

LEARNING FROM EXTREMISTS IN WEST SUMATRA

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I. INTRODUCTION

A study of extremists in West Sumatra shows how a decade of exposure to radical preachers turned neighborhood study groups into pro-ISIS cells, with members in Syria and Afghanistan. It suggests that locally tailored interventions remain the best basis of effective prevention strategies, based on knowledge of how leaders emerged, how new members were drawn in, why leadership splinters took place and how departures to Syria changed group dynamics.

The West Sumatran cells described in this report both emerged from the same hardline but non-violent mass organisation, the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, MMI) but their paths then diverged. One ended up linked to Islamic State's "Khorasan Province" in Afghanistan, the other, for a brief period, to non-ISIS militias in Idlib, Syria, before throwing its lot in with ISIS.

Both networks took advantage of the West Sumatran tradition of *merantau*, out-migration to gain experience and prestige. It gave them an extended support network in and around Jakarta, additional funding sources, and ability to respond to arrests. It also meant there was constant feedback about new ideological and organisational developments in the capital, not just via social media but by visits in person from members returning to see relatives or celebrate holidays. Through these Jakarta-based friends, the groups were introduced to some of the highest-profile preachers in the extremist community.

Excitement about the caliphate strengthened the commitment to a radical ideology but also created new fissures that alert officials might have been able to exploit. There were many points along the way where community-based intervention, particularly in local mosque administration, might have worked to steer individuals away from ISIS discussion groups. Both networks were eventually broken up by police, but every wave of arrests turned the remaining members into fugitives. Their dispersal in turn created new cells as the fugitives made alliances in the places where they sought refuge.

Both groups illustrate the consequences of failing to monitor and reintegrate deportees sent home from Turkey. Deportees, both men and women, had a chance to meet, plan and exchange contacts while waiting at ISIS-run safehouses in Turkey and in a shelter run by the Ministry of Social Affairs after they returned. The Padang network made its international connections through deportees. Allocating more resources to rehabilitation and reintegration of both deportees and released prisoners and their families remains very much needed but only if the funds are programmed by officials with detailed knowledge of the individuals concerned.

II. A WORD ON PRO-ISIS GROUPS IN SUMATRA

West Sumatra has never been a hotbed of Islamist terrorism, but it has a strong tradition of advocacy of Islamic law going back to the 19th century Padri Wars when local clerics returning from Mecca and inspired by Wahhabism challenged the local aristocracy and plunged the region into war. Members of the dominant Minangkabau ethnic group have periodically surfaced in violent Islamist groups but never in large numbers, and West Sumatra has been largely free of serious terrorist actions. In late 1976, a militant wing of Darul Islam calling itself Komando Jihad bombed a Christian hospital in Bukittinggi and lobbed a grenade at a mosque in Padang during a government-sponsored Qur'an reading competition. A plot in 2008 to detonate a suicide bomb at a cafe in Bukittinggi frequented by foreigners collapsed when the bomber had second thoughts.

At the same time, shari'a advocacy in West Sumatra was much in evidence after 1998, and by the mid-2000s, groups like MMI and Forum Umat Islam had established active branches. Since

2014, police have routinely referred to Sumatran ISIS supporters as members of Jamaah Anshorul Daulah (JAD), but the term means different things to different people in different areas.

The initials “JAD” can refer to a specific structure that was formally established in November 2015 at a meeting in Batu, Malang, East Java, with Aman Abdurrahman as the key behind-the-scenes instigator. Between 2015 and 2017, JAD was a single, hierarchical organization, headed by an amir who oversaw branches at the provincial, district and subdistrict level in eight provinces of Indonesia. Lampung was the only province in Sumatra to have a fully functioning JAD branch. South Sumatra JAD supporters were considered an extension of Lampung, and West Sumatra had “preparatory” branches in Padang and Bukittinggi which were never fully incorporated.

There was also one group in Medan led by a former prisoner named Jhon Hen whose members so badly wanted to be part of JAD that in 2017 they began calling themselves JAD-Medan, even though they were rejected by the real JAD organization because the latter’s leaders had no idea who they were.

By 2018, the national JAD structure, which was always more fluid than its leaders were willing to admit, had been decimated by arrests. The branches and sub-branches of what had once been part of a loosely coordinated organisation were mostly acting as autonomous cells. With a few exceptions, they took their own decisions, found their own funding, and answered only to a local leader, and even then were subject to internal splits and fissures as personal rivalries came to the fore.

In addition to JAD, other pro-ISIS networks and cells emerged in Sumatra. Some were unaffiliated to existing organisations but used a number of generic terms to describe themselves, one of which was *jamaah anshorud daulah* – literally supporters of Islamic state. No reference to the JAD organisation was intended.

Other groups emerged from factions of the old insurgency Darul Islam.¹ One independent cell in Pekanbaru, Riau, plotted attacks with the express hope of outdoing JAD and getting recognition from ISIS central for its superior fighting skills. Other groups emerged from a recruitment drive that the Solo-based group of Abu Husna (originally called Qatibul Iman, later Jamaah Ansarul Khilafah, JAK) conducted in Sumatra beginning around late 2014.

Another pro-ISIS group with members in Sumatra came to play an important role in Syria. Long before the Syrian conflict began, a cult-like group called Firqah Abu Hamzah (FAH) had been operating in Java and Sumatra.² Led by a preacher from a Jakarta suburb named Agus Supriadi alias Abu Hamzah, it considered all Muslims outside the group to be infidels and forbade members from attending prayers other than those led by FAH imams and or marrying outside the group. FAH members believed they would be the vanguard for establishing a community where Islamic law would be applied in full. After the caliphate was announced, Abu Hamzah went to Syria to see the new state for himself. He sent back messages to members that this indeed was the caliphate of the Prophet foretold in Islamic prophecies and they should come and join him. Many did, including families from Riau, Jambi, South Sumatra, North Sumatra, Lampung and West Sumatra.

In Indonesia, many activist Muslims saw FAH as being so exclusive that its devotion to Abu Hamzah bordered on idolatry. But in Syria, the exigencies of the war led to alliances that would have been shunned under other circumstances. Thus Abu Hamzah gave his daughter in marriage to BahrumSyah, Indonesian ISIS leader and founder of Khatibah Nusantara, later killed in

1 For how Darul Islam became the progenitor of subsequent extremist groups in Indonesia, see Solahudin, *The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia: From Darul Islam to Jemah Islamiyah*, Cornell University and ISEAS, 2013,

2 For more background on FAH, see IPAC, “Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence”, Report No.25, 1 February 2016.

2019, and in 2016-2017, a West Sumatran FAH member named Feri Rolis ended up running the safehouse in Turkey that JAD men had helped set up with ISIS central funding.

The attacks in 2019 that either took place in Sumatra or were perpetrated by Sumatrans represent a wide variety of institutional arrangements.

- The 13 March Sibolga bombing represented an informal one-time alliance between an ex-Darul Islam man and his wife in Sibolga, North Sumatra and a Facebook group administered from Lampung whose members came from all over Indonesia.³ Neither had any formal ties to JAD, and indeed there was never any formal JAD structure in North Sumatra.
- The 18 July arrest of Novendri, a Padang man, exposed a group in West Sumatra that had broken away from the existing JAD cell and declared itself to be the “real” JAD-West Sumatra.
- The 10 October stabbing of Security Coordinating Minister Wiranto was carried out by a self-radicalised Medan man who had tried to affiliate himself with a non-JAD group in Bekasi called Pembela Tauhid (PETA).
- The 13 November suicide bombing at a Medan police station involved a radical couple who had reportedly sworn allegiance to al-Baghdadi but had no formal ties to the JAD organization.

To brand them all as JAD is to obscure important distinctions. It thus becomes important to look at case studies in an effort to understand how groups evolve in response to internal dynamics and external developments.

III. THE AL-JIHAD MOSQUE IN BUKITTINGGI, WEST SUMATRA

Both the Bukittinggi and Padang networks emerged from local chapters of Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), the pro-shari’ah organisation founded in 2000 and led by radical cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir.⁴ The West Sumatra branch of MMI was only established in 2005, following the devastating December 2004 tsunami in Aceh.⁵ MMI was one of many Muslim groups that organised teams of volunteers to provide humanitarian aid and recruit at the same time. Many of the West Sumatran members, later to surface as ISIS supporters, joined MMI between 2006 and 2008. In retrospect, this was probably the high point of MMI popularity, before leadership

3 The Sibolga bombing involved a man named Abu Hamzah constructing a large number of powerful bombs out of low explosive materials. He was arrested before his group could undertake any attack, but his wife barricaded herself in their house and when the police came to arrest her, she detonated the bombs, killing herself and at least one child and flattening their neighbourhood. Miraculously, no one outside the house was killed.

4 For background on the personalities and political manifestos of the founders of MMI, see *Risalah Kongres Mujahidin I dan Penegakan Syaria’ah Islam* (Wihdah Press, Yogyakarta) 2000.

5 The branch was opened in Payakumbuh by prominent local clerics including Jel Fathullah, Kamrianto and Zulkifli M. Ali. Zulkifli was known for his end-of-time scholarship. After al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic State, Zulkifli convinced many of his followers that the ISIS leader would move to Madinah where he would take a new oath and become the Imam Mahdi (the Islamic messiah).

disputes and corruption allegations tarnished its image.⁶

The MMI structure linked branches across Sumatra, so there was frequent intermixing at meetings particularly among members in the Sumatran cities of Bukittinggi, Padang and Payakumbuh. Two men who ran into each other frequently become important players later in this story. They are May Yusral, a member of the Bukittinggi branch who was also the commander of Laskar MMI, the unarmed security unit that aspired to be MMI's militia, and Novendri, secretary of MMI Padang.

The Syrian conflict broke out at a time when MMI had lost ground nationwide as well as in Sumatra, and new, more dynamic movements were coming to the fore. MMI, however, had provided a solid model for Islamist advocacy – clear goals, inspiring speakers, a territorial structure, regular activities to keep members engaged, fund-raising efforts in the name of humanitarian relief, and a sense of being involved in a broader struggle to defend the faith. Pro-ISIS groups were able to build on the groundwork that MMI had laid.

A. *The Original Group and the Importance of Jakarta Links*

The Bukittinggi network emerged first. Beginning around 2012, a group of former MMI members who met regularly at the al-Jihad Mosque began to become more interested in the war in Syria. The group did not have a fixed membership but included several men who had known each other since childhood and who had attended the same state schools in the 1990s.⁷ Others were traders who sold goods at the nearby market and who shared information on prices and the best place to set up a stall. Their discussion group was thus as much a social gathering as a religious group, a place to meet after work and chat about the latest news.

It also had members in Jakarta. Minangkabau men have a tradition of leaving home to look for work in the wider world, and Indonesia's capital has always been a magnet. In 2006, one of the original members of the al-Jihad MMI group, Amril Nurman alias Mbot, moved to south Jakarta and began selling cloth in Tanah Abang, the biggest cloth market in Southeast Asia. He married a local woman and started attending a *pengajian* at a Tanah Abang mosque led by a fiery preacher – and former MMI member – named Halawi Makmun. Halawi, who died in 2014, was then one of the most radical clerics in Indonesia. He called for the excommunication of Muslims who did not share his views (literally to declare them non-believers or *kafir*, hence this extremist stance is known as *takfiri*). He also called for any Muslim who supported democracy to be declared an apostate.

A second member of the Bukittinggi group, Roby Risa Putra moved to Jakarta a few months after Amril and joined the same radical discussion circle. They arrived in the capital at a critical time, when local and international developments were converging to produce ideological upheaval in the Indonesian Islamist community, and a preacher named Aman Abdurrahman was

6 MMI's goals from the beginning were political, not military – to apply Islamic law by working through existing political institutions, not through rebellion or acts of terrorism. At the same time, it had a military wing that both provided security for MMI activities and held occasional clandestine training sessions that aimed at preparing members for future battle. MMI's claim to support a purely non-violent approach was undermined by the selection of Ba'asyir, then still serving as the amir of Jemaah Islamiyah, as overall commander. Ba'asyir left MMI in 2008 after a leadership dispute with another founder, Fihiruddin Muqti alias Abu Jibril, and founded a new organisation, Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT). But damage to MMI's status was already done. In West Sumatra, several important leaders including Zulkifli M. Ali, decided to break with MMI by 2010, criticising Abu Jibril for various shortcomings, including nepotism.

7 They included Aprimul Hendri, Roby Risa Putri and Amril alias Mbot. Aprimul was born in Kec.Luhul Nan Duo, Pasaman Barat, West Sumatra around 1974 and attended public schools in Bukittinggi through high school. He was arrested on 15 March 2015, sentenced to three years on charges of financing the travel to Syria of five individuals and released after fully completing his sentence in March 2018.

attracting thousands of followers through his writings and translations.⁸ Amril and Roby moved around from mosque to mosque, listening to lectures by Halawi, Aman, and Aman's protégés.

The lessons they absorbed filtered back to Bukittinggi. Every year at Lebaran (Idul Fitri), the end of the fasting month, the friends would return to Sumatra to be with their families. They would then gather with their old friends in the Bukittinggi mosque. Social media had already become an important means of staying in touch, but these annual meetings at Lebaran were critical for renewing friendships, trading information, discussing new developments and sharing the teachings of the Jakarta clerics. The reunions reinforced the original group while introducing new militant elements.

In 2011, some time before Lebaran, another member of the original group, Aprimul Hendri, left for Jakarta to buy supplies for his cloth trading business. He contacted Amril, his old high school classmate, and met to discuss the need for an imam to lead the forthcoming Idul Fitri prayers at the al-Jihad mosque. Amril suggested Halawi Makmun. Together they arranged the funds to bring him to Bukittinggi, thereby guaranteeing that he would spread his message to a much broader audience. Halawi spoke on a favourite *takfiri* theme: the ten actions that should lead to the ex-communication of Muslims.⁹

By mid-2012, Amril and Roby were deep into the circle of Aman Abdurrahman's followers in and around Jakarta who were closely following developments in Syria. Leaders included M. Fachry, Siswanto and Bahrumsyah, all early supporters of ISIS.¹⁰ In August 2012, Amril arranged for Siswanto to be the Idul Fitri preacher in Bukittinggi. In early 2013, Bahrumsyah came to the al-Jihad mosque to speak about the importance of jihad and martyrdom, the reasons why democracy was a form of idolatry, the role that Syria would play in the battle at the end of time, and the vision of a new Islamic state.¹¹ These speakers attracted a new generation to the al-Jihad *pengajian*, men like Zaki, then aged 22, who had studied at a JI-affiliated school in Solo, then returned to Bukittinggi. Yahya alias Haidar, another new member, was a student at a da'wah academy near the mosque. Like Zaki, he was twenty years younger than men like Aprimul.

B. *The Influence of Harizal and his al-Qaeda Ties*

In 2013 excitement about the jihad in Syria mounted in Bukittinggi. Several groups from Jakarta, including groups close to Jemaah Islamiyah such as Syam Organiser and Hilal Ahmar Indonesia (HASI), organized public meetings (*tabligh akbar*) to discuss Syria and raise funds to help the Sunni victims. As a result of these events, several activists from West Sumatra joined humanitarian delegations to Syria but to non-ISIS militias. By 2013, as Iraqi-led ISIS forces consolidated their presence in Syria and differences with local Syrian militias, including the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front, intensified, Indonesians who thought they were joining ISIS found themselves in non-ISIS camps.

8 Between 2007 and 2010, Jemaah Islamiyah moved away from violence as its top leadership was arrested following a clash in Poso; Abu Bakar Ba'asyir left MMI and set up Jamaah Asharut Tauhid (JAT) in 2008; a Malaysian ex-JI member led the bombing of two luxury hotels in Jakarta in 2009; an alliance of extremist groups built what they hoped would be a regional training camp in Aceh in 2010; and a radical editor named M. Fachry, inspired by an international group called al-Muhajiroun, founded an influential website, al-mustaqbal.net, that became a key disseminator of ISIS propaganda. See IPAC, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," Report No.13, 24 September 2014.

9 There are variations on how these ten are interpreted but they include 1. Idolatry; 2. Apostasy; 3. Refusing to treat a kafir – including Jews, Christians, idolaters and atheists among others – as such; 4. Following a path other than that laid out by the Prophet and believing that any form of law is preferable to God's law; 5. Hating anything brought by the Prophet; 6) blaspheming Allah, his prophets, the Qu'ran, Islam, or ulama; 7) believing in magic, such as *santet*; 8) assisting kafirs to make war on Muslims; 9) believing that any human being can be exempt from following Islamic law and 10) turning away from the religion of Allah. See "10 Pembatal Keimanan dan Rekayasa Perusakan Iman," www.nahimunkar.org, 22 August 2016 (posted at the height of the anti-Ahok campaign).

10 IPAC, "Evolution of ISIS", op.cit.

11 Trial dossier of Yahya alias Haidar, East Jakarta District Court, December 2016.

This happened to the al-Jihad group in Bukittinggi. Members had become increasingly radicalised through the visits of extremists like Fachry and Bahrumsyah, and they were eager to go to Syria to fight, but they were not closely following the ins and outs of intra-jihadist rivalries. Around March 2013, a man with strong al-Qaeda links named Muhammad Harizal alias Ari alias Abu Hudzaifah joined the al-Jihad discussion group. He was originally from North Bengkulu and had become radicalised during his university studies in Bandung, where he joined a group at As-Sunnah mosque in Cibiru that had longstanding links to extremist groups.¹² In 2007, Harizal's name appears on a list of regular visitors to Aman Abdurrahman at Sukamiskin Prison, Bandung.¹³ He returned to live in Lubuk Pasang, not far from Bukittinggi, and shortly afterwards joined al-Jihad. In August 2013, at one of the al-Jihad meetings during Ramadan, Harizal told some of the others that he was planning to go to Syria to fight. He left Indonesia in November 2013 and on arrival joined the al-Nusra Front.

In March 2014, several of the Bukittinggi members including Roby Risa Putra, Amril and Aprimul, took part in the first-ever pro-ISIS demonstration in Jakarta, organised by M. Fachry and Bahrumsyah around the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle. But their main contact in Syria was still Harizal, and he was still with al-Nusra. Via messages over WhatsApp, Harizal persuaded Zaki, one of the younger members of the al-Jihad group, to join him. Zaki told his parents he was going to study in Jordan, and shortly after the Hotel Indonesia demonstration, he left, together with Amril and Amril's wife and child. All crossed successfully into Syria, but Amril and his family joined ISIS (with Amril rising to a senior position within Khatibah Nusantara) while Zaki joined Harizal in Idlib. In May Yusral, the former Laskar MMI commander, left around the same time through contacts with the Syrian Medical Mission (Misi Medis Suriah, MMS), a Salafi group that briefly joined forces with the JI-linked humanitarian delegations.¹⁴ He also joined al-Nusra.

In May 2014, three more members of the al-Jihad *pengajian* – Rohim (Abdurrahim), Yahya and Hakim – joined them in Idlib, facilitated by Harizal. Aprimul, the former MMI member, helped finance their travel. (Almost a year later, after police had arrested Aprimul, they asked him why he had helped raise the money for their tickets. "Because they were my friends," he responded.)

Yusral returned to Indonesia after only a few months in Syria, confused by the conflict between al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria and unsure which to support. After many discussions with his old friend Novendri, he decided to support ISIS, in part because ISIS was bearing the brunt of attacks from the U.S.-led coalition. He then joined Novendri's group in Padang.

Yahya, meanwhile, returned disillusioned. He said Harizal had met them in Idlib and had taken them to the al-Nusra headquarters where they stayed for a week. They were asked which militia in Idlib they would like to join, al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham. They initially chose the latter, hoping they would get into combat more quickly. After several months, Yahya moved to al-Nusra and took part in several battles.¹⁵ He preferred being with Arabs to being with Indonesians, hoping he would become more fluent in Arabic, but after living in Idlib for over a year and getting more and more disappointed with what he saw, he decided to return to Indonesia.

In December 2016, he got out to Turkey through a people smuggler and bought a ticket to

12 The brother of the founder of as-Sunnah, a retired general named Herman Ibrahim, had provided military training to MMI in 2004. "Polisi Masih Meyisir Perkemahan di Tawangmangu", liputan6.com, 26 May 2004.

13 At the time, Aman was serving a seven-year sentence for running a discussion group in Cimanggis, a Jakarta suburb, that included bomb-making instruction.

14 Trial dossier of Yahya alias Haidar The three left on 20 May 2014, flying to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and then to Turkey on Malaysian Airlines. They went from the airport to the city of Hattai by bus, stayed overnight then were picked up the next day by a Syrian sent by Harizal and brought to Idlib.

15 In one of these battles, two of his Indonesian comrades were killed. These were Ridwan Hayie from Solo and Asep Setiawan from JAT Tasikmalaya.

Kuala Lumpur, hoping he could use one of the many illegal ferries across the Straits of Malacca to get home without attracting attention. At the airport, however, he was stopped by Malaysian immigration officials and deported back to Indonesia the next day. He was eventually tried under the 2003 terrorism law and sentenced to five years in October 2017. As of late 2019 he was serving his remaining sentence in Sentul, Bogor at a facility for “cooperative” prisoners.

C. *The al-Jihad Group Joins ISIS*

There are conflicting testimonies about when individuals left for Syria, and memories tend to get particularly unreliable when it comes to exact dates, unless there are air tickets or other clear evidence. It seems, though, that departures from Bukittinggi to Idlib ended before Abubakr Al-Baghdadi’s June 2014 announcement of the new caliphate. There were plenty of new contacts on the ISIS side in Syria, however, for those interested in trying to emigrate (*hijrah*). Bahrum-syah, for example, was soon appearing in ISIS recruitment videos from Syria, and several of the Bukittinggi group moved into the pro-ISIS orbit. Roby Risa Putra swore allegiance to the new caliphate at the ceremony organised by Fachry at the State Islamic University’s mosque in Ciputat. shortly after the caliphate was proclaimed.

In August 2014, Aprimul, who had helped fund the travel of his friends, enrolled his eldest child in the high school at Ibn Mas’oed pesantren, a school set up by Aman Abdurrahman that became a prime recruiting and sending point for people leaving to join ISIS. After he enrolled his second child in January 2015, he and his wife decided to move to Jakarta. Two months later he was behind bars. On 21 March 2015, police arrested Fachry and Aprimul, followed by Roby Risa Putra on 11 April.

Fachry’s influence was so wide that his arrest had ripple effects across the country. One person who felt newly vulnerable was a young man from Padang named Saifullah, who had been very close to Fachry. He moved to the Ibn Mas’oed pesantren after the arrest, finding a job there as a guard in the library and topping up his income selling milkshakes with Sunarto, an ISIS supporter from Jambi whose child was enrolled at the school.¹⁶ Saifullah plays a major role in the next part of the story.

D. *In Retrospect: The Bukittinggi Group*

If we look back at how the Bukittinggi group evolved from 2006, when the MMI group first emerged among a group of old friends, to its affiliation with ISIS from 2014 through 2017 when its leading members were arrested, several points stand out:

- It started with a core group of friends, several of them classmates from elementary school
- Its members became committed to extremist views through direct face-to-face contacts with extremist preachers, first in Jakarta among the men who had moved there to work, then through their contacts to Bukittinggi. Social media would have played a part in reinforcing these contacts, but the direct contact was key.
- Commitment picked up pace with the availability of local contacts in Syria. When Harizal first began arranging travel from Bukittinggi, al-Nusra was the only option, even though the Bukittinggi group was more inclined toward ISIS. But as more and more Indonesians left for Syria, it became easier for Bukittinggi members to link up with ISIS contacts at home, in Turkey and in Syria.

¹⁶ Just as other networks in Java had been strengthened by petty trading in products that required low capital and few skills, milkshakes became the enterprise of choice for the ISIS circle around Saifullah.

- At no point was there any credible counter-information to ISIS propaganda or any effort of authorities to warn the men in the group, divert them to other preachers, engage community leaders through trading opportunities, or work with individuals in the group to shift their increasingly extremist orientation.

Two other issues stand out. One is that little effort has been made thus far in Indonesia to understand ongoing ties to the al-Qaeda network except for the JI link to al-Nusra. The network, as the stories of Harizal and May Yusral show, is wider than JI and deserves more attention.

The second point is that the Bukittinggi group, for the most part, was not interested in violence. They wanted an Islamic state, they wanted to be part of the caliphate and they wanted to fight Islam's enemies in Syria. But that does not seem to have translated into a desire to harm anyone in Indonesia.

IV. THE PADANG-ACEH-AFGHANISTAN NETWORK

The Padang group had similar roots to its counterpart in Bukittinggi but it survived longer, developed a much wider international network (pushed in part by the weakening and eventual defeat of ISIS in Syria) and became more violent. Competition for leadership may have been a factor in the latter.

Like the Bukittinggi group, the Padang *pengajian* began around 2006 in the al-Hidayah Mosque as a weekly MMI meeting, promoting the application of Islamic law in West Sumatra. Local clerics also taught that Muslims had an obligation to fight *thaghut*, defined as those who obstructed shari'ah enforcement, by which they usually meant the police. One participant who absorbed these teachings was Novendri, then in his late 20s who worked in a variety of low-paying service jobs from hotel employee to security guard to itinerant salt peddler. He was also the secretary of the MMI branch. By 2012, he had come to believe that MMI had grown too soft, no longer condemning democracy and willing to acknowledge that churches and Chinese temples were holy buildings.¹⁷ He was looking for something more militant.

Al-Baghdadi's announcement of the caliphate in June 2014 split the MMI Padang group in two. One faction retained its MMI affiliation and took an anti-ISIS stance. The other was inclined toward ISIS.¹⁸ The pro-ISIS group began holding regular meetings in an Islamic healing clinic owned by one of the members, Muklis. In early January 2015, the group decided to invite M. Fachry to Padang, since his website, al-mustaqbal.net, had become the most prominent disseminator of ISIS material. They sent him an invitation via text message.

About a week later, a university student named Saifullah came to see them on behalf of Fachry. He said he wanted to confirm that they were indeed supporters of Islamic State and that the invitation was genuine. Although Saifullah was a Padang native, he had been going to college in Yogyakarta, Central Java, and was likely already living in Jakarta. This was the first time that any member of the Padang militants had met him.¹⁹

Fachry came himself about two weeks later in February 2015. He held a series of discussions at Muklis's clinic, with Saifullah in attendance. Before he returned to Jakarta, all of the men in the group took the oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Fachry instructed them to form a structure for ISIS-West Sumatra so that it would be easier to coordinate activities and outreach with ISIS

¹⁷ Confidential document made available to IPAC, December 2019.

¹⁸ Members included May Yusral, Novendri, Berki, Muklis, Jasmomon, Khoiri, Jimmy Mayo, Kariman, Zulrahman, Hendra Syafram alias Ayub, Jimmy Ramadhan, Yoni Syahputra alias Jusuf, Joni, and Zedriansyah alias Pak Jek. Confidential document made available to IPAC, December 2019.

¹⁹ Some sources suggest Novendri may have been a student at the Yogyakarta Institute of Technology (ITY) but this needs to be confirmed.

followers elsewhere. Muklis was chosen as amir for West Sumatra and in that capacity attended the founding meeting of Jaamah Anshorul Daulah (JAD) in Batu, Malang in November 2015.

For the next two years, activities of JAD-West Sumatra consisted mostly of weekly meetings, with Novendri and May Yusral among the active members. In 2017, a dispute erupted between May Yusral and Muklis over petty as well as more substantive issues. Muklis demanded that May Yusral stop seeing his old MMI friends because MMI was anti-ISIS. May Yusral refused. Muklis objected to the fact that May Yusral's wife, an elementary school teacher, was a civil servant. Their more important disagreement was about whether Indonesia was a legitimate theatre for jihad. Muklis argued that the war was in Syria, not Indonesia and he forbade members to get involved in terrorist attacks at home. May Yusral argued for jihad in Indonesia because the Indonesian government failed to apply Islamic law. He also argued that since the police were obstructing efforts to form an Islamic state in Indonesia through arrests of mujahidin, it was appropriate to see them as the enemy.²⁰

As a result of the dispute, May Yusral established his own, more militant cell, taking several men, including Novendri with him – but he still referred to it as JAD-West Sumatra. The group held regular meetings to discuss Aman Abdurrahman's writings on tauhid and jihad and eventually, to plan how to mount attacks that would produce funds for travel to Syria and free comrades detained in police stations across the province.

A. Saifullah Tries for Syria and Gets Deported

Meanwhile, a separate strand of the story was developing that would later come back to Padang. Sometime in late 2015, Saifullah – Fachry's associate who had come to check out the Padang group's bonafides – decided to leave for Syria via Turkey. Fachry had been arrested a few months earlier and Saifullah's position was precarious. But like many other would-be fighters who left around the same time, he ended up stranded in Istanbul, unable to cross over. As he was waiting at a safehouse there for a green light to leave, he came to know another man in the same predicament, an Acehnese named Mohammed Aulia.²¹

In March 2016, many in the safehouse were caught by Turkish authorities and deported, including Saifullah and Aulia.²² Aulia returned to Aceh but maintained contacts in Syria, including with his younger brother who had successfully crossed over. Saifullah was allowed to return home after a debriefing by police. He returned to Ibn Ma'soed pesantren and was in touch with Munawar Kholil, a former teacher at Ibn Ma'soed who had joined ISIS in Syria and in 2016 was assigned to help Indonesians who wanted to leave for Syria. Munawar also became a major financial liaison between Syria and ISIS-Southeast Asia.²³ Saifullah became a contact point for

20 Confidential document made available to IPAC, December 2019.

21 Aulia, from Montasik, Aceh Besar, and his younger brother Muhammad Afdhal, had been recruited into ISIS in 2014 by a university lecturer named Zulfahmi alias Abu Maqdisi, a Salafi who had become attracted to new caliphate and convinced by the end-of-time prophecies of a Pakistani cleric, Imran Hussein. In 2015, Zulfahmi left for Syria, telling his wife, Nur Fazillah alias Ummu Dila, that he was going to Malaysia. Shortly after he arrived, he divorced Ummu Dila by text message. He was killed a few weeks later. Afdhal left for Turkey next with five friends and all successfully crossed into Syria. In late 2015 or early 2016, Aulia together with his wife and children, only eventually to get caught in Turkey.

22 Saifullah appears on an official list of deportees; Aulia does not, but some deportees slipped through the registration procedures. They would likely have just missed an Indonesian family that arrived in March from Makassar – Rullie Rian Zeke, his wife Ulfah and their five children. Rullie and Ulfah would later become the suicide bombers in a January 2019 attack on Jolo cathedral in the southern Philippines, and Saifullah would be in contact with the network in Sabah, Malaysia that helped them – but that came later.

23 Munawar had been in Syria since 2015 where he used his old pen name, Ushdul Wagha (with many variant spellings), and Saifullah was in touch with him in Turkey. Munawar had become the finance man for Indonesian ISIS leaders in Syria, and between 2015 and 2017, he personally arranged the funding for 57 Indonesians to go to Syria. In arranging financial transfers, he was in close touch with Malaysian national Dr Mahmud Ahmad, chief international recruiter and fund-raiser for ISIS in the Philippines.

Munawar's financial transactions. Beginning in March 2016, in the lead-up to the Marawi siege, he began receiving funds from Munawar for onward transfer to Mindanao from Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Germany, the Maldives and elsewhere.²⁴

In July, after police caught another of Munawar's agents on Java, Saifullah decided to leave the country, but this time with a new destination in mind – Afghanistan, since Munawar had told him that IS-Khorasan was open for emigration. He left for Bangkok in July 2017 with two friends and from there contacted Munawar, asking for financial help. In August, the funds arrived, about \$1,400 per person. Shortly thereafter, Saifullah arrived safely in Afghanistan, alone: his two friends had decided to go Syria after all.²⁵

B. Hendra Saputra and Aulia Reconnect

As Saifullah was leaving for Afghanistan, his fellow deportee, Aulia, was at loose ends in Aceh. In early February 2018, Aulia got a call from a fellow Acehnese ISIS supporter, Hendra Saputra.²⁶ Hendra wanted to know if Aulia knew of any land available that could be used as a training ground to prepare ISIS supporters for “emigration” (*hijrah*).²⁷ Aulia had the good sense to refuse to get involved, in part because he now wanted to try and leave for Afghanistan like Saifullah. Hendra went ahead and tried to set up a camp in North Aceh with a few men and women from Aceh, Jambi, North Sumatra and Java. They were quickly caught.

Saifullah, based somewhere in IS-Khorasan, was now in a pivotal position. He could help fellow ISIS supporters who wanted to join him in Afghanistan, act as a communications hub and, with access to ISIS resources through Munawar Kholil, provide funding for JAD activities in Indonesia and the Philippines. In May 2018, for example, a few days after the Surabaya bombings, he facilitated the travel of Bagiyo Saleh, a deportee sent back by Turkey in October 2015, to Khorasan. Bagiyo left Indonesia on 22 May 2018, pretending to go on *umroh* (the so-called lesser pilgrimage) to Saudi Arabia.

On 13 August 2018, police arrested a member of May Yusril's group in Padang. Novendri sent a panicked message over WhatsApp to the other members, urging them to save themselves. He then fled to Jakarta by bus, borrowing money along the way. After weeks of travelling and living off friends, he finally sent a message to Saifullah asking for help. Sometime in September 2018, Saifullah, from Afghanistan, connected him with Bondan, an ISIS supporter based in Bekasi, outside Jakarta. Bondan found him a place to stay and a job selling milkshakes.

The day after he started his new job, Novendri got a message on Telegram from Saifullah, asking him if he could go to Bogor and pick up Rp.18 million in cash to give to Bondan. Novendri

24 The Mindanao connection strengthened after a senior JAD operative, Suryadi Masoed, undertook a series of trips in late 2015 and 2016 to purchase arms and arrange for the training of Indonesians in Basilan, in the southern Philippines, under Isnilon Hapilon, amir of ISIS-Philippines, otherwise known as “East Asia Wilayah”. The training was necessary because Suryadi realised that even if he got the arms back to Indonesia, no one in the current crop of mujahidin knew how to use a gun – they had no international training and with a few exceptions, most had never taken part in the conflicts in Ambon and Poso. One of the trainees, Achmad Supriyanto, met Dr Mahmud on Basilan and agreed to become the middleman for financial transfers between Syria and Mindanao. Munawar would send funds from ISIS central to Indonesia, and Achmad would divide them up into smaller amounts and send them via Western Union to ISIS-linked accounts in the Philippines. Indonesian police learned of these arrangements, however, and on 23 March 2017, two months before Marawi erupted, they arrested Suryadi Masoed and Achmad Supriyanto.

25 Altogether Rp.120 million arrived from Munawar. It was to be divided into four parts. The largest share went to a family also in Bangkok but headed for Syria, not Afghanistan. This was the family of Sunarto, the milkshake seller from Ibn Masoed. He and his family got Rp.60 million (about \$4,300) but they were caught in Turkey and deported back to Indonesia on 17 December 2017.

26 The two men were frequent participants in discussions with Zulfahmi alias Abu Maqdisi (see Footnote 19).

27 They should have known better. A similar effort to set up a training camp in Aceh had ended up in disaster in 2010 with police arresting over 100 would-be fighters from almost every violent extremist organisation in the country, with the notable exception of Jemaah Islamiyah. See International Crisis Group, “Jihadi Surprise in Aceh”, Asia Report No.190, 20 April 2010.

made the pick-up from a man known as Abu Saida, through an elaborate system of introductions and codes sent via Telegram. He said that Saifullah told him the money was going to be used to purchase explosives for bombs.

Novendri at this point got nervous and after checking with his wife in Padang to ensure that no police had come to call, he decided to return home after a short stop in Yogyakarta.

As the end of 2018 neared, Kurdish forces arrested Munawar Kholil and put him in al-Malikiyah prison in Syria. Saifullah appears to have taken over his role in facilitating and financing the travel of Indonesian mujahidin looking to fight abroad. Given the financial transfers that he had made beginning in 2016, however, it looks like senior Indonesian ISIS leaders in Syria had begun preparing strategically for a move of fighters and resources out of Syria at least as early as 2017, as the western coalition forces closed in..

Almost unnoticed in the year-end activities was the arrest of Hendra Saputra in December 2018 and the dispersal of his followers to other areas, including central Kalimantan.

C. *The “Black Banners of Khorasan”*

The word was now out that ISIS families were being encouraged to move to Khorasan. Sometime in December 2018, Abu Walid, one of the most senior Indonesian still alive in Syria, sent instructions to veteran Indonesian combatant and recently released prisoner Hari Kuncoro that he should prepare to leave for IS-Khorasan to accompany the family of Bagiyo Saleh – the deportee whom Saifullah had helped move to Afghanistan after the Surabaya bombings. The idea may have been to make Hari Kuncoro the Southeast Asian operational commander in Khorasan – he certainly had military training, international contacts and expertise that few others in JAD could claim.²⁸

Abu Walid arranged for Rp25 million to be sent to Hari, stipulating that Rp.12 million was to pay for travel expenses and the rest was to be turned over to Saifullah on arrival. All got passports and tickets to Iran. This was the route of choice because Iran had a visa on arrival policy, whereas anyone traveling via Pakistan had to get a visa in Jakarta. Iran also had the advantage of having people-smugglers at the border, willing to help visitors get across for about \$1,000.

On 3 January 2019, the travellers left for the Jakarta airport: Hari Kuncoro; Bagiyo’s wife Nadhiroh Nuraini; and their child Azzam al Faruq, believed to be around five years old. Indonesian police were waiting, however, and Hari Kuncoro was arrested before he could board the plane. Nadhiroh and child may have made it through and are believed to be in Afghanistan. Abu Walid was killed in Syria two weeks later.

The next group to leave for Khorasan was led by a 35-year-old woman from Nganjuk, East Java named Wartini. She too was a deportee, sent home from Turkey in early 2017 after leaving for Syria in May 2016. Her husband, Fajar Siddik, had been killed in Syria even before she left Indonesia, but she reportedly said that he had told her that if anything happened to him, she should go to Faryab, Afghanistan to live – again suggesting that Afghanistan was being discussed by the ISIS leadership as a possible alternative to Syria.²⁹

The other four in the group belonged to one family: Ahmad, his wife Sara and two children. Ahmad was a teacher at Ibn Mas’ud pesantren in Bogor, the school where both Saifullah and Munawar Kholil had worked. Sara, his wife, was the daughter of a JAD leader from Karawang. The entire group was taken into custody at the Iranian border and eventually sent to Kabul

28 Hari Kuncoro alian Uceng was a former KOMPAK combatant in Ambon, fighter in Mindanao with his brother-in-law, Bali bomber Dulmatin (now deceased), participant in the 2010 Aceh training camp, and former prisoner, only released in October 2017.

29 Wartini was in the same batch of deportees as the family of the Jolo bombers, Rullie, Ulfa and four of their five children.

where they remained in prison as of early 2020.

D. Saifullah and the Jolo Bombing

In May 2019, Saifullah's name came up again, this time in a context that resonated internationally. On 26 May, Malaysian counter-terror police arrested an undocumented Indonesian migrant worker named Yoga Febrianto on a palm oil plantation in Sabah. Yoga turned out to have been part of the terrorist network responsible for the Jolo Cathedral bombing in the southern Philippines on 27 January 2019. Suddenly, many different parts of the puzzle came together.

Yoga was part of a pro-ISIS cell on the plantation led by another Indonesian, Andi Baso. Andi was a fugitive from a JAD cell in East Kalimantan who had moved to Sabah in 2018, with instructions from Indonesians in Syria, relayed through an Indonesian prisoner, Suryadi Mas'oe, to open a channel for travel from Sabah to Mindanao.³⁰ Andi was put in touch with Rullie Rian Zeke, the deportee from Makassar who had spent less than a month in a government rehabilitation centre and then was allowed to go home. Five months later, in August 2017, Rullie left for Mindanao and joined the camp of Abu Sayyaf ISIS leader Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan on Jolo. In October 2018, Rullie asked Andi to accompany his wife, Ulfah, and three of their children to Mindanao and indicated he was engaged in a secret mission. Andi Baso delivered the family safely on 24 January 2019, and on 27 January, Rullie and Ulfah blew themselves up in a suicide bombing at the Lady of Mt Carmel Cathedral in Jolo during Sunday mass.

Andi Baso, who married Rullie and Ulfah's 18-year-old daughter in Sabah before they left for Mindanao, was apparently in communication with Saifullah. Andi had designated Yoga to be his successor as Indonesia-Philippines ISIS liaison, responsible for helping procure weapons and facilitate travel. After Andi Baso's departure, Yoga received a message over Telegram from Saifullah, saying he would send Rp.30 million to Yoga to purchase weapons in the Philippines for use in Indonesia. Malaysian police arrested Yoga, however, before any funding arrived.

Less than a month after Yoga's arrest, on 13 June 2019, a group of eleven Indonesians was stopped in Bangkok airport as they were getting ready to leave for Afghanistan. The group's leader was none other than Aulia, Saifullah's old friend from the safehouse in Turkey. He had brought his family and a number of other Acehnese on another failed attempt to *hijrah*. They were deported from Bangkok the same day and arrested on arrival in Jakarta.

On 24 July 2019, Indonesian police held a press conference where they presented a map of the network involving Saifullah, Aulia, Hari Kuncoro, Abu Walid, Yoga, Andi Baso and Novendri, among others. Shortly afterwards, rumors began circulating that Saifullah had been killed in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan; they remain unconfirmed.

E. In Retrospect: The Padang Group

The Padang pro-ISIS group had almost identical roots to its Bukittinggi counterpart but took a different trajectory. Some of the factors involved were:

- Direct exposure to charismatic preachers, in this case, M. Fachry.
- Leadership disputes that created splinters, with one taking a more extremist path.
- The impact of arrests that pushed remaining members of the group into new alliances. Saifullah joined the Ibn Mas'oe group after Fachry's arrest and then decided to flee the

30 He had been involved in discussions with Suryadi Mas'oe in mid-2016 about how to bring guns from Mindanao into Indonesia and in November 2016, he had helped make bombs, one of which was used in an attack on church in Samarinda that killed a toddler.

country after Suryadi Mas'ood's arrest. Novendri became a bagman for Saifullah in Jakarta after fleeing Padang, and Andi Baso becomes available for work in Sabah after fleeing East Kalimantan. Fugitives thus become critical to the expansion of networks.

- The involvement of deportees at key points, among them Saifullah, Aulia, Wartini, Bagiyoyo Saleh and the Makassar couple, Rullie and Ulfah. The combination of frustration at not achieving their goal, undiminished zeal with lack of exposure to the realities of the situation in Syria – not only constant bombing but also corruption and in some cases, discrimination against non-Arabs – and the difficulties of having to start life again with no resources all become reasons for returning to extremist activities.

Where does JAD come into this story? Two of the primary actors, Novendri and May Yusril were leaders of the JAD structure in Padang but labelling various parts of this network “JAD” does not begin to get at the complexity of personal relationships. Focusing on JAD can be like putting on blinders that remove other parts of the picture from view. We now know, for example, that the main safehouse in Istanbul for Indonesians waiting to cross into Turkey was managed for one critical period in 2016-7 by a West Sumatran member of FAH, the organisation described in Section II. How did enforced collaboration in Syria and Turkey among FAH, JAD and the old Katibah Nusantara network of BahrumSyah translate back to Padang? We know JAD Padang splintered but there is much to be explored about how the two factions related to other pro-ISIS groups operating in the same area, including FAH.

The women also get short shrift from law enforcement agencies in both Padang and Bukittinggi because they are largely seen as auxiliary players. But West Sumatra's dominant ethnic group, the Minangkabau, has a matrilineal culture where women have always had high status. What do these extremist groups look like from the perspective of the women involved? It is likely that as the men were meeting in the mosques, the women had their own discussion groups, chat forums and business activities. But because there is little monitoring of women's activities and few women operatives and analysts in police counter-terrorism ranks, at least half of the story of radicalisation in West Sumatra remains untold.

V. CONCLUSION: THE POLICY OPTIONS

The Jokowi government in its second term has defined “radicalism” as one of the biggest existential threats to the state and is adopting broad-brush screening programs to try and ensure that “radicals” do not infiltrate the civil service, academic institutions or other influential sectors of society. But it is not taking the measures necessary to understand how radical ideas are transferred and how radical alliances are formed. That comes about through impartial, objective research or long experience working with relevant community groups.

In hindsight, there were several opportunities for local officials, working with community leaders, to intervene as the Padang and Bukittinggi groups became attracted to ISIS. In Bukittinggi, the MMI cells-turned-ISIS supporters met at the al-Jihad Mosque from 2006 to 2017 – more than ten years. In all of that time, surely there was knowledge within local law enforcement of how the discussions there had taken a radical turn. One strategy used elsewhere is to encourage local clerics and donors to take over the Mosque Development Committee – effectively the financial administration – so that they have more of a say in which groups are hosted. It is a useful strategy because it requires no new law, involves no curbing of speech or assembly, simply ensures a mosque administration less hospitable to extremists.

Another strategy that has been successful elsewhere has been to play on personal rivalries that break out within extremist organisations to persuade one side to disengage. For this strategy

to work, local authorities need to be following the groups closely enough to understand when splits have taken place; there was certainly no shortage of opportunities in both Bukittinggi and Padang.

It is striking how many examples there are in Indonesia of interest in end-of-time prophecies attracting individuals to ISIS and the role that non-ISIS scholars of the Islamic apocalypse play in piquing their interest. More thinking needs to be done about how the interest in Islamic eschatology might be used to more constructive effect to promote disengagement from violence.

The absence of information on women in the Padang and Bukittinggi networks or the informal linkages that might have been established among wives highlights the need for more systematic information-gathering by women field operatives or analysts. Detachment 88, the police counter-terrorism unit, is trying to recruit more women but there is a long way to go.

The story of these two networks also illustrates how much we still need to understand about the links to al-Qaeda among Indonesian extremists not linked to Jemaah Islamiyah. By now there are enough prisoners with some knowledge of the al-Nusra networks in Indonesia to make it a worthwhile thesis topic for an aspiring scholar in security studies.

Finally, we return to the issue of more targeted rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Much more thought needs to go into the design, implementation and evaluation of these programs based on a detailed understanding of the backgrounds of the individuals concerned. A thorough appraisal of existing government-funded programs is long overdue.

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