of interviews with Nurul Hidayat and Zaki Siregar, 2 May 2010.

21 See [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/12/saudi-fighters-syria-official-silence.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/12/saudi-fighters-syria-official-silence.html).

22 Human Rights Watch, "You Can Still See Their Blood": Executions, Unlawful Killings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside, 11 October 2013.

23 See [shoutussalam.com/2013/12/klarifikasi-komandan-mujahidin-suqour-al-izz-abu-muhammad-gugur-syahid-di-aleppo/](http://shoutussalam.com/2013/12/klarifikasi-komandan-mujahidin-suqour-al-izz-abu-muhammad-gugur-syahid-di-aleppo/).

tion decided to withdraw, but Riza Fardi reportedly was very unhappy with the decision. Despite his having already been shot in the hand, he decided to stay together with seven others to insert themselves into enemy ranks. As they were advancing, they threw a grenade; the Assad forces opened fire in return, killing all seven.<sup>24</sup>

While other Indonesians deaths in Syria have been rumoured, Riza Fardi's is the only one confirmed. Four other Ngruki graduates left for Syria via Turkey in August 2013 from Islamabad, where they were attending the International Islamic University. They are Dawin Nuha Abdullah, Muhammad Fakhri Insani, Rusydan Abdul Hadi and Arisdiantoro. Dawin is the son of Amir Mahmud, an instructor at Muhammadiyah University Solo and an Afghan veteran from the prestigious 1986 batch.<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Fakhri is the son on Soleh Ibrahim, head of the Solo branch of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT). In November, Soleh Ibrahim said he had had no word from his son since 22 August.<sup>26</sup>

Two other Indonesians are reportedly with ISIS. One is Muhammad Ayub, son of Abdurrahim Ayub, former head of JI-Australia who left JI and became a non-violent salafi. The other is Abdul Rauf, respected as a memorizer of the Qur'an, who appears to be the main contact for Indonesians who want to join ISIS. Nothing is known of his background or organisational affiliations.

#### B. *The Ex-Abu Umar Network/Mujahidin Indonesia Barat*

In January 2014, after counter-terrorism police killed six members of Mujahidin Indonesia Barat, one of the splinter groups that emerged from the network of arrested Darul Islam leader Abu Umar, they announced that Nurul Haq, one of those killed, had a false passport in the name of Eka Satria that he was planning to use to go to Syria. It emerged later from the testimony of Anton, a surviving member of the group arrested hours before his friends were killed, that all had planned to go to Syria and that they had robbed a bank in Tangerang on 12 December 2013 in part to finance their trip. They estimated that a false passport cost approximately Rp10,000,000 (roughly \$833) and travel costs would be about double that.<sup>27</sup> He revealed separately that another member of the group was already in Syria and would help them once there.

## VI. DIVISIONS IN THE JIHADI MOVEMENT

For all of exhortations to Muslim unity in *Strategi Dua Lengan*, the reality is that the jihadi community is deeply divided, both in Indonesia and in Syria itself, along many different fault-lines. A small group of dissenters in Indonesia's radical community reject the Sunni-Shi'a divide and see Assad as the best hope for fighting Israel. The hostility between Syrian jihadi groups has spilled over to Indonesia. And a short-lived harmony between Indonesian salafis and salafi jihadis that the Syrian conflict produced has broken down as their differences have become more pointed over time.

#### A. *Pro- and Anti-Assad*

In Indonesia, one group led by Ustad Muzakir, from Gumuk, Solo, a longtime colleague of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, refused to join the campaign for jihad in Syria and went to meet Ba'asyir in prison to urge that it be stopped. Jose Rizal Jurnal, the head of MER-C, a humanitarian group that

24 Ibid.

25 The 1986 batch also included as JI's Abu Rusydan and Abu Tholut.

26 "Orangtua Mahasiswa Hilang di Pakistan Masih Putus Kontak", *jppn.com*, 3 November 2013.

27 See testimony of Azmi Fuadi alais Anton, the surviving member of the group, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB3ruWU2E24](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB3ruWU2E24). He appears to have been beaten and is probably speaking under duress.

provides Ba'asyir's personal doctor and associates itself with radical causes, also refused to send aid to the anti-Assad forces, whereas in the past, it had always looked for opportunities to send medical assistance to Muslim conflict areas around the world. Both Muzakir and Jose Rizal believed that jihadis had become trapped in a plot of America and Israel to weaken Assad, who together with militias like Hezbollah had been Israel's most consistent foe. They argued that the Sunni-Shi'a divide was only diverting attention from the larger goal of attacking Israel and freeing Palestine. Both refused to brand Shi'a as *kafir*, or infidel, and as a result, both were accused of being secret Shi'a themselves.

### B. ISIS vs al-Nusrah

But Muzakir and Jose Rizal represent a small minority view within the extremist community. More confusing for the Indonesians were the splits in Syria, especially between ISIS and the al-Nusrah Front. ISIS emerged from the al-Qaeda insurgency in Iraq led by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In 2006, it became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). An Iraqi named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader in 2010. On 9 April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced that the al-Nusrah Front was ISI's front in Syria and that the two groups would henceforth work together as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which he would head. The al-Nusrah Front wanted no part of this, especially when members were ordered to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi, and the split became deep and dangerous. At that point, al-Nusrah associated itself more explicitly with bin Laden's designated successor, Aiman az-Zawahiri.

The statement angered many others in jihadi circles, including several deeply respected clerics including Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatadah al-Filistiny, Abu Bashir ath-Thurtusi and others. Al-Maqdisi, whose writings have been very influential in Indonesia, wrote that ISIS was not a government but merely a jihad organization like many others. Abu Qatadah took a similar stance. ISIS ignored them both, irritating them to the point that at-Thurtusi issued a fatwa that ISIS itself was heretical and as such deserving of death.

The murder of several jihadi leaders by ISIS in late 2013 deepened the divide. In November, ISIS beheaded Muhammad Fares, a commander of Ahrar al-Sham, and displayed his head on a widely circulated video. Later it said it had been a mistake, but Ahrar al-Sham's demand that his killers be brought to justice went unheeded by ISIS. Then, in December, ISIS killed Hussein al-Suleiman alias Abu Rayyan, an Ahrar al-Sham doctor who was distributing aid from a Malaysian salafi group. Again, demands that the killers be tried were ignored.

Indonesians have had direct experience with ISIS tactics. On 5 January 2014, some volunteers from Misi Medis Suriah, accompanied by local jihadi guards, were stopped at an ISIS checkpoint as they were going to the Turkish border to pick up an ambulance. They were told they had to swear a loyalty oath (*bai'at*) to ISIS head Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi before they could pass. The guards tried to negotiate the passage of the Indonesians without them, but this too was rejected, and someone in the ISIS contingent fired on the guards' vehicle. A gun battle broke out, and eventually it was ISIS that was forced to withdraw.<sup>28</sup>

The same source for the above said that ISIS had robbed a team of volunteers from Malaysia, seizing the aid they were bringing in, and killed a Malaysian fighter in a battle with the group Liwa al-Fajr.<sup>29</sup>

The tensions between ISIS and al-Nusrah have forced Indonesian jihadis to choose sides. Imprisoned scholar Aman Abdurrahman has sided with ISIS, somewhat surprisingly given his

<sup>28</sup> IPAC interview with JI member, Jakarta, January 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

past writings.<sup>30</sup> In a recent posting from prison he wrote:

When Muslims heard the news of the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq, they were happy and bestowed their praise and support on its founder and his forces. Their happiness stemmed from their hope that this state, which had forced the withdrawal of a superpower (the United States), would become the embryo of the long-awaited caliphate. Every Muslim owes a debt to this state and those who founded it because it forced out the U.S.

Then when the Syrian revolution began, this state helped Syrian Muslims by sending the al-Nusrah forces and financial support to rescue Muslims from the oppression of the thaghut Bashar Assad and his criminal forces. They succeeded in cleaning large swathes of Sham from the hands of the Nushairiyah [Shi'a] and other apostates. Then they declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. Certain groups rejected them, groups whose understanding of Islamic law is incorrect. Some were groups who had their own interests and objectives and others were individuals whose vision was limited and who thought in terms of national boundaries set by the Sykes-Picot agreement. And then there were those who ended up swearing allegiance to the state and its amir, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi.<sup>31</sup>

He then slammed ISIS detractors:

What saddens us is that Muslim leaders and others who previously wrote about the need to establish an Islamic state and caliphate in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet now oppose and treat as an enemy this very state that they once wrote and spoke about in lectures. What is it with you, how can you pronounce such a judgment?

I say to them all: what is stopping you from swearing allegiance, we in this most eastern country of the Muslim world cannot accept your doubts, they make no sense at all. So let us all take the loyalty oath to the state and its amir, the Commander of the Faithful.<sup>32</sup>

The militant website *almustaqbal.net* also clearly supports ISIS and carries the banner in (poor) English, "We are Indonesian Moslem Support Your Jihad ISIS." Mohamed Fachri, its editor, argued there was nothing wrong swearing allegiance to al-Baghdadi, especially as he was only the head of state, not the caliph, and he had a right to demand the loyalty of those in his area. The online jihadi discussion forum, *albusyro.com*, went so far as to block the accounts of any participants who criticized ISIS.<sup>33</sup>

The al-Nusroh Front also has its supporters, including the site *arrahmah.com*, which publishes statements from ISIS critics such as Aiman Zawaheri and al-Maqdisi. Most recently it published a tract from Abu Khalid as-Suri, Zawaheri's close associate, who accused ISIS of undermining the jihadi movement. He warned it not to fall into the kind of extremism that leads to attacks on other Muslims and ends up destroying the jihad, as happened in Algeria.<sup>34</sup> The warning was not published by the pro-ISIS media.

Arrahmah's stance was criticized as unbalanced by Iwan Darmawan alias Rois, now on death row for his role in the 2004 Australian embassy bombing, in a statement he released over a radical site:

30 Aman Abdurrahman is known for his translations of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who was once the mentor of Abu Musab Zarqawi, the late leader of the Islamist insurgency in Iraq. But al-Maqdisi broke with Zarqawi over the latter's brutality, and later explicitly rejected his method of waging jihad. For Aman to side with the direct successor of Zarqawi is something of a turnaround.

31 See *al-mustaqbal.net/eksklusif-surat-ustadz-aman-untuk-ulama-mujahidin-dan-umat-islam-di-iraq-syam/*.

32 Ibid.

33 The "return" of *albusyro.com* was announced on *voa-islam.com* on 18 December 2013. The statement said that the original site had been repeatedly shut down by "infidels". See <http://www.voa-islam.com/read/indonesiana/2013/12/18/28210/kabar-gembira-bagi-kaum-muslimin-atas-kembalinya-forum-islam-albusyro/#sthash.Z6YKkh4u.dpbs>.

34 See [www.arrahmah.com/news/2014/01/19/tujuh-poin-nasehat-utusan-amir-al-qaeda-syaikh-abu-khalid-asy-syami-untuk-mujahidin-isis.html](http://www.arrahmah.com/news/2014/01/19/tujuh-poin-nasehat-utusan-amir-al-qaeda-syaikh-abu-khalid-asy-syami-untuk-mujahidin-isis.html).

As proof (of its bias), has arrahmah.com ever published a statement from ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al- Adnani Asy- Syami who has denied all the accusations against it? Or statements from the ISIS Amir Syaikh Abu Bakar Al- Baghdady Al- Husaini Al- Qurosyi? Not once [...]. Today arrahmah has turned into a site that hurts the jihad and attacks *mujahidin*, especially those fighting under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, otherwise known as ISIS.<sup>35</sup>

Jl, for its part, is trying to stay above the fray and for the moment is not choosing sides.

### C. *Salafi vs Jihadi*

The conflict in Syria briefly patched over differences between salafis and salafi jihadis in Indonesia because both saw the Shi'a as the enemy. Mutual hostility is the norm between the two, with salafis accusing the jihadis of being *khawarij*, or heretic, and the jihadis calling the salafis *murji'ah*, by which they mean passive do-nothings, men who rely on words and not action.<sup>36</sup> The temporary truce went so far that HASI's first aid mission in early 2012 included a salafi activist from the youth group Pemuda al-Irsyad.

But the situation changed with the tensions between ISIS and the other jihadi groups in Syria. The salafi groups were appalled at ISIS brutality, especially after the execution of a member of Ahrar al-Sham – which had been founded by a Syrian salafi. They began to use the label *khawarij* against ISIS and cited a *hadith* saying that at the end of the the world, the *khawarij* would side with Dajjal.<sup>37</sup>

The criticism stung the pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia and they retorted with accusations that the salafis were trying to obstruct the restoration of the caliphate in Syria. The attacks played out on Indonesian social media sites, with one salafi activist receiving a death threat from a jihadi linked to Mujahidin Indonesia Barat because of his statements against ISIS.<sup>38</sup>

## VII. IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT IN INDONESIA

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The Syrian conflict has already had an impact in Indonesia by convincing many extremists that their local jihad should be set aside for now to devote energy to the more important one abroad. It also has helped restore the prestige of Jl, which had been vilified by other groups for its 2007 decision to disengage from violence, at least in Indonesia, and focus instead on dakwah. The question is what the future impact of the Syrian venture will be – whether it will increase anti-Shi'a sentiment and lead to the targeting of Shi'a institutions, for example, and whether returning *mujahidin* will bring new life, leadership and ideas to the radical movement at home.

### A. *The Real Jihad*

Jl's Abu Rusydan expressed a widely held view when he said:

Why should we expend so much energy by thinking small and undertaking a local jihad experiment as we've done up till now? This is not to demean the martyrs, may Allah accept their actions and the families they left behind. But it's only sapping our strength.<sup>39</sup>

35 See [al-mustaqbal.net/nasehat-ustadz-rois-kepada-arahmah-com-terkait-isis/](http://al-mustaqbal.net/nasehat-ustadz-rois-kepada-arahmah-com-terkait-isis/).

36 The Murji'ah, literally "postponers", were an early Muslim sect.

37 IPAC interview with salafi activist, Jakarta, January 2014. Salafi use of the term *khawarij* against ISIS can be found on several salafi sites, for example: [www.sunnahcare.com/2014/01/ulah-sembrono-kelompok-khawarijtakfiri.html](http://www.sunnahcare.com/2014/01/ulah-sembrono-kelompok-khawarijtakfiri.html).

38 IPAC interview with salafi activist, Jakarta, January 2014.

39 "Wawancara Dengan Ustadz Abu Rusydan, Benang Merah Jihad Afghanistan dan Jihad Suriah", *An-Najah*, No.97, December 2013.

He went on to say that history showed that the local jihads only end in defeat, because the enemy will be as strong or stronger than any force trying to destroy them. He used as an example the state set up by the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s that eventually collapsed after the Americans invaded. He also pointed to Darul Islam, defeated by the TNI in the 1960s. He said it was time for Indonesians to join the global jihad – a war undertaken collectively by jihadi forces from different countries in an area where victory was assured in prophecies. Indonesians would find the victory that up till now has been elusive: the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.<sup>40</sup>

The difference between a war with global, even apocalyptic consequences, and the futile effort in Indonesia to take potshots at police has become apparent to all but a handful of mostly not very well-educated jihadis.

### B. *The Return of JI*

In the seven years since JI's shift away from violence, its leaders have been voices of relative moderation, in prison and outside, bringing their experience to bear in counseling against acts of jihad that only wreak havoc on the movement. Some have left to join pure salafi organizations, others have returned to teaching in JI schools, a few are quietly assisting police. Very few, however, have renounced the basic tenets of salafi jihadism – there is nothing wrong with commitment to jihad, but in Indonesia for the moment, they say, the costs outweigh the benefits. That said, even during the period that JI was being most taunted by more militant groups for its passivity and reluctance to fight, its network of some 40 pesantrens across the country, mostly in Java and Sumatra, were still the go-to schools for extremists who wanted to see their children imbued with jihadi values. Every wave of arrests of suspected terrorists today still produces one or two graduates of JI schools.

This means above all that JI is not a spent force in Indonesia despite its decline. Its involvement in Syria might have several implications. Its caution against local jihads could mean that as its prestige returns, it could become a restraining influence against those who might want to raise the level of action in Indonesia. At the same time, the more people it recruits for Syria the less control it will be able to maintain over what they do or where they go. Also, Darul Islam's own history shows that whenever the older generation gets too conservative, the younger hotheads go their own way. Finally, JI's cost-benefit calculus has led it towards disengagement because of the relative strength of the enemy, in this case the Indonesian state. But if the Syrian conflict helps both JI's fund-raising ability as well as its own recruitment, and if domestic political situation should take a turn for the worse, that calculus could change. No one should rule JI out of future action.

### C. *Returning Mujahidin*

As IPAC has noted in previous reports, the current generation of Indonesian jihadis for the most part is poorly educated, poorly vetted, poorly trained and poorly led. The result is failure to do much damage. If the call to abandon the local effort and join the global jihad could weaken the movement still further, it is also true that *mujahidin* returning to Indonesia from Syria have the potential to provide everything today's jihadis now lack – especially experienced leaders.

At a minimum, they will return with more exposure to ideological debates and possibly strategic goals that go beyond dissolution of the counter-terrorism police. The idea of restoring the caliphate, a vague goal at the best of times for the old JI, is now front and center of the broader jihadi agenda, and this could lead to new kinds of alliances inside Indonesia.

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40 Ibid.

They could also come back instilled with a heightened antipathy to Shi'ism, meaning that if some do choose to engage in violence at home, Shi'a institutions could be a target. And if pro-ISIS sentiment increases in Indonesia through prison letters of Aman Abdurrahman and others, then the targeting could expand further to once again include foreigners.<sup>41</sup>

#### D. Conclusion

All of this means that upheaval in the Middle East may have direct consequences in Indonesia, but the dangers should not be overdrawn. The drivers of jihad will continue to be mostly local as they have been from the beginning. Indonesians coming back from Afghanistan from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s did not use their skills and training to undertake violence in Indonesia until after Soeharto fell and the Ambon conflict erupted, with Indonesian Muslims dying in a local war. Without local grievances to build on, no *mujahid* coming back from Syria or Yemen or anywhere else can build much of a movement, and without community support, as Abu Rusydan has repeatedly argued, no movement can succeed. Indonesia's great strengths are its own political stability and relatively peaceful regional environment. It is nonetheless worth keeping an eye on Syria.

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41 In 2007, Aman translated a tract by noted radical scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, in which al-Maqdisi urged jihadis to move away from *qital nikayah* – repeated hits against the enemy designed to weaken its legitimacy and resolve – to *qital tamkin*, a more strategic struggle to use jihad to remove obstacles to the establishment of an Islamic state. Aman, through his support for ISIS, seems to see the need for a combination of both, and this could affect choice of tactics and targets at home.