

# Mobilizations and Movements of Foreign Fighters from Southeast Asia to Syria and Iraq

Tia M. Kibtiah

*Bina Nusantara University, Indonesia*

## **Abstract**

*This article examines foreign fighter movements, in particular, those who joined the Islamic State and al-Nusra front from Southeast Asia to Syria and Iraq. It will analyze the dynamics of the movements in Southeast Asia and Syria and Iraq, provide a discussion of the potential threats of the returnees and how state and civil society respond to the threats of the groups. It is based on interviews with Afghan veterans in Indonesia and analyses of primary and secondary sources of the Syrian and Iraq conflicts. It argues that it be urgent to strengthen unity and partnership between the state and civil society in coping the rise of the terrorist movements and to prevent violent attacks after the returns of Southeast Asian fighters from Syria and Iraq.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Fighters, Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, Southeast Asia, Syria and Iraq

## **Introduction**

The term 'foreign fighters' in this article refers to fighters who involved insurgencies outside their countries. It covers not only the people who join in combat but also those who migrate and travel to the conflict zone to participate in fighting or training with an insurgent group or provide some supports (Zammit 2015). In 1980s-1990s, people traveled from Southeast Asia and other countries to join Mujahidin in Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet Union. They are considered as foreign fighters. It includes the people travel from all over the world to Syria and Iraq to fight against Bashar al-Asad's regime in the last decade.

This article will examine transnational terrorist movements, in particular, the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al Nusra (JN), which impact to the rise of terrorism recruitment, transnational movements, and national-international threats. Their involvement in the Syrian conflict combines violent experience, international terrorism networks, and direct threats from returnees to their home countries. The number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is varied from around 20,000 to 70,000 fighters from about 100 nationalities, including 4000 fighters from Western Europe (Lister 2015). The fighters from Southeast Asia, especially from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines are main concerns on this article, how the fighters moved to

Syria and Iraq and how state and civil society in Southeast Asia anticipate the returnees of the fighters. Katibah Nusantara, the group, founded by fighters from Southeast Asia in Syria and Iraq united fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines with Indonesians took leadership positions. Overall Southeast Asian fighters are around a thousand and Indonesia dominated the number and leadership. Indonesia contributes about 500 to 700 fighters from both the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, which created frictions among Jihadists in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Many of them previously became a strong part of Jama'ah Islamiyah leadership and members, however after the foundation of IS by Southeast Asian jihadists the frictions begin.

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who used to be chairman of Jama'ah Islamiyah after the death of Abdullah Sungkar, now takes a crucial position in the IS of Indonesia along with Aman Abdurrahman. Advisory board leadership of Ba'asyir and Aman is very influential to the growth of IS in Indonesia from about 500 in 2014 to 1,500 in 2015. BahrumSyah and M. Fachry declared IS in Indonesia in July 2014. Although the early meetings are discussing the support of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) held in Tangerang in February 2014.

This article is based on the interviews with former foreign fighters involved in the Afghan war in the 1980s. Among them joined violent attacks in Bali and Jakarta. Furthermore, it analyses primary and secondary sources from foreign fighter group websites, government and research center policy papers. It argues that mobilization and movements of foreign fighters have attracted more recruits and strengthened

the capacity of individuals and groups after their involvements of fighting in Syria and Iraq. The returnees of Syria and Iraq potentially threatens security and stability in Southeast Asia and international regions where foreign fighters back to their home countries.

### **Foreign Fighters**

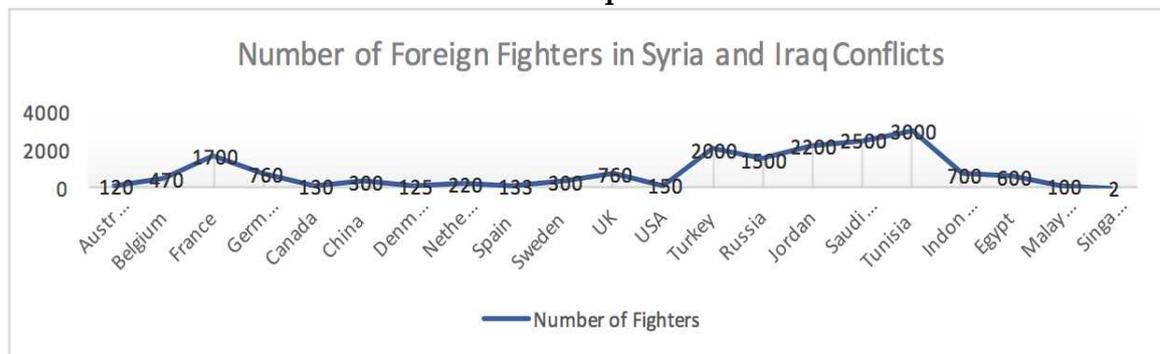
Up to a thousand of Southeast Asian jihadists are among foreign fighters from all over the world. It is surprisingly the percentage of foreign fighters from the West is much higher than the participants of fighters in the history of conflict and war involving jihadists such as Afghan war. Compared to Afghan fighters, IS (used to be ISIS) is "much better organized in that it has a military approach in spreading its influence with an over-arching set of strategies and a strong centralized leadership. Al-Qaida has more of the attack-and-run style, and the groups affiliated with it seem to be operating relatively independent" (Nadaraj 2014). The majority of recruits to the Islamic State going to Syria intended of "acting there rather than training to become domestic terrorists" and "remains more personal than political" (The Soufan Group 2015: 7). However, the latest two decades domestic attack plots were organized by individual and groups closely related to foreign fighters experience. Bali bombings in 2002 involved Afghan veterans affiliated to Jama'ah Islamiyah. Afghan returnees endangered their home countries threatening terror attacks and violent attack plans in the US, France, Australia, Southeast Asia, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Syrian and Iraq conflicts returnees will endanger and threaten more to their home countries.

David Malet defined foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts,” playing critical roles in conflicts since ancient periods (Lister 2015). The nearest equivalent was fighting in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, which attracted about 20,000 foreign fighters over a twelve years from 1980 to 1992. Charles Lister (2015) estimated foreign fighters involved in Syria and Iraq was growing dramatically from 700-1,400 in mid-2012 to over 22,000 in early 2015.

It is predicted that the number of foreign fighters: Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Morocco (2,000), Jordan (1,500), France (1,550), Russia (1,500), Turkey (1,300), UK (700) – unnamed intelligence officials said 1,600, Germany (700), Indonesia (700), Libya (600), Bosnia (340), China (300), US (200), Malaysia (100), the Philippines (100) and Singapore (2) (Lister 2015: 1). The number of fighters

is underestimated by analysts and intelligent. Indonesian intelligent authority argued that Indonesian fighters join the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front are about 200-300. They do not consider the number of Indonesian fighters from the Middle East, Pakistan and North Africa where they are studying. Wildan Mukhollad (19), an Indonesian student at Al-Azhar University and Al Islam school graduate, joined IS in 2012 and became a suicide bomber for IS in Iraq in early 2014 (Nuraniyah 2015). Mukhollad wanted to show himself that he is among the best young fighters continued the agenda of Bali trio and senior fighters in the early period of the Al Islam school of East Java. He is among three martyrs in Syria and Iraq graduated from the school. IPAC (2014) also stated other martyr Zainul Arifin recruited by the school graduate for IS bombing attack operation in Poso targeting Police.

**Table 1. Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq**



Sources :Lister 2015; The Soufan Group 2015

### Lessons from Southeast Asia

It is interesting to learn how Southeast Asian fighter organization founded and grew in Syria and Iraq, poses direct threats to government and the people in the region, and how state and civil society responded to the rise of radical jihadists and foreign fighters from Southeast Asian regions. Their number, growth, and capacity are more efficient and deadly than fighters of the Afghan war in the 1980s and 1990s.

Southeast Asian fighters are divided at least into two factions: Daesh (the Islamic State) and al-Nusra front (JN). The tensions between ISIS and al-Nusra in late 2013 have forced Southeast Asian jihadists to choose their sides. In Indonesia, Aman Abdurrahman sided with ISIS. The website *almustaqbal.net*, edited by M. Fachry, also supported ISIS. On the other hand, al-Nusra front had its supporters, commonly senior JI leaders and associates of al-Qaidah. *Arrahmah.com*, among the supporters, published statements from ISIS critics like al-Maqdisi and Aiman Zawahiri. It published Abu Khalid as-Suri, Zawahiri's associate, claimed ISIS of undermining Jihad movement (IPAC 2014). Ali Imron and other Afghan veterans criticized that the Islamic State do not conduct the ethics of Jihad like how the Prophet and his companions required rules and procedures of war. Imron considered the way of IS showing provocative video and pictures of slaughtering and other executions to public space is against the essence of Jihad to disseminate good conduct and Islamic ethics for a better community and the world.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Abdul Qohar, Suhail and Masykur, other Afghan veterans

argued that the Islamic State recruitments to any people without enough training preparations impact lower capacity and immature Jihad operations. It will endanger their plan and counter-productive to the mission of Jihad.<sup>2</sup> Kohar joined Afghan academy training for three years and now keep himself into community education in Jakarta.

Southeast Asian IS fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines agreed to coordinate under the group of the *Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah* or the Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State in which fighters share a common culture and language of Bahasa Indonesia and Malay, and unite to recruit, train and mobilize fighters from Southeast Asia to Syria and Iraq. The *Katibah Nusantara* was headquartered in Al-Shadadi, in the Syrian province of Hasaka. It is headed by an Amir identified as Abu Ibrahim al-Indonesiy. Leaders of the *Katibah Nusantara* are mostly Indonesians although some Malaysians appeared among the leadership. It has some departments: "combat fighters, snipers, heavy weapons, tactics and strategy, and military management" (Singh 2015: 2). It has also volunteer positions for cyber propaganda and communications supported by IS members in Syria, Malaysia and Indonesia.

### Returnees: Threats and Challenge

ASEAN and international leaders warned the threats of returnees of Syrian and Iraq conflicts to stability and security. Their ideological and violent experience can influence people in the region. The returnees will strengthen the capacity of potential violent attacks in Southeast

<sup>1</sup> Ali Imron, interviews with author, Polda metro prison Jakarta, November 9, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Abdul Qohar, Suhail and Masykur, interviews with author, Jakarta, June 6, 2015.

Asian regions. It is based on the experiences of Afghan veterans who involved in serial attacks and plot plans targeting foreigners and government assets in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. Indonesia is the most severe region affected by violent attack operations by Afghan veterans. The IS returnees can be “mobilized to undertake attacks in Southeast Asia. Unlike JI which had members who were returnees from the Afghan war, this time, the region would be confronted with a far stronger force regarding numbers, ideology and military training and combat experience.” (Singh 2015: 1).

However, Institute for Policy and Analysis of Conflict have a different opinion to potential threats of returnees. IPAC (2014:11) stated that many Southeast Asian fighters are:

*“Poorly educated, poorly vetted, poorly trained and poorly led. The result is the failure to do much damage. If the call to abandon the local effort and join the global jihad could weaken the movement still further, it is also true that mujahidin returning to Indonesia from Syria have the potential to provide everything today’s jihadist now lack - especially experienced leaders.”*

IPAC underestimates the capacity of foreign fighters, including those from Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Although they do not require military training from anybody joined Daesh/ IS, their fighting and engagement experience with international fighters in Syria and Iraq, sharing common interests against Assad’s regime and the West coalition countries are more than enough to consider the threats of the returnees. Ali Imron argues that ISIS more dangerous than Al Qaida. He said “we (Al Qaida) left the New Order Indonesia and never considered the government as unbeliever (Kafir). It is

very different from ISIS which disseminates takfiri ideology.” This ideology makes IS members quickly targeting other people and groups for attack operations, including attacks on other Muslim fighters. In late 2013, IS killed leaders and individuals of JN, and other individuals and groups disagreed to support Al Baghdady.

As of February 2015, among 90 Australian fighters have “appeared in propaganda videos for Jabhat al-Nusra and IS, three are believed to have carried out suicide bombings, and some Australians are occupying leadership positions. Some have also boasted of war crimes, and explicitly threatened Australia” (Zammit 2015: 10). The interactions and engagements experiences among foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and their global networks enabled them to conduct transnational terrorism attacks. Kira's (2014: 364-365) argues that “the technologies associated with globalization have enabled terrorist cells and groups to mount coordinated attacks in different countries. Indeed, a hallmark of Islamic militant groups is their ability to conduct multiple attacks in different locations.” Cyber maniac among IS supporters in Indonesia had coordinated of robbery and attack operations in Medan and Poso in 2014 and 2015 using online chats and emails (IPAC 2014). WhatsApp, Blackberry Messenger, and other social media have become favorite tools of interactions and coordination among the Islamic State members in the disseminating news, instruction, and meeting. They also used fundraising taking advantages of cyber technology. Coordinating of returnees of Southeast Asia and global IS, JN and other terrorist networks after the Syrian and Iraq conflict raised critical attentions among state leaders in Southeast Asia. Lister stated

that “some returnees retain the potential for reintegration into Western society, with some requiring rehabilitation and psychological care. Above all, not every foreign fighter should necessarily be treated as a lifelong extremist, but instead as a potentially valuable member of his or her home society” (Lister 2015: 8).

Officials from Southeast Asian countries responded to the rise and threat of Southeast Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore government authority concerned to the threats. They agreed to the importance of unity and comprehensive partnership between the state and civil society in coping with the Syrian and Iraq conflict returnees.

Singapore’s defense minister Ng Eng Hen argued that “the Islamic State poses a ‘clear and present danger’ to Southeast Asia, with trained foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq potentially linking up and formalizing ties with local groups to execute attacks” (Parameswaran 2015). Rebellious and violent jihadist groups such as Jama’ah Ansharut Tauhid commanded by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and Abu Sayyaf Group of Southern Philippines are among groups already pledged allegiance to the Islamic State since 2014. Former activists of Jama’ah Islamiyah have declared to support the caliphate of Abu Bakar Al-Baghdady. To the Islamic State, Ng said that “they have sympathizers, they have foreign fighters who are trained, who have the motivation, the means and who have a common vision” (Parameswaran, 2015). In addition, Malaysian Defense Force Chief, General Tan Sri Zulkifli Mohd Zin was “worried that when they (militants) return to Malaysia, they will do something that can threaten the safety of the country, especially after they established a network

in neighbouring countries from Syria or Iraq” (Hanson 2015: 3). The threats of IS to Southeast Asian countries also became a priority concern for Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. He said that IS threats “not only to countries who are part of the US coalition but also to Singapore. As with the threat from the Al Qaeda, even if Singapore is not itself a target, foreign interest here may be targeted” (Hanson 2015: 3).

Civil society organizations are strategic groups protecting the community from radicalization and preventing recruitments of IS. In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the largest Muslim organizations are the backbone for Indonesian Muslims preserving religious moderation and committed to supporting nationalism and nation-state building. They are strategic partners for National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) to counter radicalism and terrorism.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude that mobilizations and movements of foreign fighters from Southeast Asia to Syria and Iraq conflicts raised the capacity of violent Jihadist groups in the region and internationalized them with global jihad networks in Syria and Iraq were up to 100 different nationalities of around 70,000 foreign fighters involved in different groups. Southeast Asian IS fighters coordinated quite effectively after the foundation of Katibah Nusantara which accommodates fighters from Southeast Asia. They successfully conducted operations in 2014 attacking Kurds population. The foundation of the group was intended to accommodate Indonesian, and Malay speaking fighters and protected each other individuals and families from Bashar al-

Assad and Western coalition's attacks. They also successfully launched propaganda and recruited people from Southeast Asian countries. They have taken a strategic position to represent Caliphate leadership in Southeast Asia under Abu Bakar Al-Baghdady.

Syrian and Iraq conflict returnees threaten stability and security in their home countries. They strengthen the capacity of local groups and need to anticipate of potential threats to attack operations targeting government and foreigners as revenge for the defeat and the death of leaders and community of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq conflicts and other regions. November 13, 2015, Paris attacks were a continuation of battle as revenge against Charlie Hebdo and France's coalition against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (The Economist, November 21, 2015). The IS leaders continued to assure the importance of attacks against governments and people who are against the interests of IS all over the world.

State and civil society in Southeast Asia have to strengthen their partnership and cooperation to fight against terrorism and prevent violent attacks by IS, JN and other individuals and groups sympathizing them. Local insurgent and violent radical groups in Southeast Asia such as Santoso's Mujahidin of Eastern Mujahidin and Abu Sayyaf Group have directly threatened the government of Indonesia and the Philippines respectively of their support to the interests of IS. Indonesian counter-terrorism agency including Detachment 88 has raised the importance of open coordination among government in Southeast Asia and Australia to detect the flows of funds and people from the regions to Syria and Iraq.

It includes prevention of cyber terrorism coordinated by global terrorist networks.

#### About Author

A Lecturer of Department of International Relations, BINUS University Jakarta. She can be contacted at tiamariakibtia@gmail.com

#### Reference

- Dershowitz, Alan M. (2002). *Why Terrorism Works Understanding the Threat Responding to the Challenge*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hanson, Ferguson. (2015). *Countering ISIS in Southeast Asia: The Case for an ICT offensive*. Perth USA Asia Centre Strategic Insight Series.
- Henin, Nicholas. (2015). *Jihad Academy the Rise of Islamic State*. Translated from French by Martin Makinson. London: Bloomsbury.
- Imron, Ali. (2007). *Ali Imron Sang Pengebom (Ali Imron the Bomber)*. Jakarta: Republika.
- IPAC. (2014). *Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict*. IPAC Report No. 6, January 30.
- Kiras, James D. (2014). *Terrorism and Globalization*. In John Baylis, Steve Smith & Patricia Owens (eds.). *The Globalization of World Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp.357-371.
- Lister, Charles. (2015). *Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?* Washington: Brookings Institution.

Nadaraj, Vanitha. (2014). Asean must get rid of ISIS in Southeast Asia. Retrieved December 19, 2015, from <http://www.establishmentpost.com/asean-must-get-rid-isis-southeast-asia/>.

Nirmala, Murugaian. (2015). *Old War, New Methods the Fight Against Terror*. Singapore: The Strait Times.

Nuraniyah, Navhat. (2015). How ISIS Charmed the New Generation of Indonesian militants..Middle East Institute. Retrieved 20 December 2015. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/how-isis-charmed-new-generation-indonesian-militants>.

Parameswaran, Prashanth. (2015). Singapore Warns of Islamic State Terror Nexus in Southeast Asia. *The Diplomat*. December 10.

Silverstein, Ken. (2014). *The Secret World of Oil*. London/ New York: Verso.

Singh, Jasminder. (2015). *Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit*. RSIS Commentaries No. 126- May 26.

The Soufan Group. (2015). An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. *Foreign Fighters*. The Soufan Group.

Weiss, Michael & Hassan, Hassan. (2015). *ISIS Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts.

Zammit, Andrew. (2015). *Australian foreign fighters: Risks and responses*. Sydney: Lowy Institute.