

**THE RADICALISATION OF INDONESIAN  
WOMEN WORKERS IN HONG KONG**

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## CONTENTS

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Growth of <i>Dakwah</i> in Hong Kong.....	1
	A. How the Community Grew .....	2
	B. Ustadz Muhaimin Karim and His Outreach Efforts .....	3
	C. <i>Dakwah</i> Moves to Victoria Park.....	4
III.	Salafis Come to Hong Kong.....	5
	A. Birrul Walidain and VOA-Islam .....	5
	B. Al-Furqon and Serving Islam Team (SIT) .....	7
	C. IMSA: the Youtube-inspired Salafis.....	8
	D. Two Different Paths to Salafism .....	9
IV.	The Indonesian Shi'a Community.....	10
V.	The Phenomenon of Extremist Maids.....	12
	A. Ayu's International Network.....	13
	B. Ummu Yasir and Ghalia: Promoters of Online Marriage.....	14
	C. Wives and Would-be Bombers.....	15
VI.	Commerce in The Service of Religion: A Possible Bridge? .....	16
VII.	Conclusions.....	18

## I. INTRODUCTION

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The arrest of two women, both former overseas workers, for attempted suicide bombings in December 2016 underscores the vulnerability of Indonesian migrants to extremist recruitment. Several dozen Indonesian maids working in East Asia have become involved in a variety of pro-ISIS activities from providing funding for tickets to Syria to marrying fighters online. While the numbers are tiny – in Hong Kong, an estimated 45 out of more than 150,000 Indonesians – it is still important to contain the radical fringe through more targeted pre-departure training of migrants; engagement of Indonesian Muslim leaders and educators; and improved monitoring of incoming Islamic teachers (*ustadz*) by the Indonesian consulate.

In Hong Kong, the outbreak of war in Syria was the immediate trigger for the emergence of extremist cells but interest in extremist doctrine had been evident earlier. That interest was perhaps the inevitable consequence of the huge expansion of the Indonesian Muslim community in Hong Kong over the last fifteen years that includes groups spanning the ideological spectrum from progressive to ultra-conservative. The number of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong has risen dramatically from 1,000 in 1990 to 55,000 in 2000 to more than 153,000 in 2016. Their presence has spawned a range of businesses, services and associations focusing on everything from fashion to sports, but the fastest growing sector is Islamic religious outreach (*dakwah*).

Of over 200 Indonesian associations in Hong Kong listed by the Indonesian Consulate General in 2016, more than half are *dakwah* groups. On Sundays, when most Indonesian maids have the day off, numerous Islamic study circles can be found in Victoria Park and other public places. Demand for Islamic teachers is so high that the Islamic Union of Hong Kong – the oldest Islamic charitable organisation in the territory – cannot meet it. Many Indonesians turn to the Internet and social media for religious guidance and general news on the Muslim world, leading in some cases to contacts with extremist preachers.

Domestic workers have also become radicalised through online encounters with male jihadis that can turn into personal relationships, including marriage and financial support. Through their own social media circles, the women often have more international connections than the Indonesian men they become attached to and can help connect them to global extremist networks. Their online boyfriends, however, are often more interested in their cash. The frequency of attempts at economic exploitation by male jihadis suggests that counselling against such moves may be one key to countering recruitment.

This report explores how and why radical cells emerged among domestic workers in Hong Kong and the factors that led some migrant workers to join. It is based on in-depth interviews with domestic workers in Hong Kong, Indonesian clerics and Islamic organisation leaders in Hong Kong and Jakarta, analysis of social media conversations and examination of written material from *dakwah* organisations.

## II. GROWTH OF DAKWAH IN HONG KONG

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The appearance of radical cells must be understood in the context of the dramatic growth of the Indonesian community in Hong Kong and the emergence of religious structures to serve it. With relatively good salaries and protection of labour rights, Hong Kong is now the fourth most popular destination for Indonesian migrant workers after Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan. For these migrants, Islamic organisations offer not only an opportunity to strengthen faith in a non-Muslim setting but also a place for social gathering that can help them adjust to an unfamiliar environment, avoid the temptations of the big city and anchor their traditional identities. Religious discussion groups, particularly those held in Victoria Park on the maids' day

off, became particularly popular. Islamic journalism and creative writing under the guidance of an Islamist organisation, also became a pathway to piety. As activities expanded, it became a matter of time before hardline groups would take an interest.

#### A. *How the Community Grew*

Indonesian domestic helpers in Hong Kong overtook Filipinos as the largest migrant worker community in Hong Kong in 2009, though Filipinos have since caught up.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Filipino and Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Indonesian</b>	<b>Filipino</b>
2000	55,174	151,485
2005	96,904	118,032
2010	140,941	137,313
2015	150,239	181,861

Source: Hong Kong Immigration Department

According to Hong Kong census data, there were 159,901 Indonesian nationals in the country in 2015; only 231 were men.<sup>2</sup> Around 95 per cent work in informal sector as nannies, caretakers for elderly people and domestic helpers, or, in the case of men, as gardeners.

The rapid growth of the Indonesian migrant worker community is a result of several factors, including Indonesian government policies encouraging labour migration, the limited availability of jobs at home after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and an increasing demand from Hong Kong employers who saw Indonesian workers as cheaper and less demanding than Filipinos.<sup>3</sup>

Indonesian overseas employment agencies (Penyalur Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, PJTKI) sold the services of domestics cheaply as a strategy to compete with the better trained and better organised Filipinos, resulting in many Indonesians being paid less than the minimum wage.<sup>4</sup> The agencies also encouraged an image of Indonesian women as ignorant and submissive to appeal to employers who wanted docile workers.<sup>5</sup> Some women said the agencies confiscated handbooks on migrants' rights that the Hong Kong government distributed on arrival at the airport and that they did not understand their rights until after living in Hong Kong for several years.<sup>6</sup>

1 Amy Sim "Women in Transition: Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," Unpublished Thesis, Hong Kong University, 2007.

2 Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, "Women and Men in Hong Kong Key statistics," 28 July 2016, p. 239. The data for 2016 is not yet available.

3 Amy Sim, "Women Versus the State: Organising resistance and Contesting Exploitation in Indonesian Labour Migration to Hong Kong," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2009, pp. 47-75.

4 IPAC interview with Gabungan Aksi Migran Muslim Indonesia (GAMMI), Hong Kong, 14 May 2017; Asian Migrant Centre, "Underpayment 2: Systemic Extortion of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong," September 2007; Amnesty International, "Exploited for Profit, Failed by Governments: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers Trafficked To Hong Kong," 21 November 2013. A study conducted by Asian Migrant Centre and Migrant Forum in Asia in 2001 reveals that almost half of the Indonesians were underpaid while almost all Filipinos received at least the minimum wage. In terms of rest days, Indonesians on average had two days off a month while 93 per cent of Filipinos had one day a week -- which is actually required by Hong Kong Employment Ordinance (Chapter 57). A subsequent survey in 2007 suggested that 42 per cent of the respondents were underpaid. The trend continued as late as 2012, where nearly 30 per cent of Indonesians surveyed were paid below minimum standard.

5 Nicole Constable, *Born Out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor*, University of California Press, (Berkeley, 2014), p. 72.

6 IPAC interviews, Hong Kong, 5-14 May 2017.

These abuses do not appear to have played a direct role in the radicalisation of women, but they did lead to the establishment by the maids themselves of an Islamic advocacy group, Forum Komunikasi Peduli Umat (FKMPU). It was meant to be a forum for Muslim activists as opposed to secular labour unions that had emerged in the political openness that followed the fall of President Soeharto in 1998 and was one of the very few Islamic organisations operating in Hong Kong in the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> Eventually the growth of the Indonesian community led to more interest from a wider variety of organisations in Indonesian in how to serve, educate, profit from and sometimes exploit the migrant workers, including, ultimately, radical clerics.

### B. Ustadz Muhaimin Karim and his outreach efforts

Indonesian preachers gradually began to realise that they could play a role in saving the migrants from the danger of conversion (commonly termed “Christianisation”) as well as from social ills and vices while at the same time tapping into the economic potential they represented. The arrival of moderate Muhammadiyah cleric Ustadz Muhaimin Karim in October 2002 as a new preacher at the Islamic Union of Hong Kong was a catalyst for the upsurge of Indonesian Islamic groups.<sup>8</sup>

Muhaimin, a Cirebon native and graduate of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan was then working for the Malaysia-based Regional Islamic Da’wah Council for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP). He had been coming to Hong Kong since 1997 to deliver sermons at the invitation of the Indonesian consulate. When he saw the consulate’s guest list, he was struck by how many Christian priests from different denominations were on it and how few *ustadzs*. He begged RISEAP to let him move to Hong Kong as he was genuinely worried about the danger of Christian conversion efforts aimed at Indonesian workers. RISEAP finally let him go and he took up a position at the Islamic Union of Hong Kong based in the Ammar Mosque (Masjid Ammar) in Wan Chai.

There he established a study group (*pengajian*) for Indonesians called the Group of Devout Social Activists in Hong Kong (Himpunan Sosial Aktivis Sholehah Hong Kong), better known as *halaqah*, the term for a small religious study circle. When he started many migrants were fearful of losing their job if they joined. They were generally told by their agencies to not pray or wear a headscarf (*jilbab*) because in Chinese culture, white (the colour of the Muslim prayer covering for women) symbolises death, hence it would make their employers uncomfortable. Many had to pray in the bathroom and faced punishment if their employers found out.<sup>9</sup>

By his own account, Muhaimin was also responsible for bringing the Jakarta-based charity Dompot Duafa, literally “purse of the poor” to Hong Kong, as he says it was on his recommendation that they first visited in 1999.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, Dompot Dhuafa established a union-like organisation called Friends of Migrant Workers (Sahabat Pekerjaan Migran, SPM) in Hong

7 The best-known secular union was Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (ATKI) also founded in 2000. For more on Indonesian migrant workers’ organisation, see Michele Ford, “Organizing the Unorganizable: Unions, NGOs, and Indonesian Migrant Labour,” *International Migration*, Vol. 42, 2004, pp. 99–119

8 Islamic Union is an Islamic charitable organisation established at the beginning of the 20th century by Muslims from South Asia and the Malay Archipelago living in Hong Kong under the British rule. For more on its history, see The Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, *Light of Islam*, (Hong Kong, 1986), retrieved on 17 June 2017, from <http://www.islam.org.hk/eng/TrusteeHistory.asp#3>.

9 IPAC separate interviews with Asan, Anik, Ust Muhaimin, and Eni Lestari, 5–13 May 2017. See also Wai-Yap Ho, *Islam and Hong Kong: Ethnic Identity, Muslim Networks and the New Silk Road*, Routledge (New York, 2013).

10 IPAC interview with Ustadz Muhaimin, Hong Kong, 6 May 2017.

Kong that ran a money transfer business, among other things.<sup>11</sup> It set up a formal branch in Hong Kong in 2004 known as Dompot Duafa Hong Kong, DDHK, and its *dakwah* program over time took on a more conservative cast.

Muhaimin worked tirelessly to raise public awareness about Islam and encourage more Indonesians to become devout Muslims. Among other things, he drafted a letter in Chinese explaining to employers why Muslims have to pray and fast during Ramadhan and suggesting that the maids could pray for their employers' prosperity and wealth.<sup>12</sup> He set up radio programmes in English and Chinese where local people could call in with questions about Islam and was available to offer advice to Indonesian workers on religious or personal problems any time day or night.

#### D. *Dakwah Moves to Victoria Park*

Islamic study groups really took off, however, when they moved from Ustadz Muhaimin's indoor sessions (*dakwah gedung*) to Victoria Park, where maids gathered on their day off. In October 2004, Ustadz Muhaimin encouraged what had been a small group of East Javanese *pesantren* graduates, Majelis Taklim al-Fatah and four other discussion groups to unite under an umbrella organisation called the Union of Victoria Park-based *Dakwah* (Persatuan *Dakwah* Victoria, PDV).<sup>13</sup> Being a moderate and open-minded *ustadz*, he was able to approach the largely traditionalist field *dakwah* activists despite his modernist background.

The outdoor *dakwah* on Sundays turned into one of the most important social gatherings for Indonesian maids. Each member was encouraged to bring in at least one new recruit every week. Members invited friends, chance acquaintances or random individuals around the park, swelling the number of participants and leading to the formation of many new groups.

For Ustadz Muhaimin, outdoor *dakwah* was the best way to approach nominal or lapsed Muslims and bring them back into the fold.

One woman said:

My group is called Roudlotul Qolbiyah, we started in mid-2000s. Not many people wore headscarf then, not like now. We just casually chatted with people sitting around at the park, asking them to join our *pengajian*, many refused, but we didn't give up. They said "I'm wearing a miniskirt, how do you expect me to read Qur'an [*ngaji*] dressed like this?" I said "Don't worry, just come, we've got plenty of sarongs." Day by day, more and more people joined.<sup>14</sup>

The Victoria Park *dakwah* groups became hugely popular. They offered a source of emotional comfort and community; they also became an opportunity for the women to use their leisure time productively. Participants typically went to the mosque or outdoor groups at noon after finishing off other errands such as sending remittances home. They started with noon prayers and continued with classes where members who could recite Qur'an well taught their friends. An *ustadz* would then give a lecture on a religious topic. The formal meeting ended with a late

11 IPAC separate interviews with DDHK General Manager and Yohanna Fatimah Angelia, Hong Kong, 6 and 12 May 2017. SPM's partner in this undertaking was Yohanna Fatimah Angelia, a former consulate staff member/entrepreneur who converted to Islam. Besides working at the consulate, Fatimah who had moved to Hong Kong in the 1980s, ran a successful business selling phone cards to the migrants.

12 IPAC interview with Ustadz Muhaimin, op. cit

13 IPAC interview with a founding member of Al-Fatah, Hong Kong, 5 May 2017. The four were Al-Hidayah, Al-Maunnah, Al-Masyithoh, and Majelis Dzikir Ilham. The latter split off from al-Fatah over a feud in the leadership in 2003. PDV was chaired by Imas Masruroh, the *qori'* and long-time member of Majelis Taklim, a *dakwah* group initiated by the Indonesian consulate in 1994.

14 IPAC interview with Roudlotul Qolbiyah founder, Hong Kong, 5 May 2017.

lunch or dinner together with food prepared at their employers' houses.

The informal session that followed lasted until the end of the maids' day off, sometimes as late as 9 p.m. The women would spend hours talking about everything from celebrity gossip to problems with their employers, husbands and families back home. Some members continued reciting Qur'an or reading books on their own, others might chat about the latest Muslim fashion, and still others would call their children or husbands and sometimes fight with them over the phone while other members listened and later provided advice. Older members became like mothers for the younger ones, providing a kind of surrogate family. This kind of *dakwah* in Victoria Park continues today.

### III. SALAFIS COME TO HONG KONG

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As the Muslim community in Hong Kong grew, it became more diverse, gradually coming to include ultra-conservative Salafis as well as Shi'a. The Salafis stepped up activities in 2006 in response to perceived threats to the faith from alleged "Christianisation" to the controversy over the publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Concern over these external threats led some Indonesians to open communication to hardline groups with which they had had minimal interaction before. Others became more concerned by what they saw as the rise of mysticism and superstition and reached out to the Salafis in search of a purer form of Islam.

The burgeoning community also led to the commercialisation of religion, with new opportunities to sell Muslim fashion, bring in celebrity *ustadz* and open Islamic healing clinics. Hardliners were as eager as moderates to exploit the growing market.

#### A. *Birrul Walidain and VOA-Islam*

In 2006, a group of Indonesian migrants concerned with the threat of Christianisation in Hong Kong established a street library on Sundays at Victoria Park called *Birrul Walidain*. It was named after the *Birrul Walidain* Foundation, an organisation founded by Insan Mokoginta, a Chinese Indonesian Muslim convert and self-declared "Christologist", or someone who studies Christianity from the perspective of Islam, though the term is only used by those who see Christians as a danger.<sup>15</sup> Insan became very active through books and public debates, trying to attract new converts by exposing flaws in Christian doctrine and scripture and proving the superiority of Islam. Some Indonesian migrants, having encountered Christian missionaries in Hong Kong, reached out to Insan, whom they knew of through his best-selling tracts.<sup>16</sup> Insan was a member of Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia (DDII), an organisation that has facilitated the spread of Salafist and Islamic Brotherhood political thoughts in Indonesia since the 1980s and is deeply anti-Christian.<sup>17</sup> His first visit to Hong Kong in 2008 paved the way for more regular visits from preachers associated with DDII of both Salafi and even Salafi jihadi persuasion.

15 "Kisah *Dakwah* di Bawah Langit Hong Kong," [hidayatullah.com](http://hidayatullah.com), 4 April 2010.

16 One of these was *Sekeluarga Itu Akhirnya Masuk Islam (Finally That Family Converted to Islam)*.

17 Martin V Bruinessen, "Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization" in Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (eds), *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, Palgrave Macmillan, (New York, 2014), pp. 61-85. DDII is not a purely Salafi organisation but there is a strong Salafi influence, especially through alumni of its scholarship program to the Middle East. Historically, DDII founder Mohammad Natsir had a close relationship to Abdullah Sungkar, founder of Jemaah Islamiyah. Today, as a mainstream mass organisation, DDII publicly rejects violent extremism, though it still makes common cause with hardliners and extremists on issues of common interest, particularly anti-Shi'a campaigns.

Imitating Insan's *dakwah* style, members of the Birrul Walidain library wrote about their encounters with Christian missionaries on their personal blogs and on popular Islamist websites such as hidayatullah.com and arrahmah.com or to Insan himself so he could add their stories to his books.<sup>18</sup> In early 2007, some Indonesians reportedly saw Christians handing out flyers containing an English translation of a passage from the Qur'an, which some evangelical Christians interpret as evidence that Islam acknowledges the Bible as the word of God.<sup>19</sup> There was never any evidence, however, that these missionaries had succeeded in systematically converting Muslim workers, though it is not uncommon today to find Indonesian and local Chinese Christian missionaries walking around Victoria Park and other public places where Indonesian workers spend their day off. They try to open conversations, hand out flyers or simply read the Bible aloud, and their presence has served to fuel hardliner warnings about the "Christianisation" threat.

These self-declared "anti-trinity" activists from Indonesia also raised concerns about shelters run by Christian NGOs. One of these, Christian Action, claims to have helped 200,000 domestic workers since 1993, most of them Filipinos and Indonesians.<sup>20</sup> Rumours have spread in the Indonesian community suggesting that those who stay at the shelter are seduced into converting through legal assistance, financial rewards and religious counselling, even though Indonesian rights activists who work with abused maids say their clients there are free to practice their own religion.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most vocal anti-Christian propagators in Hong Kong is an Indonesian woman who goes by the pen name Yulianna Perindu Syurga (Yulianna PS). Yulianna is a huge fan of Insan Mokaginta and several of her electronic messages to him were published in Insan's 2010 book titled *Questions and Answers (Islam-Christian) via SMS While in Prison* [Tanya Jawab (Islam-Kristen) Via SMS Selama di Penjara].<sup>22</sup> In 2009, Yulia started working as a freelance reporter for popular Salafi jihadi news sites, including Voice of Al-Islam (VOA-Islam) and Arrahmah.com.<sup>23</sup>

All of Yulianna's writings, including a poem for the imprisoned jihadi leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, suggest strong support for the application of shari'a and jihad as the only way to fight the injustice suffered by Muslims around the world, but at least until 2016, she was consistent with her choice of "jihad by the pen" rather than joining any jihadi group.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, she helped inspire jihadi media to conduct *dakwah* in Hong Kong. In October 2010, Birrul Walidain Hong Kong, with the support of a progressive Islamic labour rights group called Gabungan

18 Alexa web traffic analytics ranked hidayatullah.com's popularity at 1,212 nationally, which is higher than prominent moderate websites such as muslimmedianews.com (ranked 3,102) and Islami.co (ranked 9,117). Two outwardly jihadi websites are also popular: voa-islam.com (ranked 1,144) and arrahmah.com (ranked 2,117). These three Islamist sites (hidayatullah, voa-islam, and arrahmah) are in the top result of Google search result for "Islamic news" in Indonesian [*berita Islam*].

19 "Kristenisasi pada TKI di Hong Kong," timfakta.blogspot.co.id, September 2007. The passage in question is Surah Ali Imran, verse 3, which says: "He has sent down upon you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel."

20 "Serving Migrant Domestic Workers," christian-action.org.hk.

21 IPAC interview with Eni Lestari, head of ATKI, Hong Kong, 13 May 2017.

22 Insan spent six months in prison in 2009 for campaign misconduct: he was using his *pengajian* session at a mosque in his native province of North Sulawesi to campaign for the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). <http://www.portal-islam.id/2009/03/kristolog-pembela-islam-dipenjara-di.html>

23 She is also a published author of four fiction books, including a short story collection entitled *Hidayah Pelipur Cinta: Pengembaraan Seorang Ateis Menjadi Insan Mujahid* which, among other things, tells the story of a Chinese Muslim convert who went on to become a mujahid in Afghanistan. The book was published by Voa-Islam Publishing.

24 Yuliana PS, "Syair untuk Ustadz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir," thoifah-almanshuroh.blogspot.co.id, January 2013. "Jihad by the pen" was popularised in Hong Kong by an Islamic writers' club called Forum Lingkar Pena ("the pen circle forum"), which established a branch there in 2003. FLP was pioneered by *dakwah* activists affiliated with the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).



Migran Muslim Indonesia (Indonesian Muslim Migrant Alliance or GAMMI) whose members might not have fully understood the background of the main speakers, held a mass *pengajian* at Kowloon Mosque, featuring Insan Mokoginta and Mahfudz Dahlan, the founder of VOA-Islam and former member of jihadi group KOMPAK who had trained in Mindanao.<sup>25</sup>

This would be a tactic followed by many hardline groups: partner with an organisation with proven skills at mass mobilisation and then use public events with big-name speakers to draw in the Muslim mainstream. In Hong Kong, Salafi ideas began to catch on.

### B. *Al-Furqon and Serving Islam Team (SIT)*

The search of some migrants for a purer form of Islam was sparked by the appearance of dubious elements that attached themselves to the Hong Kong *dakwah* movement – clerics who ended up selling prayer beads with alleged special powers and other charms as a way to make money, “paranormals” who claimed to have mystic insights.

In 2007, Siti and Roati, two women disillusioned with what they saw as the corrupt practices in the Muslim community, contacted a teacher from Ma’had Al-Furqon, a lesser known Salafi *pesantren* in East Java but popular one on the Internet. They had previously subscribed to Al-Furqon digital radio and online magazines and finding the purity that they were looking for, formed a group of ten to twenty women that met in Kowloon Park every Sunday.<sup>26</sup> The teacher agreed to give a sermon by teleconference to their group, and he has been doing so every Sunday since, with only one visit to Hong Kong.

In the end, however, some Indonesians found long-distance teachers unsatisfactory and turned instead to international, Middle Eastern-linked groups, notably the Serving Islam Team (SIT). SIT has existed in Hong Kong since 2003, but Indonesians only began to take part in it around 2010 as they became more exposed to global Salafism, including through social media. SIT, however, is far more open than many Salafi organisations for two reasons: the unusual background of its founder and its goal of attracting converts by showing the tolerant face of Islam.

Founded by Wael Ibrahim, an Egyptian pop singer-turned-religious scholar, SIT’s stated objective is to clarify misconceptions about Islam through street *dakwah*, public debate with Christian priests and regular classes on Islam.<sup>27</sup> It is moderate in the sense that it is open to non-Muslims who want to learn about Islam or the Arabic language and it does not impose a strict dress code on its members; most of its female members do not wear the *niqab* (face veil), not even a long headscarf (*hijab*) that many Indonesian Muslim women favour. Wael believes that devotion should come from within, not be imposed from above. That said, he is less tolerant of Muslims who practice *bid’ah* or unwarranted religious innovation, which is part of the reason why he is not very popular with Indonesians from more traditionalist backgrounds.<sup>28</sup>

25 The labour rights group involved in this event was Gabungan Aksi Migran Muslim Indonesia or GAMMI, which started out as vehicle for mobilising Indonesian migrants to protest against the Danish cartoons in 2006. Like its sister organisation, ATKI, most GAMMI members are progressive and outspoken. They believe that women can be leaders in most walks of life which puts them at odds with salafi jihadism.

26 IPAC phone interview with Ustadz Anwar Ahmad of Al-Furqan, 4 May 2017.

27 See SIT profile on [www.servingislamteam.com](http://www.servingislamteam.com).

28 IPAC interview with a staff member of SIT, Hong Kong, May 2017. SIT’s office was originally located at Wan Chai Mosque, the same place where Ustadz Muhaimin ran his *halaqah* classes. But after a while, Wael and his students – many of them Middle Eastern and South Asian – filed a complaint to the mosque management about the Indonesians’ packing in too many people and practicing “unIslamic” rituals such as chanting (e.g. reciting *sholawat*, which is a common tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama). There was not much that the management could do though, so SIT eventually moved its office to another building not far from the mosque.

Wael's sympathetic approach to non-Muslims and non-practicing Muslims may have been influenced by his own background. He had been an ambitious musician whose only goal was to be a superstar when he fell in love with a Catholic Filipina and moved to Hong Kong to be with her in 2002. There he formed a new band that quickly became a success, but he wanted to compete with one of Hong Kong's biggest stars, Leslie Cheung. In April 2003, however, just as Wael was reaching out to Cheung's production company, Cheung committed suicide by jumping from the Mandarin Hotel. Wael was shocked and eventually abandoned music to search for something more meaningful. He and his wife, who converted to Islam, embarked on a spiritual journey together, attending lectures by famous Muslim speakers such as the hardline Ahmad Deedat, known for his public debates with evangelical Christians.<sup>29</sup> Wael decided to study Islam in Mecca and then took a bachelor's degree in Islam and comparative religion in Egypt.<sup>30</sup> He opened SIT in the hope that it would attract non-Muslims into Islam, just as Deedat did. SIT claims to have converted 100 people, mostly Filipino migrant workers, in 2015 and 2016.<sup>31</sup> Wael and his wife have a strong *dakwah* engagement not only with Filipina maids in Hong Kong but also with Filipino Muslims through their Philippines-based Connect Institute that runs Islamic seminars in Marawi and Iligan City in Mindanao and other parts of the country.

### C. IMSA: the Youtube-inspired Salafis

A new group emerged in late 2012 which tried to distinguish itself from the rest of the Indonesian workers by calling itself the Indonesian Muslim Student Association (IMSA). The people behind IMSA were migrant workers but they were also students at the Hong Kong campus of the Philippines-based St Mary's University, an institution established to help domestic workers pursue their studies.<sup>32</sup>

In late 2012, Fajar Kurniawan, head of the Indonesian program at St Mary's and formerly vice-dean of the As-Syafi'iyah Islamic University, Jakarta, together with some senior students, established IMSA in the hope that students would acquire not only worldly but also religious knowledge. Because Fajar himself was not qualified as an Islamic teacher, he let some of the senior Indonesian students teach the younger ones. While the founders of IMSA included both modernists and traditionalists, the association beginning in 2013 gradually shifted to a more Salafist approach as the older students left and younger ones took over. The latter saw existing religious study groups as superficial, more focused on having celebrity preachers rather than on probing the essence of Islam. As the former IMSA leader said:

I tried going to one of those majelis taklim at the park, but it was kind of useless. They were just chanting and mostly talking. And their favourite *ustadz*, he just jokes around,

29 Ahmad Deedat was a South African Islamic preacher and expert of comparative religion who was popular all over the Muslim world for his open debates with Christian preachers. In 1957, he co-founded Islamic Propagation Centre International and he received the King Faisal International Prize for service to Islam in 1986.

30 Note the degree was at American Open University, which is known for its flexibility in terms of distant learning and shorter period of study (compared to Al-Azhar) but with similar quality as most of its lecturers also teach at Al-Azhar University.

31 Interview with SIT member, Hong Kong, May 2017. It is, however, not entirely accurate to attribute the high rate of Muslim converts among Filipinos to SIT or other *dakwah* groups. Studies on Filipino workers' religiosity in Hong Kong show that in many cases, they convert in order to marry their Pakistani boyfriends. See Valerie C. Yap, "The religiosity of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong," *Asian Anthropology*, Vol. 14 No. 1 2015, pp. 91-102.

32 Anna Syukri, "Klarifikasi Saint Mary's University Atas Gugatan PMI," *kompasiana.com*, 2 November 2015. The Hong Kong branch of St Mary's was opened in 2005 to cater to the education needs of Filipino domestic workers. The Indonesian program was started in 2009 and had produced 544 graduates as of 2015.

sometimes inappropriately. We don't want that.<sup>33</sup>

Later in 2013, IMSA students decided to invite Felix Siau, a popular *ustadz* affiliated with Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, an organisation that aims to restore a global caliphate through non-violent means. It supports full application of Islamic law but it does not embrace the Salafis' theological exclusivism. IMSA members liked Felix because he was able to communicate the essence of shari'a to youth in their own language through popular books such as his *Udah Putusin Aja* (Just Break Up) that gives practical advice to youngsters on how to manage their feelings for the opposite sex while remaining observant of their religious obligations. Felix's public speaking style resembles that of a motivator, and as such is highly marketable in Hong Kong. IMSA sold 1,000 tickets for the event on December 2013 and has invited him four more times since.<sup>34</sup>

One Hong Kong-based *ustadz* described IMSA as a superficial, "social media-inspired" Salafi organisation, not yet an "ideological" one [*belum secara fikroh*].<sup>35</sup> Its members admire clerics who can cite many hadith and Qura'nic verses and explain them in a seemingly scholarly way. One of these was Khalid Bassalamah, an up-and-coming Saudi Arabian-educated Salafi *ustadz*, whom the IMSA students found on YouTube where he has posted some 600 lectures.<sup>36</sup>

In September 2014, IMSA held the first ever *pengajian* with Khalid Basalamah in Hong Kong. Through him, they were introduced to other Salafi *ustadz* such as Ustadz Adi Wahyudi who brought to Hong Kong his entire crew from Akhyar TV, one of the numerous Indonesian Salafi *dakwah* television channels.

#### D. Two Different Paths to Salafism

Two case studies show the different paths that Indonesians have taken to Salafism. Arief "Didi" Wahyudi came from a background of wealth and privilege, Yeni (not her real name) from a much poorer family.

Didi and his wife Medya were born to well-to-do families in Sumatra and raised inside the residential compound of a multinational oil company. They moved to Hong Kong in 2000 when Didi got a job at IBM as an IT specialist. Coming from a modernist Islam background, they had always been practicing Muslims but they were never really moved to learn more about their religion until 2009, when Didi moved to London. The family stayed behind in Hong Kong but made frequent visits, and their interaction with other Muslims in the London community became the beginning of what they called their "return to Islam".<sup>37</sup>

One day they attended a lecture by Nouman Ali Khan, a Pakistani-American preacher and founder of the US-based Al-Bayyinah Institute for Arabic and Quranic Studies and came away

33 IPAC interview with the former head of IMSA, Hong Kong, 7 May 2017.

34 "Hizbut Tahrir Bukan Wahabi", anis-khilafah.blogspot.co.id, 9 March 2010.

35 IPAC interview with an Dompot Dhuafa-affiliated *ustadz*, 6 May 2017.

36 Khalid has a solid social media team who runs a sophisticated website, Facebook fan page, and uploads hundreds of his videos on YouTube. He also distinguishes himself from other sunnah preachers with his specialty in *sirah nabawiyah* (the history of the prophet), which happens to be the favourite of IMSA members.

37 IPAC interview with Didi and Medya, Hong Kong, 13 May 2017. They said they were living in a Muslim neighbourhood that was unlike anything they had seen in Indonesia. Islam was not just a ritual but also an intellectual endeavour – with religious discussion groups at mosques – and a way of life that manifested in everyday acts of kindness and generosity even to strangers. This may have been a case of uprooted urban parents struggling to give a religious foundation to their children in a secular environment and finding particular solace in the community.

thoroughly inspired.<sup>38</sup> When they returned to Hong Kong in 2010, they found that Wael Ibrahim fit their new belief best – not least because he spoke English. Didi began teaching a weekly Islamic class at DDHK as part of his commitment to spread Salafi teachings; the then head of the DDHK office was also leaning towards Salafism.

As the 2014 presidential election in Indonesia drew near, Didi joined the presidential election committee at the Indonesian consulate. Fajar Kurniawan, the head of St Mary's Indonesian program, was also on the committee. Having heard about Didi's *dakwah* experience, Fajar offered him a position as adjunct lecturer of Islam at St Mary's, which Didi accepted. He also became the resident *ustadz* for IMSA, where he combined lessons on technology with religious instruction. Like his teachers, Didi emphasises a *bid'ah*-free yet compassionate Islam – although some of his former students at DDHK said that he was becoming more anti-Shi'a.

One of the most notable aspects of Salafi growth in Hong Kong is the prominent role of social media. Smartphones ensure that products, preachers and trends that become popular in Indonesia immediately find their way to Hong Kong. In the case of IMSA, an entire group came to adopt Salafism largely through the influence of YouTube *ustadz*. In fact, it was the students who introduced their teachers, Fajar and Didi, to Khalid Basalamah and the like, not the other way around.

A domestic worker in Hong Kong found Salafism through a very different path. Yeni (not her real name) came from a poor family in Blitar, East Java. In 2000, she got a job in Taiwan at a Christian elderly care home where she worked until 2011. During her stay there, she was forced to join a Bible study group, and toward the end of her contract, she was under intense pressure to be baptised. Yeni said: "I was not a very observant Muslim, I barely prayed, but still, my conscience shrieked at the thought of conversion [*hati nurani saya menjerit*]. It was simply unthinkable."

Confused and upset, Yeni, who had only learned to use the Internet in 2009, ran a Google search for the words "Muhammad" and "Jesus" because the Taiwanese priest in the Bible study group used to always tell her that Jesus was superior to Muhammad. The internet search took her to SIT's Facebook page. She left a message on it explaining her situation. Wael Ibrahim immediately replied and taught her how to rebut the priest's arguments. He also advised her to come to Hong Kong as soon as possible. The exchange gave her the courage and arguments to refuse baptism, and she left for Hong Kong shortly thereafter. There she learned to speak English fluently and Wael Ibrahim helped her find a Muslim employer who allowed her to work for SIT in her spare time.

#### IV. THE INDONESIAN SHI'A COMMUNITY

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Salafis were not the only group to find Hong Kong fertile ground for *dakwah*. The Shi'a came as well. The existence of an Indonesian Shi'a group in Hong Kong surfaced publicly in 2012, just as anti-Shi'a sentiment was rising in Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> Amy Utami, a migrant who worked as a freelance

38 Like Wael Ibrahim, Nouman also returned to his Islamic roots as an adult. He was raised in Saudi Arabia but his Islamic learning only started when he was living in the U.S. and his main teacher was a Pakistani Deobandi cleric, Dr Abdus Samie. Nouman's close relations to Deobandi and Sufi clerics put him at odds with the purist Salafis. According to his followers, Nouman adheres to Salafi tenets in terms of avoiding *bid'ah* such as praying for the dead, but he also calls for the breaking down of sectarian divisions and criticises the Salafi preoccupation with labelling other interpretations of Islam as deviant. For Salafis' criticism on the status Nouman Ali Khan, see "Salafi Scholar Dr. R. K. Noor Muhammad on Nouman Ali Khan", [thewayofsalafiyah.wordpress.com](http://thewayofsalafiyah.wordpress.com), 12 July 2015. For Khan's response, see "Salafis Getting Annoyed with Nouman Ali Khan," [www.muftisays.com](http://www.muftisays.com), 11 July 2015.

39 See IPAC, "The Anti-Shi'a Movement in Indonesia," Report No. 27, 27 April 2016.

journalist for *Iqra*, DDHK's monthly bulletin, brought it to public attention in an article titled "Shi'ite Sect Creates Anxiety for Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong" [*Aliran Syiah Meresahkan BMI Hong Kong*]. She described expanding Shi'ia influence and the importance of teaching migrants about Shi'a deviance.<sup>40</sup>

Shi'ism began to spread within the overwhelmingly Sunni community in 2006, when a small group of Indonesian workers, partly out of curiosity and the excitement of trying something new, contacted the Hong Kong Shia Asna-i-Ashri Association, a mostly Pakistani group.<sup>41</sup>

The first Indonesian contact with the association took place as the Danish cartoon controversy ignited anger across the Muslim world. On 6 February 2006, some 2,300 Muslims resident in Hong Kong came together at Charter Garden, Central District, to defend their religion and Prophet against what they felt deeply to be an insult in the name of freedom of expression.<sup>42</sup> The heightened sense of solidarity and equality across national and ideological lines led one group of Indonesian women to decide to find out more about Shi'ism. They went directly to the most authoritative source they could find: a Pakistani Shi'a *ustadz*, Syed Raza Shah, who offered to teach the "Indonesian sisters" every Sunday.<sup>43</sup> The language barrier did not stop him; Raza would speak in English and then one or two Indonesians fluent in English would translate for their friends.

Some in the group were doubtful and accused the Shi'a of being deviant at the beginning, but instead of directly responding, Raza quizzed them about the wives of the Prophet, of whom the women knew little. That became his entry point. The women were fascinated by the Shi'a concept of *ahlul bayt* (family of the Prophet) and were surprised to hear detailed stories of the lesser known wives not commonly taught in Sunni literature.<sup>44</sup> Once convinced, they were willing to delve deeper into Shi'a teaching. Raza says that over ten years, he has single-handedly facilitated the conversion of 200 Indonesians to Shi'ism.<sup>45</sup>

The Indonesian migrants reached out to Shi'a clerics from Indonesia, especially those affiliated with Ahlul Bait Indonesia (ABI), and every year during the Ashura commemoration – the holiest day in the Shi'a calendar – they would invite a well-known *ustadz* to Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> Everything went well until 2012 when Amy Utami wrote her article about Shi'a women trying to recruit Sunnis in Kowloon Park. Concern over Shi'a expansion increased when, in 2013, some Indonesian Sunnis felt they had been duped into attending Shi'a events at the invitation of Yohanna Fatimah Angelia, a former staff member at the Indonesian consulate, whom they had

40 Amy Utami, "Aliran Syiah Meresahkan BMI Hong Kong," [ddhongkong.org](http://ddhongkong.org), 3 December 2012.

41 IPAC interview with Raza Shah, Hong Kong, 13 May 2017.

42 "Hong Kong Muslims Protest against Danish Cartoons," [islam.org.hk](http://islam.org.hk), 2006.

43 IPAC interview with Raza Shah, op. cit.

44 Ahlul bayt is central to Shi'ism because Shi'a believe that only the prophet's blood descendants have the right to be his rightful heir, whereas Sunni accords such authority to four of the prophet's companions known as 'the rightly-guided caliphs'.

45 IPAC interview with Raza Shah, op. cit.

46 These included Ahmad Baragbah (*Pesantren* Al-Hadi Pekalongan), Ahmad Hidayat (the secretary general of ABI) and Muhammad bin Alwi (*Pesantren* YAPI). For more on these pesantrens see IPAC, "Anti-Shi'a Movement in Indonesia," op.cit.

trusted.<sup>47</sup>

Fatimah assisted the Shi'a group to advertise a series of four religious lectures by clerics who came all the way from Indonesia and in one case, from Iran (an Indonesian *ustadz* who lives there). She encouraged some traditionalist groups to attend -- without apparently informing them that the classes, held between September 2013 and January 2014, were Shi'a-led.<sup>48</sup> When they realised the differences in prayers and doctrines, some of the Sunnis were furious. It fuelled a sense among the hardliners that Sunni Islam was under threat.

## V. THE PHENOMENON OF EXTREMIST MAIDS

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It was the war in Syria that brought support for violent extremism to Hong Kong. Indonesian Muslims were interested in the conflict, and jihadi social media had some of the most detailed news. The reporting on Syria inspired anger toward Bashar al-Assad, depicted on these sites as a murderous Shi'a, and heartfelt sympathy toward Sunni Muslim victims. It prompted an anti-Shi'a campaign which became the beginning of jihadi activism for some women migrants and led to their deeper interaction with extremists on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram. The most important factor drawing them into pro-ISIS networks was not ideology but personal relationships developed mostly online to jihadis in Indonesia and abroad. Over time, Indonesian migrant women with their stable incomes, foreign language skills and international experience became sought-after partners of jihadi men. A few also became interested in a more active role, turning into financiers, liaison officers and eventually would-be suicide bombers.

Through social media, official reports and direct interviews, IPAC has identified at least 50 female radical workers in East Asia taking part in a variety of extremist discussion groups (the total number may be higher, but probably less than 100). There is no single pro-ISIS structure. Of these women, 43 have worked or are currently working in Hong Kong, three in Taiwan, and four in Singapore. As of June 2017, four women had joined ISIS in Syria; around sixteen had returned to Indonesia and mostly married jihadis; and eight were deported from their host countries or from Turkey while trying to cross over to Syria. Most of the Hong Kong women had first undergone a religious transformation through involvement in DDHK and SIT, though neither promotes extremist violence. None were ever interested in supporting attacks in their host countries; they rather wanted to support anti-Assad fight in Syria or pro-ISIS violence at home.

The stories of three women in one Hong Kong group -- Ayu, Ghalia, and Ummu Yasir [not real names] -- illustrate the dynamics involved. Each of the three brought a group of friends and came together in a discussion group shortly after ISIS declared a caliphate in 2014. Personal rivalries eventually destroyed the group with each of three competing to get recognition from

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47 IPAC interview with Yohanna Fatimah, op. cit. This incident, however, may have arisen in part from a misunderstanding. Having studied Islam since early 2000s, Fatimah officially converted in 2006 and performed the hajj in 2007. After returning from Mecca, she changed her appearance. She was often seen wearing a long black dress and hijab that resembled Shi'a women's attire. Some Shi'a members mistook that as a sign that she was already a sympathiser and therefore invited her to their class. As a new Muslim, Fatimah did not yet fully understand the depth of Sunni-Shi'a division and was happy to get involved in as many Islamic activities as possible. She never converted into Shi'ism and is in fact a loyal member of NU, because the very person who first inspired her to convert was an NU *kyai* (cleric) from Surabaya. She is also close to one of NU's national figures, As'ad Aly who gave her the instruction and support to establish an NU branch in Hong Kong in 2013. That said, there are some aspects of Shi'ism that she appreciates.

48 The participants were from traditionalist *majelis taklims* close to Fatimah's charity, Pondok Fatimah. Fatimah said she felt compelled to accept the Shi'a invitation because, as she put it, "I am like a mother to the Indonesian migrant workers here. As a mother, of course I support and protect all my children regardless of their school of thought [*aliran*]." IPAC interview with Yohanna Fatimah, op. cit.

ISIS figures in Indonesia and Syria, through providing funds and arranging emigration (*hijrah*) to Syria via Hong Kong for Indonesian jihadis. As of 2017, Ayu is still working in Hong Kong while Ummu Yasir and Ghalia were deported from Turkey and Hong Kong respectively as they were trying to get to Syria.

#### A. Ayu's International Network

Ayu was one of the earliest ISIS sympathisers in Hong Kong. Her radicalisation began with a spiritual rebirth following major personal turmoil. The radical community – online and offline – became her new home and a place where she felt accepted, empowered and fulfilled.

Ayu, born to a poor family in Banjarnegara, Central Java in 1982, had been a bright student at her elementary school. She had the chance to continue to secondary school on a government scholarship but chose to work in order to help her parents and younger siblings. In 2000 she began her journey as a migrant worker in Malaysia, where she met her first husband, a Malaysian of Arab descent. Due to problems with her in-laws, she decided to go back to Indonesia in mid-2002 and cut off all contact with her husband without telling him that she was pregnant. In 2003, just a few months after Ayu gave birth to a daughter, her mother lost her job at a local food factory. Ayu began contemplating working overseas again, thinking it was the only way for her family to survive. She left for Singapore in late 2003 to work as a domestic helper only to have her employer terminate her contract in less than a year. Instead of giving up, she applied for the same job in Hong Kong where she has been living ever since.<sup>49</sup>

Ayu's radicalisation was more of an on-and-off process than a linear one. In Hong Kong, life was much more difficult than she expected. She got fired by two different employers and was once stranded in Macau, living on the street while waiting for a new visa. Things got worse when, around 2007, her Malaysian husband discovered her whereabouts. He was very angry upon learning about their daughter and asked to meet her. Depressed by mounting pressures from her job, family, and ex-husband, Ayu found refuge in drugs and alcohol. She briefly turned to Islam, joining an online forum for Islamists campaigning against Christianisation in 2008 and even attending a lecture by Insan Mokoginta. But she lapsed back into drugs. Her employer was not happy and eventually fired her in 2010. She hit rock bottom then, but in 2011, she picked herself up, got a new job and gained "enlightenment" [*hidayah*] to return to Islam. By this time, however, she did not have many friends, so she turned to Facebook for guidance. From casual searches about Islam and the Muslim world, her attention quickly shifted to a topic she had followed since the Ambon-Poso conflicts in the early 2000s: Muslims in war zones. She was especially interested in Syria as the new jihadi battleground.

Ayu was absorbed in everything related to Syria; she kept up with the news by following jihadi accounts on Facebook, where she met her second husband, Abu, a jihadi from Bekasi.<sup>50</sup> They met in person and were married in 2013 while Ayu was on holiday in Indonesia. The marriage widened her network; she befriended other Indonesian jihadis via private chat groups on Telegram. She also posted her analysis of jihad in Syria, often with reference to screenshots of her chats with international jihadis there. All of this elevated her reputation in Indonesian jihadi circles as a committed and resourceful woman.

At the same time, she built up her offline network in Hong Kong. She met other supporters of the Syrian jihad initially via social media and then face to face. Some were her friends from SIT which she had briefly joined with two other women in late 2013 to deepen her religious

49 Ayu's story is based on interviews with SIT members who know her in Hong Kong as well as her own statements on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram between 2015 and 2016.

50 Abu was linked into several jihadi groups that met at the Islamic Centre Bekasi including those led by Syamsuddin Uba, a pro-ISIS cleric from Alor in East Nusa Tenggara province.

knowledge, even though she knew that salafis and jihadis disagreed over the use of violence.<sup>51</sup> They liked the international atmosphere at SIT and were happy to make new friends with Muslims from the Philippines, Africa and Europe. But on the first day of Ramadhan 2014, she got into an argument with Wael Ibrahim after he condemned the armed groups in Syria as un-Islamic and criticised her views on jihad in front of the whole class. Humiliated, she decided to leave SIT. That night, she heard from her online friends that Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate of ISIS and she pledged her loyalty immediately. SIT teachers subsequently reported her to the police.

From her brief involvement in SIT, Ayu also got to know a Filipina convert, Aisha [not her real name], who in 2014 via video call married Abu Saed Al-Britani, a British foreign fighter she had met on Facebook who has appeared in several ISIS propaganda videos.<sup>52</sup> She almost flew to Turkey to join him in late 2014 but was stopped at the Hong Kong airport and deported to the Philippines. Ayu kept in touch with Aisha and her husband, and it was through him that she got to know many jihadis in Syria and Turkey.

Given her international network, Indonesian jihadis often asked her about the safest route to Syria and some transited in Hong Kong with her assistance. Others sought financial help for purchase of tickets, seeing all migrant women in Hong Kong as wealthy. If Ayu could not raise the money herself, she would connect the Indonesians with her friends in Europe or with fellow migrants. A case in point is Ivan Armadi Hasugian alias Madi, a teenager who attempted a bombing and stabbing attack at a church in Medan, North Sumatra in August 2016. A year before the attack, Madi had planned to go to Syria. He contacted Ayu to ask for money and assistance with booking his ticket. Ayu introduced him to Abu Saad, an Indonesian worker at a Korean car factory who transferred US\$4,600 to Ayu to help any Indonesian who wanted to fight in Syria. Ayu arranged the ticket and visa for both men and a few other Indonesians. In the end, only Abu Saad made it to Syria, Madi never left because his passport was confiscated by his parents, and the others were deported while transiting in Hong Kong.

### B. *Ummu Yasir and Ghalia: Promoters of Online Marriage*

When pro-ISIS social media users in Indonesia started migrating from Facebook and Twitter to Telegram in early 2014, the Hong Kong-based women were among the first to switch over. Having met offline, Ayu, Ummu Yasir and Ghalia were added to a Telegram group called Info Manfaat (“Useful Information”) that was administered by an Indonesian jihadi whose online name was Syuhada Uhud. Through this group, they got to know some jihadi prisoners who were also members as well as other ISIS preachers, including Ustadz Jarwadi from Kalideres, West Jakarta. Jarwadi understood that the Hong Kong women were very eager to learn and help and were therefore an easy target for exploitation. He volunteered to give online lectures and consultation and eventually visited Hong Kong in mid-2014, fully funded by Ayu and her friends who by then had a weekly *pengajian* group. But he was not just there to teach – he also brought a proposal to open a foreign exchange business and asked for donations. Ghalia was keen to give him the money but Ayu preferred to deliver funds through the more established

51 Salafi and salafi jihadi have similar doctrines in terms of religious creed (*tawhid*) and the desire to return to the purest form Islam as practised in the Prophet’s era. Purist Salafis such as the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia pursue such goal by purifying Islam from superstition and other un-Islamic tradition and not through political means because politics only divert Muslims away from studying about religion. They also believe that rebellion against a legitimate ruler is prohibited in Islam. To the jihadis, it is impossible to restore Islam to its golden age without getting rid of the un-Islamic political system that prevails in the current world and replace it with an Islamic one; and that the only way to do it is through violent revolution. See International Crisis Group, “Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don’t Mix”, Report No. 83, 13 September 2004.

52 For more on Abu Saed Al-Britani, see “Omar Hussain”, [counterterrorism.com](http://counterterrorism.com).



jihadi charity organisation, Gerakan Sehari Seribu (Gashibu). Ghalia and Ayu also disagreed over the permissibility of online marriage, which Ghalia supported and indeed took part in, and Ayu rejected. Ayu went as far as contacting Aman Abdurrahman, Indonesia's most influential pro-ISIS cleric, to ask for a fatwa on the issue; an audio recording of Aman's stance against online marriage was circulated on Telegram. The quarrel led to a falling out between Ayu and Ghalia and their respective camps.

Ummu Yasir took Ghalia's side as she herself was married online to an Indonesian man, Abu Yasir, who left for Syria via Hong Kong in June 2015 and was killed a few months later, in September.<sup>53</sup> Abu Yasir came from Bandung and was a former student at Pesantren Ansharullah, a religious school in Ciamis, West Java run by one of the leading pro-ISIS figures in Indonesia, the late Fauzan al-Anshary who was affiliated with Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD). Like Ayu, Ummu Yasir also provided a transit assistance for would-be ISIS fighters from Indonesia.<sup>54</sup> She wanted to go herself but she did not have enough money so she took a loan from a Hong Kong bank and used it to go to Turkey in February 2016. It did not matter that her husband had died because she had already found a Turkish boyfriend online named Abdel Rahim who promised to meet her there. But she found herself stuck at an ISIS safe house in Istanbul for months as the Turkish government tightened its border patrols. In the meantime, she worked illegally at a bakery, a job that she found through Abdel Rahim. The shop was raided by Turkish police in January 2017 and Ummu Yasir was deported back to Indonesia.<sup>55</sup>

### C. *Wives and Would-be Bombers*

Indonesian women extremists working abroad are not simply the victims of unscrupulous men. Some have reached out to men only after they have become interested in the jihadi cause themselves.

Four radical maids who went to Syria are a case in point. Two, Najma and Shahida [not real names], went to Syria around March and November 2015 respectively to join their online husbands. They had been radicalised first. Shahida was a Salafi activist before she met her husband who was a student at the Ansharullah school in Ciamis.

Najma went with Ayu to SIT's classes in early 2014. Between 2013 and 2014, she was involved in Gabungan Migran Muslim Indonesia (GAMMI), the labour rights advocacy group that helped organise the Danish cartoon protest in 2006; she also participated in GAMMI's protests to improve conditions of Indonesian workers, particularly by pressing for maids to be allowed to live outside their employers' homes to avoid being overworked. Najma herself never reported any abuse. She was also active in an organisation called "Mujahidah of Islam" that promoted the wearing of *niqab* by giving them away free to Indonesian women. The group also circulated helped on Shi'a deviancy to Indonesian Muslim groups in and around the Kowloon mosque. She met her husband, Abu Arianto, through social media; he stopped in Hong Kong for a few days in August 2014 before going on to Syria. Najma left to join him not long afterwards.<sup>56</sup>

The other two maids, Devi and Ifa [not real names], went to Syria as single women. They were part of Ayu's group and appear to have experienced a rapid transformation from secular,

53 IPAC interview with Ummu Yasir, Indonesia, April 2017.

54 She particularly assisted those whose travel had been arranged by Engkos Koswara. Koswara worked in Indonesia for Katibah Masyaariq, an Indonesian ISIS combat unit in Syria led by the late Abu Jandal. He was arrested on 22 March 2015 in Bekasi and later sentenced to four years in prison for facilitating travel to ISIS. For more on Katibah Masyaariq and Abu Jandal, see IPAC, "Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," Report No. 13, 24 September 2014.

55 IPAC interview with Ummu Yasir, op. cit.

56 IPAC interview with the head of GAMMI, Hong Kong, 12 May 2017.

non-practicing to radical Muslims. They were largely motivated by the end-of-time prophecies propagated by ISIS that anyone who wanted to be saved on the day of judgment should go to Sham (the Qur'anic term for greater Syria). As with many other Indonesian women who went to Syria, they wanted to raise their family there so their sons and husbands could join the army of the Imam Mahdi (the Islamic messiah) at the end of time. In the case of Devi, the change from normal worker and fashion enthusiast took less than a year: she was particularly moved by photos of Syrian Muslim victims on Facebook. She discussed with her friends about whether ISIS was really a terrorist group or a champion of persecuted Sunnis. While searching for answers, she came across Ayu's Facebook page. Ayu invited her to the study group and Devi was immediately convinced. A few months after she pledged loyalty to al-Baghdadi, her employer terminated her contract. She used her severance pay to buy a ticket to Turkey. Both Devi and Ifa married foreign fighters in Syria.

Some radical maids have sought out prominent jihadis in Indonesia to marry. One example is Nur [not her real name], a former Indonesian domestic worker in Hong Kong, who became the second wife of Adi Jihadi, a jihadi of impeccable extremist lineage who had close ties to the Philippines.<sup>57</sup> Nur had long been active in DDHK before opening a club for the practice of Islamic medicine (*thibbun nabawi*) with a Salafi emphasis. She was concerned about the growth of Shi'ism in Hong Kong and saw that in Indonesia, Salafis were the most prominent anti-Shi'a campaigners, as evidenced by the establishment in April 2014 of the Salafi-dominated National Anti-Shi'a Coalition (ANNAS). Nur found an Indonesian partner, the Sunnah Defence League, that combined all of her interests – Islamic medicine, Salafism and anti-Shi'a advocacy. In February 2014, Nur invited the League's chair, Sahal Roja'i (or better known as Sahal Khan), to deliver a sermon and perform a mass exorcism (*ruqiyah*). She became active on Telegram in 2014 and appears to have met Adi Jihadi online there. She returned to Banten and married him in 2015.

Finally, some maids have volunteered for jihadi operations. One was Ika Puspitasari, the would-be suicide bomber arrested in December 2016. She was not part of Ayu's network but was linked to it in other ways. Not much is known about how she became radicalised or what study groups she joined in Hong Kong. She fits the pattern, however, of other radical maids in that she had experienced a life-changing religious transformation in Hong Kong. She also met her husband online when she was looking to fund fighters to conduct attacks. Ika volunteered for a bombing plot in Bali after her work visa expired and could no longer contribute to the so-called "financial jihad" (*jihad bil mal*, or support through financial contributions). Before they married in 2015, Ika's husband was e-dating (that is, engaging in an online romance) with one of Ayu's friends, also a member of SIT. That friend in late 2016 married an Indonesian member of a pro-ISIS group named Anggara Suprayogi.<sup>58</sup> He became one of the Indonesian fighters who joined the Maute group in Marawi, Mindanao in April 2017 and as of July was on the Philippine police's most wanted list.

## VI. COMMERCE IN THE SERVICE OF RELIGION: A POSSIBLE BRIDGE?

Businesses followed the migrants to Hong Kong like ants to honey and *dakwah* became an industry of its own, with mainstream, Salafi and eventually even jihadi groups seeing an opportunity for profit. While different streams competed with each other, some of the businesses also acted as

<sup>57</sup> Adi Jihadi is the younger brother of Iwan Darmawan alias Rois, the field coordinator of the 2004 Australian embassy bombing. The family has long been part of the Darul Islam network in Banten and West Java. Adi was arrested in March 2017 for purchasing arms and training in Basilan, Mindanao with Isnilon Hapilon, so-called amir of ISIS in the Philippines.

<sup>58</sup> "Gagal di Poso Pindah ke Marawi," *Tempo*, 5 June 2017.

a bridge, raising the question as to whether commerce and the private sector can play a role in countering radicalisation.

Three kinds of businesses have flourished in Hong Kong. One is the sponsoring of big-name clerics; groups have made profits of up to HK\$40,000 selling tickets to pengajians and public lectures where popular speakers were featured. A second is Muslim fashion and a third is “medicine of the Prophet” (*thibbun nabawi*), in clinics that offer herbal treatments, cupping and sometimes exorcism.

On Sunday mornings, Causeway Bay is always packed with Indonesians, but The Point Plaza is particularly crowded with women looking to buy Muslim clothes. There are several shops in the mall run by (though not formally owned by) Indonesian migrant women selling high-end Muslim fashion brands, while the cheaper clothes are sold via online shops that are also operated by migrants.<sup>59</sup> A casual stroll around the Causeway Bay area shows the rising popularity of one fashion item: long headscarves that drape below the waist (known as *hijab syar'i*).

These headscarves are the new Muslim fashion trend both in Indonesia and in Hong Kong. The *hijab syar'i* movement first emerged in 2013 as a response to the ‘cool hijab’ (*hijab gaul*) or hijabi hipster (hijabster) trend popularised by Muslim fashion designer Dian Wahyu Utami, better known as Dian Pelangi, since 2010. Dian founded a series of clubs, collectively known as Hijabers Community, that encouraged more young girls to wear Muslim clothing by designing stylish headscarves. Conservatives have criticised the scarves as being too colourful and too short to qualify as Islamic clothing. Both *hijab syar'i* and *hijab gaul* have their own market segments in Hong Kong; those newly interested in Islam usually wear *hijab gaul* and progress to *hijab syar'i* over time. Some people alternate between the two on different occasion: *hijab gaul* for everyday style and *hijab syar'i* for *pengajian* or going to the mosque.

It used to be the case that Islamists and Salafis wore longer headscarves than mainstream Muslims, but Muslim fashion trends have blurred the distinction. Most women participants in Muslim study groups in Hong Kong wear uniforms that consist of a loose long dress and a long *hijab* that covers two-thirds of the body on top of the dress. Face veiling is no longer exclusively a Salafi practice; more and more traditionalists and modernists alike wear the *niqab*, as it has become the most obvious way to express personal piety. The long headscarf and the face veil have been increasingly stripped of their ideological meaning to represent a more universal symbol of women’s piety. With customers from across the religious spectrum, shop owners have the potential to play an informal role in steering women away from extremist teachings by engaging them in discussion and pointing them towards more mainstream clerics.

A second *dakwah* business that cuts across various Muslim groups is Islamic homeopathic medicine, better known as *thibbun nabawi*. This includes herbal medicine products such as *habbataussauda'* (black caraway seed that according to Islamic tradition cures everything but death) and honey, as well as traditional healing methods such as blood cupping (*hijamah* or *bekam*) and *ruqiyah* or exorcism of evil spirits (*jin*) that cause physical and mental illness. Traditionalist clerics have long practiced this kind of healing, often claiming supernatural powers. Beginning in the early 2000s, however, it began to be widely promoted as *thibbun nabawi* and now Islamists, Salafis and other more radical groups actively promote their own brands and clinics.<sup>60</sup> The demand for Islamic healing grew in Indonesia because it was much more affordable than hospital care and was believed to be safer, purer and less reliant on Western

59 It is actually illegal for migrant workers to own businesses, so they partner up with locals (Indonesian permanent residents or other citizens) as the registered owners. But online shops and street vendors pretending to be taking part in picnics in the park are very common and rarely get caught.

60 Muhammad Arwan Rosyadi, “Sehat Ala Nabi: Konstruksi Sosial Thibbun Nabawi pada Komunitas Herbal Penawar Al-Wahida Indonesia (HPAI) di Yogyakarta dan Magelang,” unpublished thesis, Universitas Gajah Mada, Yogyakarta, 2016.

ingredients than modern medicine.<sup>61</sup>

The first organisation to promote *thibbun nabawi* in Hong Kong was Institut Thibbun Nabawi (ITN), founded in December 2011.<sup>62</sup> ITN grew into a successful business with hundreds of students taking its course in healing every year, in part because it claimed that the certificate given on completion could be used to open a clinic in Indonesia.<sup>63</sup> ITN's director is Ustadz Sarwo Edy alias Abu Syadza of Institut Latihan Herba Al Wahida (INTIBAH), Solo, Central Java. The course has become so popular that Abu Syadza has to fly to Hong Kong every other month to teach. While Abu Syadza himself is not a radical, some traditionalist Muslims are wary of the course, because *thibbun nabawi* is often associated with hardliners.

The Indonesian government and civil society need to give more thought to how these businesses might be able to help in identifying and countering radicalisation among migrants. One way might be to enlist existing associations of business owners, such as *hijab syar'i* and *niqab* sellers club, that meet regularly, both offline and via WhatsApp. Some of the most successful shops are owned by leaders of religious discussion groups (probably because they already have loyal students) who have a solid grounding in religious knowledge but at the same time are also able to attract a diverse range of customers because of the range of styles they sell and their friendliness to customers of all backgrounds. Women already involved in radical groups or tempted to join them might be drawn into other networks through business clubs. Involvement in the retail clothing business in particular might bring women into regular contact with mainstream Islamic groups that they would otherwise avoid and label as infidel.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

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The community of radical maids is small and needs to stay that way. Several measures could help.

The first and most important is to incorporate information about the risk of exploitation – including by jihadis – in pre-departure training program for Indonesian overseas workers. This should be part of a broader change in the training and recruitment system, which the government has turned over to private employment agencies (PJTKI). The government through the Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, BNP2TKI) needs to ensure that migrants receive not only proper skill training but also sufficient information about their rights and risks of exploitation, including from online boyfriends and so-called *ustadz* who take advantage of migrants' religious zeal and emotional needs. These *ustadz* sell everything from charms and Ponzi schemes to the hope of salvation at the end of time, especially since the Syrian conflict erupted. All of this could be minimised through better training and information.

The Hong Kong government, the Indonesian consulate and mainstream ulama need to work together to ensure that extremist clerics who promote hatred and violence are not given an opportunity to preach. The consulate maintains that because preachers are invited by private groups, often without informing its staff, it is nearly impossible to monitor them. The mainstream *dakwah* groups, however, might hear of planned visits far enough in advance to alert authorities.

61 Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia," in Greg Fealy and Sally White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ISEAS Publishing, (Singapore, 2008), pp. 15-39.

62 This was part of the Rumah Cahayaqu Foundation, a training centre that offers three highly popular courses: tahfidz and tahsin Qur'an, Institut Thibbun Nabawi (ITN HK), and more recently early childhood education training. Rumah Cahayaqu also published a monthly magazine, Cahayaqu, which at one point had 5000 readers.

63 IPAC interview with Susie Utomo, ITN founder, Madiun, 30 April 2017.

Indonesian *dakwah* groups can also play a preventive role. Members may be the first to know if a friend is getting drawn into extremist group. They need a secure and confidential reporting channel to the consulate, and the consulate needs a trained counsellor it can turn to for help. In Najma's case, she confided with her friend at GAMMI about her plan to go to Syria, but the friend did not know who to turn to or how to persuade her to change her mind.

This suggests that another urgent need is for training leaders and teachers of *dakwah* groups in methods and arguments to draw members away from extremist influence. Ayu's abrupt exit from SIT is an important lesson in what *not* to do: public humiliation clearly failed. One-on-one counselling is likely to be far more effective.

Several *dakwah* groups have come under surveillance, sometimes simply because some of the women wear the *niqab*. Security measures should not be implemented at the expense of freedom of religion and association. Many *dakwah* activists appreciate the freedom they have in Hong Kong to pray and dress as they please and are more than willing to cooperate with the government in the interests of protecting that space. One Salafi group, worried that they might be under suspicion because some of its members wore the *niqab*, even began inviting police to their major events to allay any concerns.

In the end, the best partner for the Indonesian and Hong Kong governments in preventing radicalisation of migrant workers is the broader Muslim community itself.

## INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

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In areas wracked by violence, accurate analysis of conflict is essential not only to peaceful settlement but also to formulating effective policies on everything from good governance to poverty alleviation. We look at six kinds of conflict: communal, land and resource, electoral, vigilante, extremist and insurgent, understanding that one dispute can take several forms or progress from one form to another. We send experienced analysts with long-established contacts in the area to the site to meet with all parties, review primary written documentation where available, check secondary sources and produce in-depth reports, with policy recommendations or examples of best practices where appropriate.

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