

Pathways to the Caliphate: Mapping Malaysian Foreign Fighter Networks in Iraq and Syria from 2012-2019

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Abstract

Utilizing social media profiles, court documents and media reports, this article analyzes the Malaysian foreign fighter networks in Iraq and Syria between 2012-2019. It is found that the Malaysian foreign fighter phenomenon is primarily driven by charismatic personalities, i.e. influential figures who were able to attract individuals into the Middle East. The attempted movement of fighters into Iraq and Syria can be divided into three phases corresponding to three personalities; the first led by Al-Qaeda linked Yazid Sufaat, the second by Afnad al-Sham linked Lotfi Ariffin and the third by Islamic State (IS) linked Muhammad Wannid Mohd Jedi. Contrary to popular belief, the first wave of Malaysian militants had joined Syrian based rebel groups like Afnad al-Sham instead of IS with the shift occurring after Lotfi Ariffin's death in September 2014. The three phases also highlight the shift in recruitment strategy from physical recruitment to the purely online sphere. A radicalization driver model of Malaysian fighters is proposed and it is argued that the two main factors that drove Malaysian fighters into the conflict zones are i) External factors: charismatic personalities; romanticization of jihad; moral factors and ideological factors; and ii) Internal factors: discontent with the government.

Keywords: Malaysia, foreign terrorist fighters, Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Iraq, Syria

Word count: 9,950 words (excluding appendix and footnotes)

Introduction

Since the Islamic State was declared in June 2014, an important part of the politics and narrative relating to the rise of the organization was the draw it had with regards to foreign fighters. More than 40,000 foreign fighters were believed to have fought in the war in Iraq and Syria originating from more than 110 countries.¹ While the bulk of the foreign fighters were from the Arab world and Africa and a sizeable number from Western Europe, Southeast Asia also had a token presence, mostly from Malaysia and Indonesia.

¹ "How Many IS Foreign Fighters Are Left in Iraq and Syria?," *BBC News*, February 20, 2019, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935>.

Intelligence estimates placed the number of Southeast Asians who had travelled to the Middle East to join the Islamic State (IS) at a number between 800 and 1200.² Out of this, the number of Malaysians foreign fighters are believed to be approximately more than 120³ while some reports suggest a higher number of 200-250⁴. While this was not the first time Southeast Asians had fought in a *jihad* abroad, with Afghanistan and Southern Philippines being the other theatres of *hijrah* (migration) and combat, this was certainly the most prominent instance of Malaysians being radicalized and travelling to combat zones in large numbers. Most of the research with regards to the IS phenomenon in Malaysia has focused on the factors of radicalization as opposed to the networks involved and the factors that motivated Malaysians to leave the country and fight in the Middle East. Based upon a detailed analysis of social media profiles of Malaysian militants, court documents and media reports, this article aims to plug the gap in the research on Malaysian militants by mapping the Malaysian networks in Iraq and Syria from 2012 to 2019 and address the common misconceptions that are associated with these networks. The rationale and impact of this will also be analyzed accordingly.

This article is divided into three sections: section one covers the literature review, section two looks at the networks and movement pathways in detail, in particular the three phases of Malaysian militant movement into Iraq and Syria led by three key personalities and the third section proposes a radicalization model that aims to explain the reasons that motivated these individuals to leave Malaysia for the battlefields in the Middle East. It is found that the Malaysian foreign fighter phenomenon is primarily driven by charismatic personalities, i.e. influential figures who were able to attract individuals into the Middle East. These three main charismatic personalities were Al-Qaeda linked Yazid Sufaat, Afnan al-Sham linked Lotfi Ariffin and Islamic State (IS)-linked Muhammad Wannady Mohd Jedi. The first wave of Malaysian militants had joined Syrian based rebel groups like Afnan al-Sham instead of IS with the shift occurring after Lotfi Ariffin's death in September 2014. The three phases also highlight the shift in recruitment strategy from physical recruitment to the purely online sphere. The two main factors that drove Malaysian fighters into the Middle East were found to be i) External factors: charismatic personalities; romanticization of jihad; moral factors and ideological factors; and ii) Internal factors: discontent with the government.

Literature Review

Most of the research on the issue of the Malaysian IS phenomenon has tended to focus on trying to explain the various factors for radicalization and support of IS among Malaysians. Schulze and Liow explain the extent of IS' appeal in Malaysia (and Indonesia) and argue that local politics and religious dynamics within the country played a key role in attracting IS supporters, sympathizers

² United States Government, "ISIS in the Pacific: Assessing Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Threat to the Homeland" (Washington D.C., April 27, 2016), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg22758/html/CHRG-114hhrg22758.htm>.

³ Interview with Malaysian counter-terrorism official, July 2021.

⁴ James Chin, "Malaysia: Clear and Present Danger from the Islamic State," *Brookings* (blog), December 16, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/malaysia-clear-and-present-danger-from-the-islamic-state/>.

and those who left to join the group.⁵ Similarly, Nawab and Arosoaie attempt to explain the considerable support of IS among Malaysians and factors that drive radicalization among them. They make a distinction between the older generation of jihadis, namely those from the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (Malaysian Mujahidin Group or KMM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) circles and the younger generation associated with IS and argue that local sociopolitical developments within the country are key radicalization drivers.⁶

Liow and Arosoaie, on the other hand, argue that while IS had managed to recruit supporters and sympathizers from Malaysia, its recruitment had been hampered by the group's inability to tailor its narrative to the local Malaysian context, which would have attracted a larger number of people.⁷ They argue that the notion of Malay-Islamic supremacy that has been institutionalized and provides empowerment to the majority Muslim population undermines the IS narrative of Muslim weakness.⁸ Sukhani seconds that argument as she looks into radicalization among Malay-Muslim women and argues that the Malaysian socio-political context contradicts IS' rhetoric of Muslim oppression and it's lack of locally-tailored narratives have diminished support for the group.⁹ Based on his experience with terrorist rehabilitation, Malaysian scholar Ahmad El-Muhammady proposes a model which suggests that radicalization in the Malaysian case occurs in both the non-violent and violent sphere and can be divided into four dimensions; cognitive, emotive, faith and action oriented radicalization.¹⁰ Similarly, based upon a detailed analysis of Malaysian IS militant Muhammad Wandy Mohd Jedi's Telegram accounts, Wan Mohd Nor and El-Muhammady suggest that there are five steps toward radicalization in the online sphere among Malaysian IS extremists namely; trust building, mind formation, consensus building, affirmation and actualization.¹¹

Whilst a huge amount of work on the subject have tended to focus on the factors driving extremism and radicalization among Malaysians, little research has been done on looking at the networks of Malaysian foreign fighters that made their way into Iraq and Syria which remains a crucial element of the Malaysian terrorism landscape. Media reports and certain studies with respect to the

⁵ Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and Local Dimensions of the ISIS Phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1424710>.

⁶ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of 'Moderation': Understanding the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia," *Asian Security* 16, no. 1 (May 31, 2018): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1470508>.

⁷ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence: Nuancing Religiopolitical Legitimacy and Conceptualizing the Appeal of ISIS in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (April 2019): 87.

⁸ Liow and Arosoaie, 108.

⁹ Piya Sukhani, "The Route to Radicalisation for Malay-Muslim Women: Tracing the Nexus Between Universals and Particulars in Malaysia" (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, August 7, 2020), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WP331.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Radicalisation Model: Learning from Malaysian Militant–Extremists," in *Terrorist Deradicalisation in Global Contexts*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna and Sabariah Hussin, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹¹ Murni Wan Mohd Nor and Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Radicalisation and Paramilitary Culture: The Case of Wandy's Telegram Groups in Malaysia," in *Militarization and the Global Rise of Paramilitary Culture*, ed. Brad West and Thomas Crosbie (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 108, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-5588-3_6.

Malaysian foreign fighter network have been inconsistent. For example, Nawab and Arosoaie note that Lotfi Ariffin and some others had joined Jabhat al-Nusra, which was formerly an Al-Qaeda affiliate group in Syria.¹² This was not the case as Lotfi and the first wave of fighters had joined Afnad al-Sham, a Syrian based rebel group that was neither affiliated to Al-Qaeda nor IS at the time (to be explained later). They also mention that Yazid Sufaat had recruited for IS¹³, which is not the case as he had recruited for and remains associated with Al-Qaeda.

Whilst some other studies have briefly mentioned the Malaysian foreign fighter networks¹⁴, little thus far have looked at them in detail. This article aims to plug the gap in the current literature by looking at the Malaysian foreign fighter networks, highlight the various personalities and connections involved and provide a radicalization model based on the motivations of the individuals involved in the networks.

The Networks

Studies have shown that radicalization is a social phenomenon that is centered around a strong “group element” involving small networks of people who influence, motivate and support each other.¹⁵ These groups or small cells can be further centered around organized networks such as mosques or study groups, charismatic individuals, or groups that lack structure such as friends and family.¹⁶

Sageman further notes that these groups or cells of people can be viewed as a network, i.e. a collection of nodes connected to each other through links.¹⁷ The people or nodes that are more popular, i.e. those that are attached to more links are called hubs.¹⁸ These networks grow into “small-world” network structures akin to traffic on the internet, through the means of “preferential attachment” where the probability of a new node connecting to any other node is directly proportional to the number of its existing links.¹⁹ This nodal-hub structure forms a very important characteristic of the global jihad movement.

This section uses Sageman’s framework to investigate the different pathways of Malaysian foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq characterized by three phases led by three charismatic figures who

¹² Osman and Arosoaie, “Jihad in the Bastion of ‘Moderation,’” 4.

¹³ Osman and Arosoaie, 4.

¹⁴ James Brandon, “Syrian and Iraqi Jihads Prompt Increased Recruitment and Activism in Southeast Asia,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 10 (October 2014): 17–20; Nicholas Chan, “From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia,” in *Global Jihad in Southeast Asia - Examining the Expansion of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda*, ed. Mona Kanwal Sheikh (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019); Ahmad El-Muhamaddy, “Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia,” in *Countering Daesh Extremism: European and Asian Responses*, ed. Beatrice Gorawantschy et al. (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2016), https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=65367300-b620-23c7-4a7e-0c4c97f42188&groupId=252038; Schulze and Liow, “Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad.”

¹⁵ Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, “Destination Jihad: Italy’s Foreign Fighters” (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 19, 2019), 24.

¹⁶ Marone and Vidino, 24.

¹⁷ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 137.

¹⁸ Sageman, 137.

¹⁹ Sageman, 139–40.

functioned as ‘network hubs’ for each phase namely Yazid Sufaat, Mohd Lotfi Ariffin and Muhammad Wanndy Mohd Jedi.

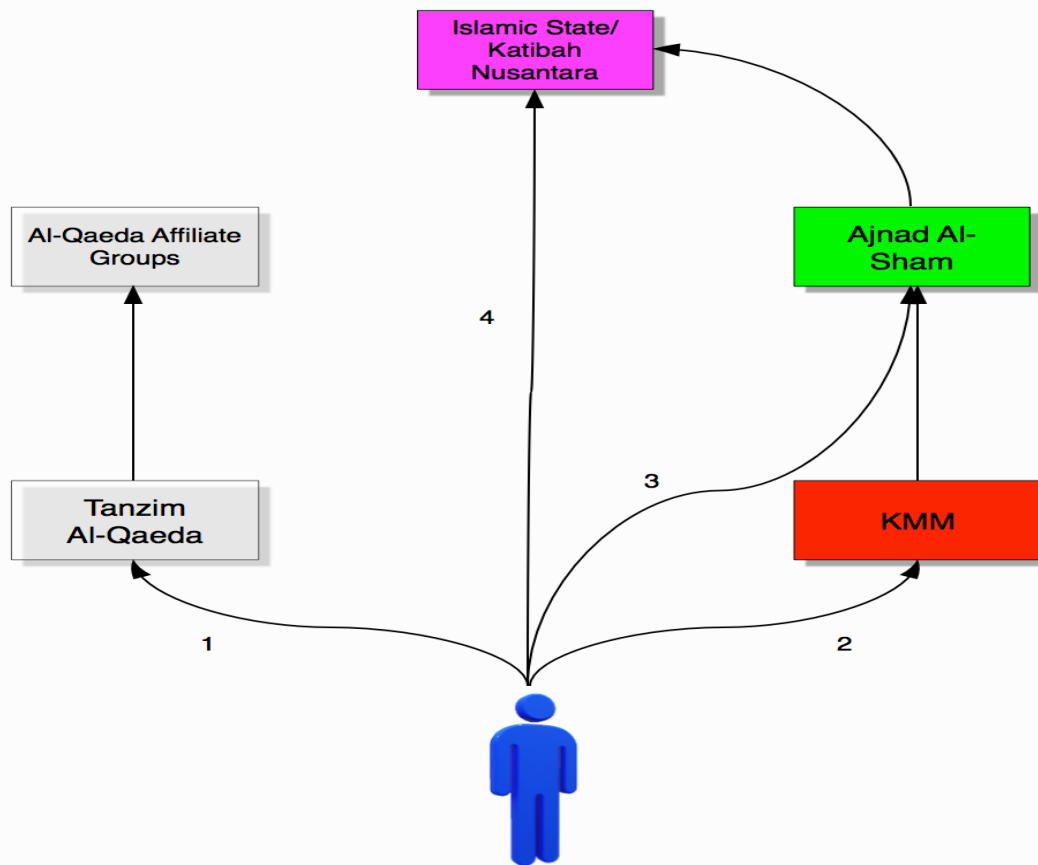


Figure 1: The four different pathways of Malaysian foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria. Chart created by the authors.

Phase 1: Yazid Sufaat, Tanzim Al-Qaeda and the first attempts

Phase one of the movement of Malaysian fighters is centered around Yazid Sufaat and a group known as Tanzim Al-Qaeda (TAQ), that was believed to have been led by him. Yazid Sufaat, a Malaysian national, was offered a government scholarship to study for a degree in biological science and chemistry at the California State University in Sacramento in the 1980s.²⁰ He returned to Malaysia in 1987 to serve in the Malaysian Armed Forces. After serving four years, he set up a private laboratory-analysis company and landed medical testing contracts from the government.²¹

Not particularly devout in his early days, Sufaat only began attending private religious lessons (*usrah*) sometime between 1993 and 1995.²² Sometime in 1995, Sufaat became acquainted with

²⁰ United Nations Security Council, “YAZID SUFAAT,” May 21, 2009, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/yazid-sufaat.
²¹ Leslie Lopez, “Malaysian Social Experiment Creates Islamic Militant Instead,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2003, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1042394757992180384>.
²² Lopez.

Muhammad Iqbal Abdurrahman, also known as Abu Jibril, a senior Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) associate responsible for setting up a JI division in Malaysia.²³ An Al-Qaeda affiliate group in Southeast Asia, JI has had a long affiliation with Malaysia. The group was believed to have been formed in Malaysia in January 1993 by two of its initial ideologues, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir who had sought refuge in the country between 1985 and 1998 from President Suharto's crackdown on militant Islamists in Indonesia.²⁴ Malaysia was a strategic point for JI and was one of four of its territorial divisions (*mantiqis*) known as the "economic region" which functioned as a source of financial resources for the organization.²⁵

Abu Jibril was a key figure in the initial radicalization process of Sufaat. He had later introduced him to other key JI leaders, Abu Bakar Basyir and Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin (Hambali). Sufaat quickly rose up the ranks within the JI Malaysian division and by mid-1999 took the *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance) to Basyir in Hambali's residence in Kuala Lumpur.²⁶

In January 2000, on Hambali's request, Sufaat hosted four of the 9/11 hijackers including Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi at his apartment in Kuala Lumpur.²⁷ In October of the same year, he had hosted another 9/11 operative Zacarias Moussaoui in Kuala Lumpur.²⁸ Sufaat was believed to have procured 4 tonnes of ammonium nitrate for a foiled JI-linked bombing plot in Singapore in 2000.²⁹ In addition to that, he was also linked to the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings carried out by JI targeting a number of churches in Indonesia.³⁰ In the 1999-2000 period, Sufaat was introduced to Al-Qaeda's central leadership by Hambali and was nominated to take the helm of Al-Qaeda's anthrax program in Kandahar, Afghanistan.³¹ Sufaat failed to develop anthrax for Al-Qaeda and was arrested in December 2001 upon his return to Malaysia.

It is believed that Sufaat had re-engaged in recruitment activities after his release in 2008. Sufaat was believed to have been involved in a small offshoot group of the larger JI organization in Malaysia called Tanzim Al-Qaeda (TAQ). Little is known about the TAQ group. In November 2011, Malaysian police had received information that Sufaat had been conducting weekly *ceramah* (Islamic discussion sessions similar to *pengajian* in Indonesia) sessions at his home to recruit members for TAQ.³² Sufaat along with his colleague, Muhammad Hilmi Hasim had managed to

²³ Lopez; Bilveer Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007), 92.

²⁴ Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia," 62.

²⁵ Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia*, 69–72.

²⁶ Lopez, "Malaysian Social Experiment Creates Islamic Militant Instead."

²⁷ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 2004, 159.

²⁸ Lopez, "Malaysian Social Experiment Creates Islamic Militant Instead."

²⁹ Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Terrorist Linked to Al-Qaeda Will Be Freed next Month, Confirms Malaysian Police Chief," *The Straits Times*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/terrorist-linked-to-al-qaeda-can-be-freed-next-month-malaysian-police-chief>.

³⁰ Quinton Temby, "Jihadists Assemble: The Rise of Militant Islamism in Southeast Asia" (Ph.D. Thesis, Canberra, Australian National University, 2017), 201.

³¹ Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, "Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction Threat: Hype or Reality?" (Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, January 2010), 14.

³² Schulze and Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad," 131.

recruit two individuals by the names of Mohd Razif Mohd Ariff and Muhamad Razin Sharhan Mustafa.³³ Razin had met Sufaat initially via Facebook before joining his *ceramah* sessions while Razif was believed to have been recruited by the former.³⁴ While attending the *ceramah* sessions, the duo had “special discussions on the subjects of faith, nullifier of faith, jihad, democracy, current affairs in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt and the need to return to the original teachings of Islam.”³⁵ After attending at least five sessions between 7th of July and 4th of August 2012, the duo had been motivated to travel to Syria to join the Syrian uprising.³⁶ They had left Malaysia for Turkey on the 3rd of October 2012.³⁷ They had failed to enter Syria via Turkey and were subsequently arrested at Beirut airport on 18th October 2012 before being charged before a military court in Lebanon on 1st November 2012.³⁸ Razin had stated that Sufaat had told him to “open the network for other Malaysians to go to Syria” and facilitate their entry into the country.³⁹

³³ “Home-Grown M’sian Terror Group ‘Aimed to Start Islamic State, War,’” TODAY, May 8, 2015, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/home-grown-msian-terror-group-aimed-start-islamic-state-war?singlepage=true>.

³⁴ “Seven Years Jail for Two for Withholding Terrorism Information,” Malaysiakini, January 27, 2016, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/328498>; “Razin — a Strange Loner,” *The Star*, October 30, 2012, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2012/10/30/razin--a-strange-loner>.

³⁵ El-Muhamaddy, “Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia,” 108.

³⁶ “Yazid Minta Saksi Buka Jaringan Di Syria,” *Berita Harian*, November 24, 2015, <https://www.bharian.com.my/taxonomy/term/11/2015/11/99686/yazid-minta-saksi-buka-jaringan-di-syria>.

³⁷ “Yazid Minta Saksi Buka Jaringan Di Syria.”

³⁸ Kamatchy Sappani, “Suspects of Attempted Suicide Attacks Face Terrorism Charges in Lebanon,” *The Star*, February 23, 2013, <https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/news/legal-and-general-news/legal-news/suspects-of-attempted-suicide-attacks-face-terrorism-charges-in-lebanon>.

³⁹ “Yazid Minta Saksi Buka Jaringan Di Syria.”

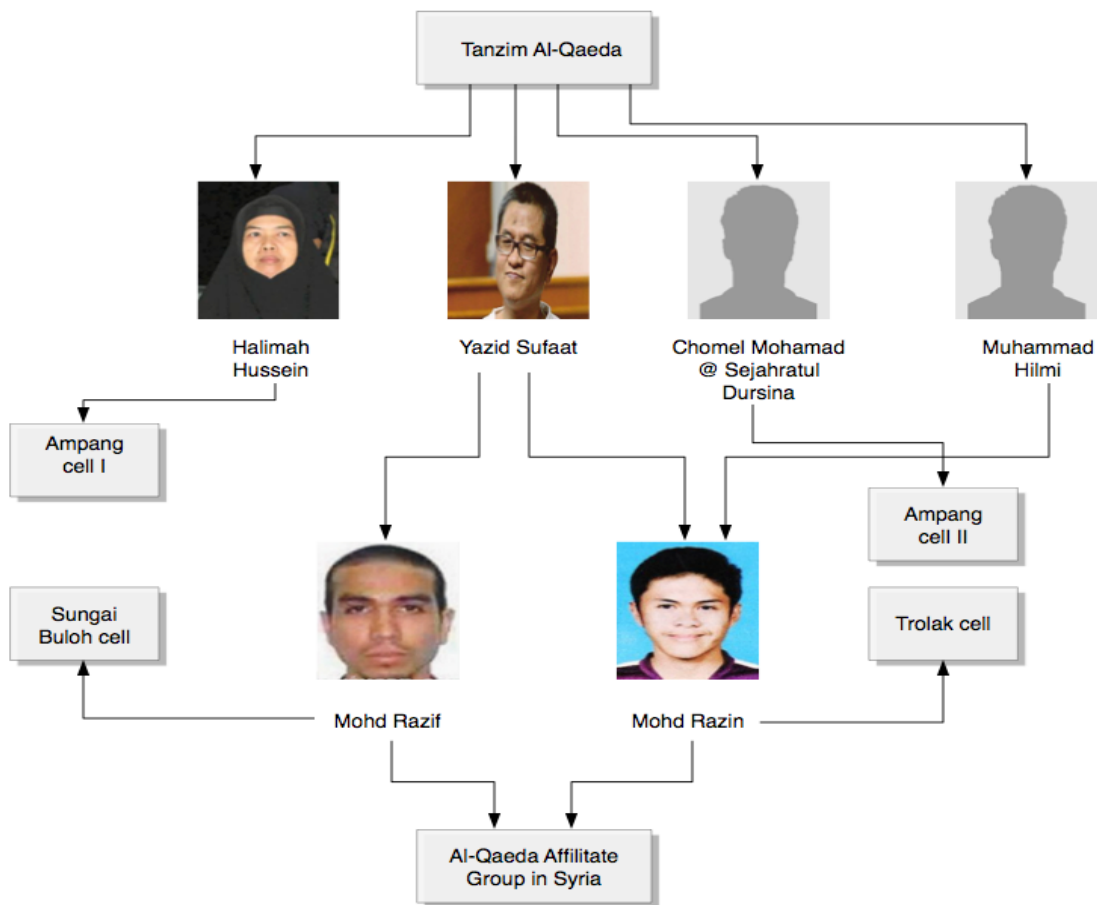


Figure 2: Yazid Sufaat's network as alleged by the Malaysian security services.⁴⁰

As noted in Figure 2, Malaysian police further alleged that Razif and Razin had led their own TAQ cells in the state of Selangor and Perak respectively while Yazid's wife, Chomel Mohamad and her religious teacher, Halimah Hussein were involved in two other cells that were actively recruiting members.⁴¹ TAQ's activities appeared to have ceased after Sufaat, Hilmi and Halimah were arrested and charged in February 2013 with terrorism offences. Sufaat was charged for recruitment and promoting terrorism in Syria while Hilmi and Halimah were charged with abetting him.⁴² Although there were some evidence of recruitment through social media such as Facebook, the primary mode of radicalization and recruitment in this phase was physical in nature, by means of the *ceramah* sessions conducted by Sufaat.

⁴⁰ "Home-Grown M'sian Terror Group 'Aimed to Start Islamic State, War.'"

⁴¹ "Home-Grown M'sian Terror Group 'Aimed to Start Islamic State, War.'"

⁴² T K Letchumy Tamboo, "Yazid Sufaat and Muhammad Hilmi to be charged for terrorism," *Astro Awani*, May 27, 2013, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/yazid-sufaat-and-muhammad-hilmi-be-charged-terrorism-15048>; Rodzi, "Terrorist Linked to Al-Qaeda Will Be Freed next Month, Confirms Malaysian Police Chief."

Phase 2: Lotfi Ariffin and the first wave

The second phase of movement of Malaysian fighters into the Syrian and Iraq conflict was centered around Mohd. Lotfi Ariffin who can be considered a crucial ‘network hub’ in this phase.

Hailing from Kuala Ketil, Kedah, Lotfi Ariffin had completed a Master’s degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic language from the Faisalabad Islamic University in Pakistan between 1988 and 1995.⁴³ In the same period, he had trained with the Afghan mujahideen in Kunjab, Afghanistan and fought alongside them in the war (with Murad Halimuddin).⁴⁴ Lotfi was also reported to have fought alongside Abdullah Azzam, the ideological mentor of Osama bin Laden and prominent Soviet-Afghan war veteran in Afghanistan, and in Tajikistan with an Al-Qaeda affiliated group under the leadership of Samir Salleh Abdullah known as General Khattab.⁴⁵

Upon his return to Malaysia, he had become a member of the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) group and took up leadership of the KMM cell in Kedah.⁴⁶ Lotfi had also become a PAS member. In 2000, Lotfi alongside Marwan, Murad Halimuddin, Rafi Udin, Zainuri Kamarudin, Zainan Harith and Zid Saharani had participated in fighting in Ambon and Poso.⁴⁷ He had been arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) between 2001 and 2006 for alleged involvement in terrorism. Upon his release, Lotfi was elected PAS Youth Information Chief in Kedah and sat on its Ulama committee.⁴⁸ He had amassed a large following owing to his religious credentials. He had become a popular figure and role model among the Muslim community. His lectures, some of which are still available online on YouTube, have garnered as much as 50,000 views.⁴⁹

Lotfi had left Malaysia for Syria on 31st January 2014 and had joined Syrian rebel group, Afnad al-Sham (AAS) on 14th February 2014. AAS comprised of a coalition of five Syrian rebel groups and was alleged to have been linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁰ The group comprised of 53 sub-factions, had a military strength of 15,000 fighters and was actively engaged in fighting Bashar al-Assad’s forces.⁵¹ AAS was neither linked to Al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State (IS) at the time.⁵² Other ex-KMM members who had followed in Lotfi’s lead were Zainuri Kamaruddin, Rafi

⁴³ “Sebuah Lagi Karya Dari Tirai Besi,” *Penerangan Pemuda PAS Kedah* (blog), August 4, 2012, <http://penerangandppnk.blogspot.com/2012/08/sebuah-lagi-karya-dari-tirai-besi.html>.

⁴⁴ Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam, “A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia” (Ph.D. Thesis, New Zealand, Victoria University of Wellington, 2009), 106, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/41339479.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Rem Ramzi, “Al-Fatihah, Ustaz Lotfi Akhirnya Gugur Di Bumi Syria,” *MYNEWSHUB* (blog), September 14, 2014, <https://www.mynewshub.tv/hangat/al-fatihah-ustaz-lotfi-akhirnya-gugur-di-bumi-syria/>; “Penerangan Pemuda PAS Kedah.”

⁴⁶ Aslam, “A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia,” 112.

⁴⁷ Aslam, 130.

⁴⁸ “Penerangan Pemuda PAS Kedah.”

⁴⁹ *Tazkirah Maghrib Ustaz Md Lotfi Ariffin - Kemuncak Kezaliman Ke Atas Umat Islam Syria Dan Mesir*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MebaQOv5dwg>.

⁵⁰ Aron Lund, “The Afnad al-Sham Islamic Union,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 4, 2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54750>.

⁵¹ Lund.

⁵² Lund.

Udin, Zainan Harith, Zid Saharani and Murad Halimuddin Hassan among others. Owing to their close links from their joint KMM membership, it is believed Lotfi's *hijrah* to Syria might have played a part in their decision either directly or indirectly. Zainuri, Rafi Udin and Zainan had left together to Syria to join AAS in April 2014 whilst Zid had left in July 2014.

As noted in Figure 3, Lotfi had attracted two groups of people, the 'old guard' which comprised of his initial KMM network comprising of older individuals who had prior militant experience and links; and the 'new guard' comprising a group of younger individuals who had no prior militant experience and links, and who were recruited through a mix of online and offline connections to Lotfi. Lotfi along with his network of ex-KMM members comprising Zainan Harith (Abu Turob), Mohd Rafi Udin (Abu Ain/Abu Awn al-Malizi), Zainuri Kamaruddin (Abu Thalha Malizi), Murad Halimuddin Hassan, Zid Saharani (Abu Hoor) and Abdul Samad Shukry Mohammad (Abu Aisyah who was ex-JI) formed the first group of fighters that had successfully made it into Syria. This group is characterized by members who were older in age and had pre-existing links to militant Islamist groups, namely KMM and JI. Their links to Lotfi (the hub) were personal as opposed to online. To understand this phase of fighters better, a brief history of KMM is necessary.

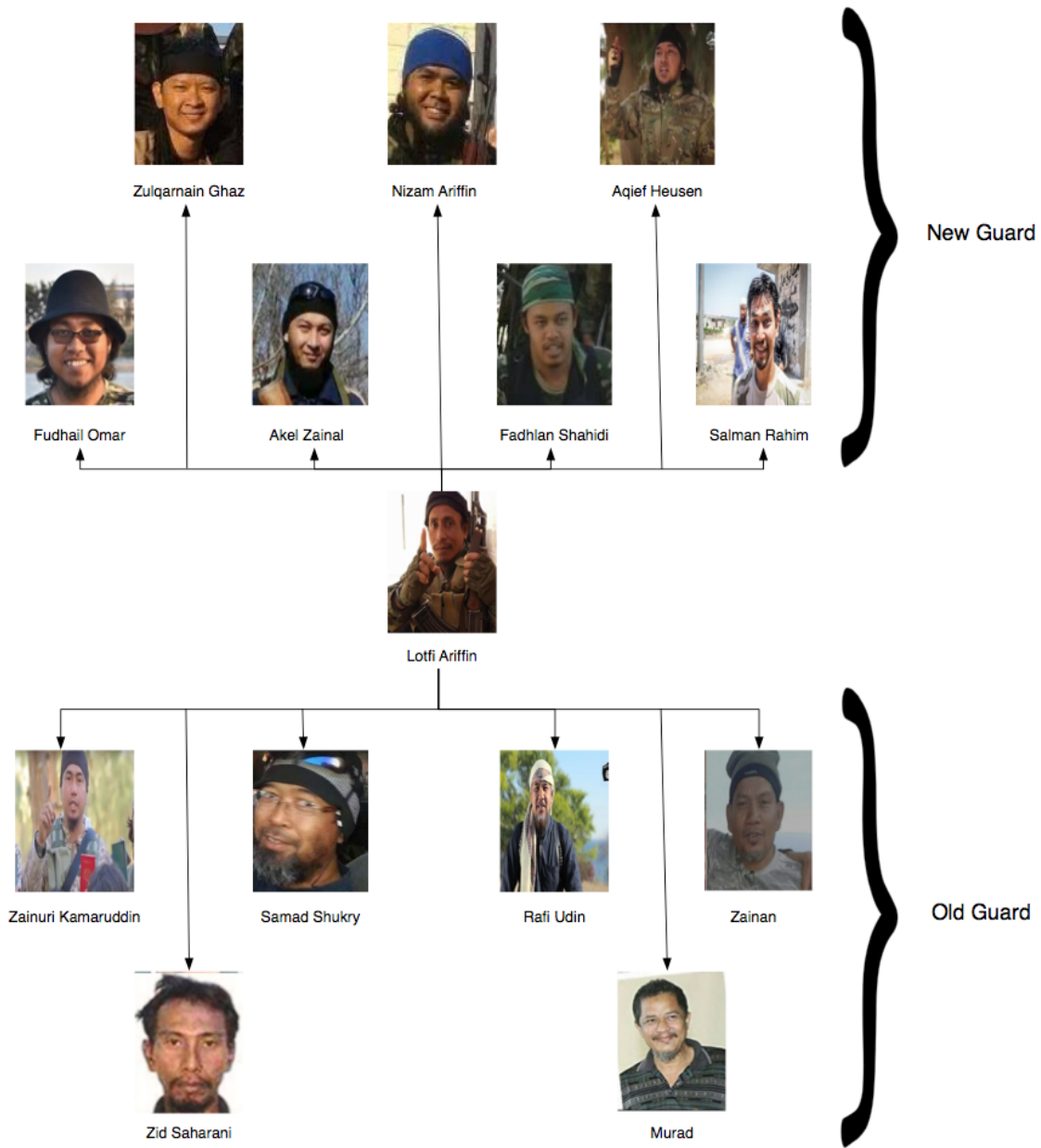


Figure 3: Selected key personalities involved in Lotfi's network. Chart created by the authors (Refer to the appendix for the full list of Malaysian foreign fighters)

KMM was formed on 12 October 1995 by Zainon Ismail, a member of the Malaysian Islamist Party (PAS) and one of the first Malaysians to have fought in the Soviet-Afghan war.⁵³ KMM had its roots in two different organisations: Kumpulan Mujahidin Kedah (Kedah Mujahidin Group or KMK) and Halaqah-Pakindo.⁵⁴ KMK was formed in 1986 by a group consisting predominantly of

⁵³ Kirsten E. Schulze and Julie Chernov Hwang, "Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: New Insights into Jihad in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019): 3.

⁵⁴ Aslam, "A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia," 104–10.

PAS members including Zainon Ismail himself and advocated for *jihad* and *shaheed* (martyrdom).⁵⁵

Halaqah-Pakindo was an alumni organization that consisted of Malaysian students who were studying in Pakistan, India and Indonesia. The group was formed to consolidate these students. Most of the students who studied in Pakistan were children of PAS members.⁵⁶ These individuals had taken part in military training in various camps in Afghanistan and had participated in fighting alongside the Afghan *mujahideen* in the Soviet-Afghan War.⁵⁷ They were allegedly exposed to salafi-jihadi ideologies which were propagated by their institutions in India and Pakistan.⁵⁸ Upon returning to Malaysia, Zainon and his fellow jihadists had formed KMM out of the core members of Halaqah-Pakindo. The main goal of KMM was the overthrow of the secular Malaysian government which was viewed to be un-Islamic, the implementation of *Shariah* and the formation of an Islamic State in Malaysia without discounting the use of violence.⁵⁹ KMM had also envisioned the formation of an Archipelagic Islamic State or *Daulah Islam Nusantara* comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand.⁶⁰

The link between KMM and JI was established by the faction within KMM that came to be known as Kumpulan Militan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMMM or K3M) or the ‘Puchong cell’.⁶¹ Certain members within KMM particularly the Selangor branch based in Puchong had felt that its central leadership had been too passive in its advocacy of violence and decided to break away and form K3M in 1998.⁶² The faction was led by Zulkifli Khir, also known as Marwan (leader of KMM operations unit) who would later become a key JI-Abu Sayyaf member in the Philippines, Adnan Daud (leader of the Selangor KMM cell) and Zainuri Kamaruddin (leader of KMM economic division).⁶³

KMM had maintained close links with key JI members including Abu Bakar Basyir, spiritual leader and founder of JI; Hambali and Abu Jibril while they were based in Malaysia from 1985-1998.⁶⁴ The three were elected as permanent teachers by KMM members and frequently conducted *usrah* (study circle) sessions with them.⁶⁵ It is believed that both Basyir and Hambali had infused JI’s narrative into KMM’s ideology during these sessions.

⁵⁵ Aslam, 88.

⁵⁶ Aslam, 105.

⁵⁷ Aslam, 106.

⁵⁸ Aslam, 105.

⁵⁹ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, “Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI): The Links,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 4, no. 1 (April 2009): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335300.2009.9686922>.

⁶⁰ Abdullah, 36.

⁶¹ Aslam, “A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia,” 121. KMMM or K3M referred to the same breakaway faction and were just different naming conventions used by the Malaysian security services and media.

⁶² Aslam, 120–21.

⁶³ Aslam, “A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia,” 121.

⁶⁴ Aslam, 123.

⁶⁵ Aslam, 124.

Owing to the espousal of violent ideology propagated by JI leaders, KMM members engaged in a number of violent attacks which was often under the guidance of the JI trio between 1998 and 2001.⁶⁶ Zainuri, Rafi Udin and Zainan had taken part in KMM's terrorist activities in this period. As one of the key members of the K3M faction, Zainuri was in charge of arms procurement and fund collection for K3M.⁶⁷ He was also involved in the bombing of a Hindu temple in Kuala Lumpur in October 2000, robberies involving a bank in December 2000 (with Zainan and Rafi Udin) as part of a *fa'i* (robbery in the name of jihad) campaign and a police station in Kedah in February 2001 (with Zainan and Murad).⁶⁸ The explosives in the temple bombing were believed to have been provided by Imam Samudra (Indonesian JI member and 2002 Bali bomber) and the bombs were believed to have been constructed by Zid Saharani, who was considered an expert in "home-made bombs".⁶⁹ The group was also believed to have masterminded attempted attacks on US Navy personnel stationed in Malaysia and the assassination of a member of parliament named Joe Fernandez who was accused of converting Muslims. Zid Saharani and Rafi Udin were also linked to fellow Malaysian national and JI bomb expert, Dr. Azahari Husin, and Imam Samudra, who had arranged for them to seek exile in Indonesia after fleeing the police crackdown on KMM in May 2001.⁷⁰

The second category of fighters in this phase, known as the 'new guard' comprised of younger individuals who had no prior affiliation to any terrorist groups. The only common link that they had was their affiliation to Lotfi. All members of this group had initially joined AAS, most likely under the influence of Lotfi before shifting to IS after the latter's death. Some of the individuals in this group were either recruited or inspired to leave for Syria by Lotfi. Some were reported to have personal links with Lotfi while the rest might only have had online links, i.e. via social media.

Lotfi's use of social media had played a key role in attracting individuals into the Syrian conflict. He was an active user of Facebook and often used the platform to call for his supporters to undertake *hijrah* and defend the Muslims of Syria against the Assad regime.⁷¹ His first Facebook pages had attracted a total of 72,000 followers.⁷² Counter-terrorism analyst, Nur Azlin refers to Lotfi as "the doyen of Malaysian online extremism".⁷³

One example of Lotfi's social media pull would be Mohammad Fadhlan Shahidi (Abu Muhajir). Hailing from the same state of Kedah as Lotfi, Fadhlan was the youngest known Malaysian to have fought in Syria at the age of 21.⁷⁴ He was reportedly "intrigued" by Lotfi's Facebook posts and

⁶⁶ Aslam, 121.

⁶⁷ Aslam, 116–17.

⁶⁸ Aslam, 136–42.

⁶⁹ Aslam, 137.

⁷⁰ Aslam, 131.

⁷¹ Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, "The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 7 (2017): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351534>.

⁷² Yasin, 3.

⁷³ Yasin, 3.

⁷⁴ "Youngest Jihadist Is Second Malaysian to Be Killed in Syria," *The Star*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/09/11/youngest-jihadist-is-second-malaysian-to-be-killed-in-syria>.

had messaged him to ask how he could become a fighter.⁷⁵ Lotfi had arranged for his travel into Syria in May 2014 and he had joined AAS upon his arrival in Hama, Syria.⁷⁶

Another key member in this group is Wan Mohd Aquil bin Wan Zainal Abidin (Abu Aqeel), popularly known as Akel Zainal. He was a native of Kelantan and was aged 35 when he left for Syria. He had no prior religious background and was in fact a member of a 90s Malay rock band called 'Ukays'.⁷⁷ Akel was reported to have been influenced by Lotfi and had joined AAS upon his arrival in Syria.⁷⁸ Akel went on to become a key IS figure and recruiter.

Other key IS figures who were originally recruited into AAS by Lotfi were Muhammad Fudhail Omar (Abu Qutaibah) and Mohd Nizam Ariffin (Abu Afghan). Fudhail, aged 22 at the point of entry into Syria, was persuaded to do so by Lotfi.⁷⁹ Nizam was also reported to have been a friend of Lotfi's and it is believed that Lotfi had played a role in him joining AAS prior to IS.⁸⁰ Likewise, Abdul Samad Shukry Mohamad (Abu Aisyah) was reported to be a "good friend" of Lotfi and had arrived in Syria together with him.⁸¹

A key differing factor between the 'old guard' and the 'new guard' apart from age and militant links is religious background. As mentioned earlier, most of members of the 'old guard' had a certain level of religious background during their early experience in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most members of the 'new guard' were not religiously inclined apart from Fadhlan Shahidi and Fudhail Omar who had received religious education.

⁷⁵ "The Social Media Life of a Malaysian Jihadist," *BBC News*, August 14, 2014, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28755907>.

⁷⁶ "The Social Media Life of a Malaysian Jihadist."

⁷⁷ "Ukays Ex-Guitarist Akel Zainal Joined ISIS," *The Independent*, March 3, 2018, <https://theindependent.sg/ukays-ex-guitarist-akel-zainal-joined-isis/>.

⁷⁸ Sharifah Mahsinah Abdullah, "Arrest Awaits Militant Akel Zainal If He Returns to Malaysia," *New Straits Times*, October 3, 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2018/10/417387/arrest-awaits-militant-akel-zainal-if-he-returns-malaysia>.

⁷⁹ "Would-Be ISIS Malaysia Chief Killed: Report," *The Straits Times*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/would-be-isis-malaysia-chief-killed-report>.

⁸⁰ M. Natha, "Malaysian Militant in IS Video Killed in Iraq: Govt Officials," *Benar News*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/video-death-06122017163215.html>.

⁸¹ "Sixth Malaysian Militant Killed in Syria," *The Straits Times*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sixth-malaysian-militant-killed-in-syria>.

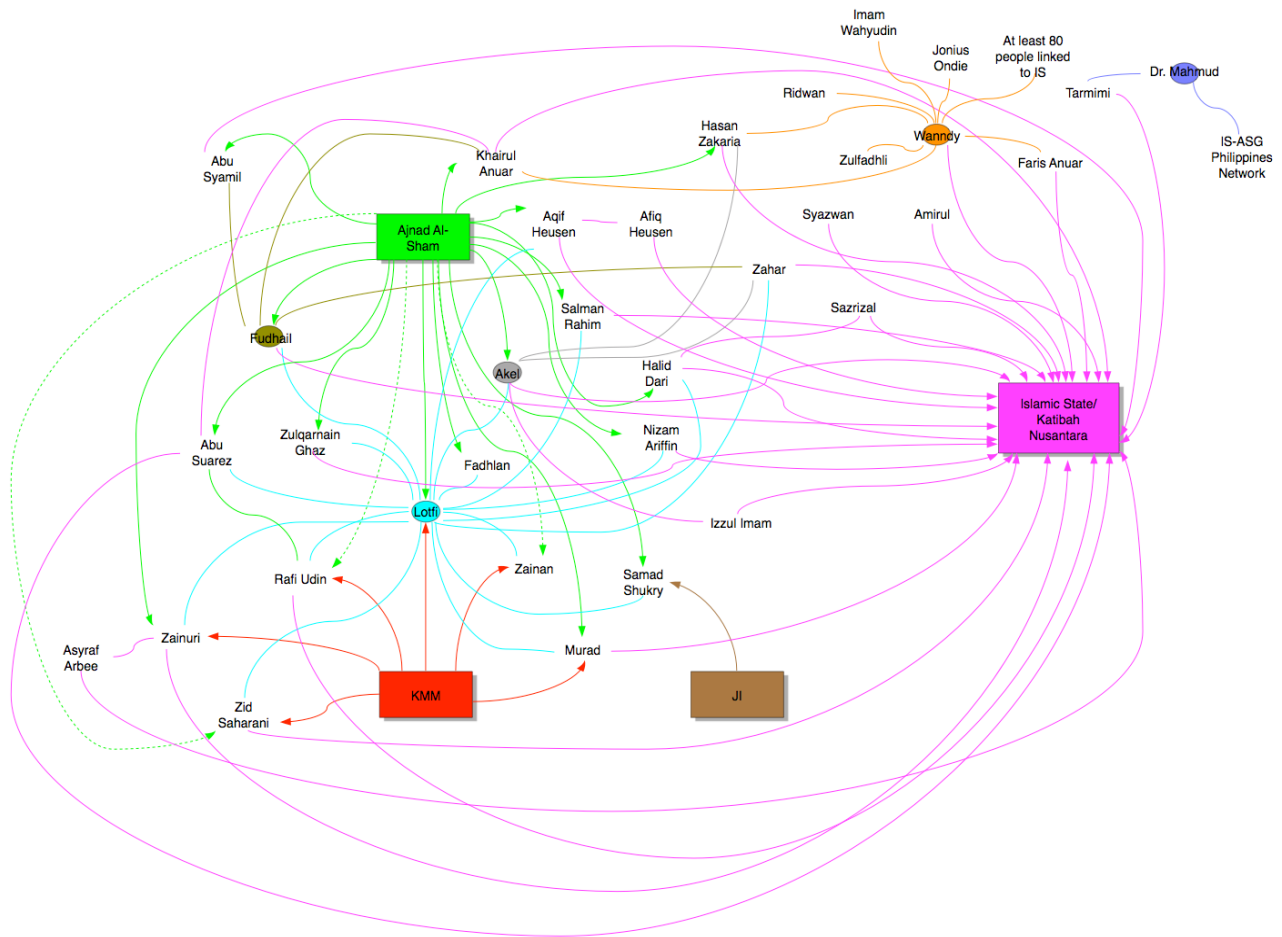


Figure 4: Lotfi's network and the shift from Ajnad al-Sham to Islamic State (Authors' analysis based on social media profiles, court documents and media reports). The colored circles are the key 'network hubs'.⁸²

Figure 4 shows that contrary to popular belief and certain reports⁸³, the initial group of Malaysian fighters after the first attempted wave in Phase 1 had joined AAS prior to joining IS, and not IS

⁸² A link between two individuals is established from any evidence, be it a photo, media report, video or social media post that establishes the fact that they had a relationship with each other or places them in the same place at the same time. There is no conclusive evidence that Zid Saharani, Rafi Udin and Zainan Harith officially joined AAS (hence the dotted lines in Figure 4). However, owing to their previous links with Lotfi and the fact that Rafi Udin and Zainan had traveled into Syria together with Zainuri (who had joined AAS) on the 18th of April 2014, it is believed that the trio were linked to AAS. Dr. Mahmud Ahmad's network is not discussed in detail in this article as he was a key recruiter of foreign fighters into the Philippines theatre. The one known individual whom he was reported to have recruited into the Middle East was Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, who was the first Malaysian to become a suicide bomber for IS. He carried out an attack on 26 May 2016 on the Iraqi SWAT headquarters in al-Anbar killing 25 elite Iraqi soldiers. For more details, please refer to the Appendix for the selected list of Malaysian foreign fighters.

⁸³ Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam, "Fake Paradise For Malaysian Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Middle East Institute, February 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/fake-paradise-malaysian-foreign-terrorist-fighters>; "Lotfi 'a Martyr' for Sacrificing His Life for Isis, Says Nik Abduh," Yahoo News, September 15, 2014, <http://my.news.yahoo.com/lotfi-matyr-sacrificing-life-isis-says-nik-abduh-032854341.html>; "Malaysian Isis Fighter in Coma after Syrian Offensive, Says Paper," The Edge Markets, September 12, 2014, <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malaysian-isis-fighter-coma-after-syrian-offensive-says-paper>.

straight away. This group was sometimes referred to as “freelance jihadists”.⁸⁴ The main reason for this is believed to have been the role of Lotfi as a ‘network hub’, a role model owing to his religious credentials and recruiter. He was seen to be someone who had ‘practiced what he preached’ by actively engaging in *hijrah* and *jihad*, unlike other religious preachers who had just spend their time preaching far from the battlefields, in the comfort and safety of their home country. A Facebook posting in 2016 referring to Lotfi by a suspected Malaysia fighter or supporter by the name Farouq Reza (Abu Qa’qa) stated

“A good ulama (religious teacher) is one that attracts goodness and disbelief to the thoghut (oppressors). One that calls for the unification of Muslims. And fights the kuffar (infidels) who fights the Muslims. Not one that sits together with the infidels!” (translated)⁸⁵

Many of the younger members of the network such as Fudhail Omar, Fadhlan Shahidi, Nizam Ariffin and Akel Zainal considered Lotfi to be their teacher and mentor as shown in Figure 5 and 6.



Figure 5: Lotfi (left) with Fudhail (centre) and Nizam Ariffin (right) with the caption “In memory of Ustaz Lotfi with his beloved students, by the grace of God, may he attain martyrdom”. Posted on Akel Zainal’s Facebook account in 2016.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ “Sixth Malaysian Militant Killed in Syria.”

⁸⁵ “Farouq Reza,” Facebook Profile, 2017.

⁸⁶ “Sri Subekti,” Facebook Profile, 2016.



Figure 6: Lotfi (centre) with Fadhlan (left) and Akel (right) with the caption “In memory, Abu Aqil, Ustaz Lotfi and his favorite student (referring to Fadhlan).” Posted on Akel Zainal’s Facebook account in 2016.⁸⁷

The shift of fighters from AAS to IS came after the death of Lotfi on 14th of September 2014. Lotfi himself had never joined IS, which was officially declared on 29 June 2014. He had famously stated in an interview, “I neither belong to Jabhat al-Nusrah nor Daesh. I performed jihad for the sake of the Syrians. I do not belong to any groups.”⁸⁸

After his death, all of the members from the above networks (except Fadhlan, who was killed on 9th September 2014, Samad Shukry who was injured and later died in February 2015 and Zainan who was killed in August 2014) had shifted to IS. The reason for this is largely due Lotfi’s death. Lotfi was viewed as a leader to many of the Malaysian fighters at that point.

Another reason which could have served as a push factor for the fighters to move from AAS to IS is the shifts that had occurred within the anti-Assad coalition forces, in particular AAS’ decision to join the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁸⁹ The FSA was viewed as traitors by some jihadists for receiving arms and support from the West and AAS’ alliance with the FSA was seen as a betrayal to the jihadist cause. This is manifested in a 2016 Facebook posting by Akel Zainal who referred to AAS, the group he was formerly a member of as “bodoh” or stupid in Malay.⁹⁰

A number of former Malaysian AAS fighters had gone on to play key roles as IS members. Most of them had joined IS’ Malay-speaking unit, Katibah Nusantara (KN) comprising of Malaysians

⁸⁷ “Sri Subekti.”

⁸⁸ El-Muhamaddy, “Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia,” 109.

⁸⁹ Schulze and Liow, “Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad,” 133.

⁹⁰ “Abu Miswak Sembilan,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

and Indonesians. Known as ‘Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah’ (KN) or ‘Majmu’ah al-Arkhabiliy’, it was formed officially on 26 September 2014 and was based in Al-Shahadi in the Syrian province of Hasaka.⁹¹ Apart from its primary objective of assisting IS’ goal of forming an Islamic Caliphate, the unit served as a training and indoctrination facility for fighters including children and assisted families in Indonesia and Malaysia whose family members were in Iraq and Syria.⁹² Those who were not in the proximity of Hasaka province had joined IS units in different locations. The Malaysians were attracted to KN due to the language factor. The Indonesian language or Bahasa Indonesia is very similar to Malay, and thus the similarities in language facilitated communication and acted as a bind between the Malaysians and Indonesians. The role of the Malaysians in KN can be divided into four categories: recruitment and propaganda; combatant roles; fund-raising; and carrying out attacks abroad (elaborated below).

In 2016, Zainuri appeared in an IS-propaganda video with other members of KN calling for attacks against Malaysians who did not believe in the IS cause whom they deemed sinners, and threatened that an army of IS fighters would soon bring the fight back home to Malaysia and Indonesia.⁹³ The video also infamously showcased Zainuri leading a group of Malaysians in burning their passports and officially severing ties with their homeland.⁹⁴

In June of the same year, Rafi Udin appeared in an IS propaganda video produced by its Philippines media office titled “The Solid Structure”. He had called for Malaysians to join *mujahideen* in the Philippines under the command of Isnilon Hapilon and had called for IS supporters to “kill the polytheists and apostates wherever you find them”.⁹⁵ He was also shown beheading an IS captive and is the first Malaysian to have carried out a telecasted beheading on behalf of IS. As of November 2017, Rafi Udin was believed to be the most senior Malaysian IS operative in Syria.⁹⁶ However, he was not active in the online domain and was not considered to be as influential as Lotfi and Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi (discussed later).⁹⁷ Other Malaysians who have appeared in IS propaganda videos are Mohd Nizam Ariffin and Abdul Halid Dari.⁹⁸

Apart from Lotfi, two other network hubs include Akel Zainal and Fudhail Omar. In 2018, Akel was said to be one of the key leaders of IS among the Malaysians.⁹⁹ He was a key recruiter and fund collector for IS through social media. Akel gained widespread popularity and a celebrity

⁹¹ Jasminder Singh, “Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State’s Malay Archipelago Combat Unit,” *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 126 (May 26, 2015), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CO15126.pdf>.

⁹² Singh.

⁹³ Farah Naz Karim and Aliza Shah, “Cops Monitoring ‘Righteous Army,’” *NST Online*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/05/146284/cops-monitoring-righteous-army-video>.

⁹⁴ Karim and Shah.

⁹⁵ United Nations Security Council, “Mohamad Rafi Bin Udin,” August 23, 2018, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/mohamad-rafi-bin-udin>.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Three ISIS Recruiters from Southeast Asia” (United States of America, August 24, 2018), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm469>.

⁹⁷ Yasin, “The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia,” 4.

⁹⁸ “Malay-Speaking Wing of ISIS Sends Video Warning to Malaysia,” *The Straits Times*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malay-speaking-wing-of-isis-sends-video-warning-to-malaysia>.

⁹⁹ “Bekas Anggota Ukays Kini Pemimpin Kanan ISIS,” *Perak Today*, February 25, 2018, <https://peraktoday.com.my/2018/02/bekas-anggota-ukays-kini-pemimpin-kanan-isis/>.

status on Facebook through his stylized photos that he posted of himself on the battlefield and provided updates as to the outcomes of various IS battles in Syria. His Facebook profile was reported to have “thousands of followers”.¹⁰⁰ His prior background as a drummer in a rock band had garnered him attention and contributed to his popularity as he was viewed as a ‘unique’ individual who went from rockstar to jihadist fighter. He was reported to also have recruited female students from local universities to join IS in Syria including a college student by the name of Syamimi Faiqah who was alleged to have eventually married him.¹⁰¹ Akel had also facilitated the travel of Malaysian national Hasan Zakaria (Abu Adam al-Malizia), who became an IS suicide bomber and carried out an attack on a group of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) soldiers on 15 November 2016.¹⁰²

Akel was also involved in remotely planning a number of attacks in Malaysia. In 2018, two individuals were arrested by Malaysian police for planning attacks on places of worship in Kuala Lumpur and police stations in Kelantan under the instructions of Akel.¹⁰³ He had also attempted to mastermind another attack on a Freemasons Centre in Johor Bahru.¹⁰⁴

Another key member was Muhammad Fudhail Omar. Fudhail was believed to have joined KN after the death of Lotfi and was tasked with teaching the children of KN Quran recitation as he was well-versed in Islamic studies and had studied in Egypt. An influential propagandist and user of social media, Fudhail was also a key recruiter and fund collector via social media. He had also attempted to influence a 17-year old to carry out a lone-wolf attack in Sandakan, Sabah in 2016.¹⁰⁵ As of April 2017, after the death of Wanndy, Fudhail was one of the most senior Malaysian IS figures in Syria alongside Rafi Udin, Akel Zainal and former army officer turned IS member Muhammad Zahar.¹⁰⁶

Phase 3: Muhammad Wanndy and the recruitment storm

This phase is characterized by the recruitment activities and links to Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi (Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh) who was a key ‘network hub’ in this phase. Hailing from Durian Tunggal, Melaka, Wanndy was believed to have been radicalized online and had no prior links to any terrorist groups.¹⁰⁷ He had no religious background and had a troubled childhood. In

¹⁰⁰ Yasin, “The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia,” 4.

¹⁰¹ “Ukays Ex-Guitarist Akel Zainal Joined ISIS.”

¹⁰² Aliza Shah, “Two Malaysians Die for IS,” *New Straits Times*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/09/171132/two-malaysians-die>; “Young Malaysian ISIS Suicide Bomber ‘Killed 14 in Syria,’” *The Straits Times*, December 18, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/young-malaysian-isis-suicide-bomber-killed-14-in-syria>.

¹⁰³ Muzliza Mustafa and Hadi Azmi, “Arrests of Suspects Foiled Terrorist Plot, Malaysian Police Say,” *Benar News*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/suspects-arrested-12102018141313.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs, “Detention of Two Radicalised Singaporeans under the Internal Security Act” (Singapore, February 15, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ “Would-Be ISIS Malaysia Chief Killed.”

¹⁰⁶ “Would-Be ISIS Malaysia Chief Killed.”

¹⁰⁷ Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, “Malaysia’s ‘Jihadist-Celebrity’: Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8, no. 11 (2016): 15–19.

his early days, he had even been reprimanded for mixing too much with girls.¹⁰⁸ The turning point in Wanndy's life was the death of his mother in 2011, after which he had turned to religion.¹⁰⁹ Wanndy was gradually attracted to IS ideology and attributed his 'jihad in Syria' to a person whom he had talked with on Facebook and from whom he had learnt about jihad and the IS cause.¹¹⁰ He was involved in collecting and channeling funds to IS as he was alleged to have been seen "with bags of money" and holding clandestine meetings at his home in Melaka.¹¹¹ At the age of 25, he left for Syria on 26 January 2015 with his wife, Nor Mahmudah Ahmad to join IS.¹¹² He captured the attention of the security services after appearing in a self-filmed 30-second IS-linked video depicting the beheading of a Syrian spy with another Malaysian, Mohd Faris Anuar (Abu Qudamah al-Malizi).¹¹³ Wanndy was seen kicking the head of the man in the video which was uploaded on Wanndy's Facebook account on 22 February 2015.¹¹⁴

Wanndy was a key member of KN who had fought in both Iraq and Syria in places such as Hasakah, Aayn Issa, Bayji and Ramadi.¹¹⁵ He was active in recruiting individuals to join IS in Syria. Wanndy was alleged to have been linked to at least a third (more than 80) of the 250 people arrested in Malaysia between 2013 and 2016 for IS related activities.¹¹⁶

This phase also marked the shift from open source social media platforms to a greater use of encrypted platforms. Yasin refers to this shift as the funnel model of online radicalization whereby a wide array of individuals may initially visit or connect with a 'handler' on an open platform like Facebook and eventually, only those who show sufficient interest, commitment and radicalism move down the funnel into a deeper engagement with their handlers via encrypted platforms.¹¹⁷ Wanndy was adept in the use of Facebook and Twitter as well as encrypted platforms such as Whatsapp and Telegram. Like others such as Akel Zainal, Fudhail Omar and Lotfi Ariffin, Wanndy had used Facebook as a means to disseminate IS propaganda and ideology, provide daily updates on IS battles in Syria and Iraq and posts that were personal in nature such as providing updates on his daily life with his family and even the food they would eat on a daily basis. The latter provided his followers a glimpse into life in the 'promised land' and attracted a huge amount of attention. He had operated multiple accounts using various monikers including 'Abu Hamzah

¹⁰⁸ "IS: Muhamad Wanndy Tidak Berperwatakan Alim," *Berita Harian*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.bharian.com.my/taxonomy/term/11/2015/03/38517/muhamad-wanndy-tidak-berperwatakan-alim>.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Malaysian counter-terrorism official, July 2021.

¹¹⁰ Jani, "Malaysia's 'Jihadist-Celebrity,'" 15.

¹¹¹ "Malaysian Militant Was Hostile and Had Bags of Money, Say Neighbours and Friend," *The Straits Times*, March 7, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-militant-was-hostile-and-had-bags-of-money-say-neighbours-and-friend>.

¹¹² "Malaysian Militant Was Hostile and Had Bags of Money, Say Neighbours and Friend."

¹¹³ "Two Malaysians Spotted in ISIS Beheading Video Identified by Police," *The Straits Times*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/two-malaysians-spotted-in-isis-beheading-video-identified-by-police>.

¹¹⁴ Jani, "Malaysia's 'Jihadist-Celebrity,'" 15.

¹¹⁵ "Sayyaf Hamzah Al-Fateh," Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹¹⁶ "Malaysia's Top Islamic State Operative Killed in Syria: Police," *Reuters*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-militant-idUSKBN18415C>.

¹¹⁷ Yasin, "The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia," 2–3.

Al-Fateh', 'Abu Hamzah Al-fateh', 'Abu Hamzah al-Fateh', 'Abu Hamzah al-Fateh II', 'Sayyaf Malizia', 'Sayyaf Hamzah Al-Fateh' and 'Wakasilu Huruahara'.

Most of his covert communication, however, was through encrypted platforms such as Telegram, where he had led two groups called 'Gagak Hitam' (Black Crow) and 'amanah (phb) v pas'. Members had to follow a strict vetting process before being invited to join his Telegram groups to prevent spies which served as an intimate room for recruitment, discussion of IS ideology, activity, indoctrination and attack planning.¹¹⁸ His Telegram groups had approximately 30 members who were predominantly males of ages between 18 to 35 years.¹¹⁹

Wandy had efficiently used social media as a tool to recruit individuals, solicit funds and virtually plan attacks in Malaysia in line with senior IS strategist and spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's call to carry out attacks at home if supporters were not able to travel to the battlefield.

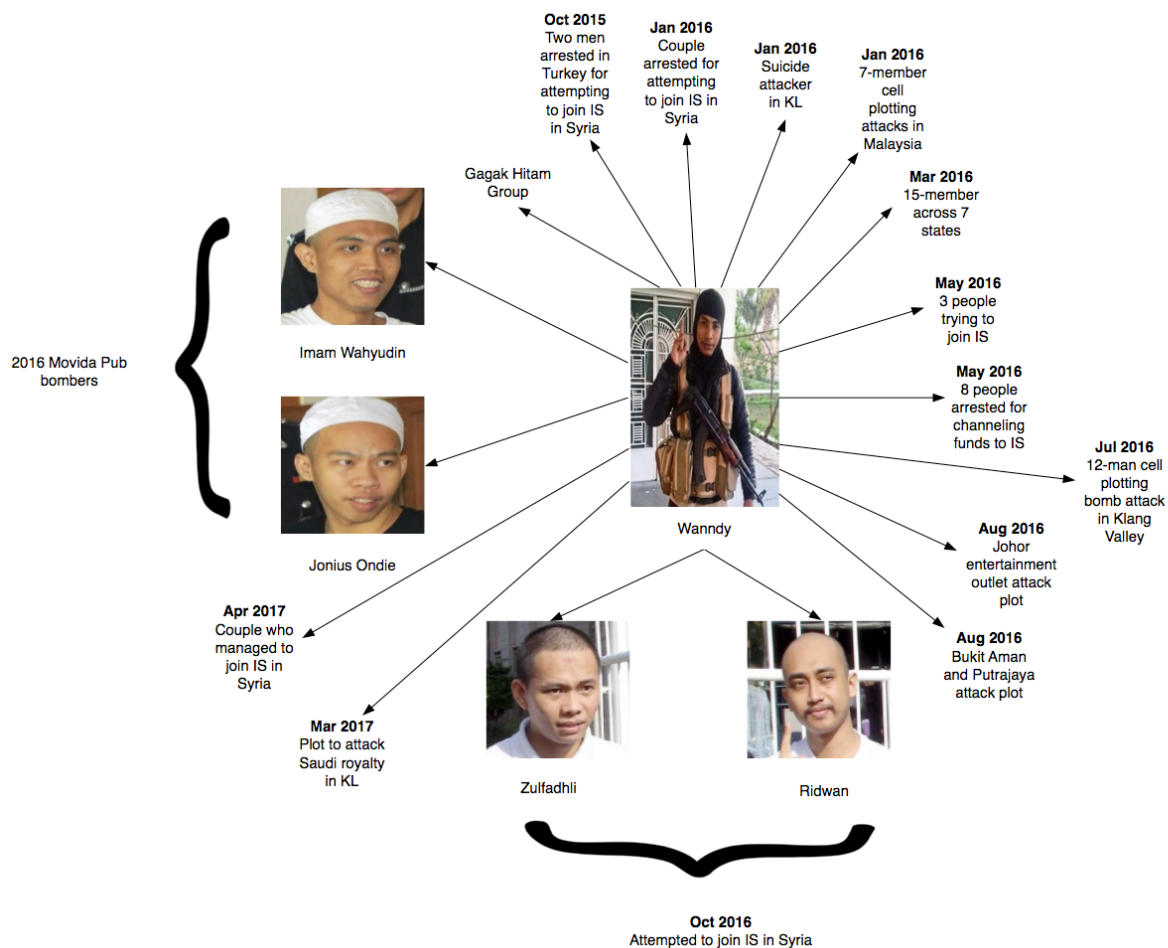


Figure 7: Wandy's network comprising a mix of individuals whom he had attempted to recruit into the Middle East and those whom he had directed to carry out attacks in Malaysia. Chart created by the authors.

¹¹⁸ Wan Mohd Nor and El-Muhammady, "Radicalisation and Paramilitary Culture," 106–18.

¹¹⁹ Wan Mohd Nor and El-Muhammady, 107.

In October 2015, two men in their 20s were detained for attempting to join IS in Syria via Turkey with the help of Wanndy.¹²⁰ On 11 January 2016, Malaysian police arrested a married couple in their 20s who were recruited by Wanndy through Facebook and Telegram for attempting to join IS in Syria.¹²¹ In April 2017, just prior to his death, Wanndy was responsible for recruiting another couple believed to be in their early 30s into Syria via Facebook Messenger.¹²²

In June 2016, Wanndy was alleged to have remotely masterminded the bombing of the Movida pub in Selangor. The bombing was carried out by 21-year old Indonesian, Imam Wahyudin Karjono and 24-year old Sabahan, Jonius Ondie. The duo, were members of a Telegram group by the name of 'Gagak Hitam' (Black Crow) which was led by Wanndy and had pledged allegiance to IS via the group.¹²³

In July 2016, Wanndy was believed to have been linked to a 12-man terrorist cell that was arrested in Malaysia. He was alleged to have provided them instructions on how to construct an improvised explosive device (IED) via Telegram in preparation for attacks in the Klang Valley.¹²⁴ In August 2016, another individual who was receiving instructions from Wanndy was arrested for plotting an attack on the Malaysian Police Headquarters in Bukit Aman and government offices in Putrajaya.¹²⁵ In the same month, another two individuals who were arrested had claimed that they were waiting for instructions from Wanndy to carry out attacks on entertainment outlets in Johor Bahru.¹²⁶ In October 2016, 14 members of the Gagak Hitam group were arrested with a number of them being involved in plots to attack the country's Independence Day celebrations, a Hindu temple and police stations on the instructions of Wanndy.¹²⁷

In March 2017, Wanndy was linked to another high-profile terrorist plot to attack Saudi Arabia's King Salman during his visit to Kuala Lumpur. The plot involved three cells of individuals involving four Yemenis, an Indonesian, a Malaysian and someone of East Asian origin.¹²⁸ Two of

¹²⁰ "Two Men Charged with Trying to Join Islamic State in Syria," *Malay Mail*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/11/28/two-men-charged-with-trying-to-join-islamic-state-in-syria/1260261>.

¹²¹ Polis Diraja Malaysia, "Tangkapan Empat Individu Yang Disyaki Terlibat Dalam Kumpulan Pengganas" (Siaran Media Polis Diraja Malaysia, January 16, 2016).

¹²² Safeek Affendy Razali and Faris Fuad, "Suami Direkrut Mohammad Wanndy Mohammad Jedi - Aisyah," *Berita Harian*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2018/10/490380/suami-direkrut-mohammad-wanndy-mohammad-jedi-aisyah>.

¹²³ Public Prosecutor v Imam Wahyudin Karjono and Anor [2017] 1 LNS 691 (High Court of Kuala Lumpur 2017); Mustaza bin Abdul Rahman v Public Prosecutor [2020] MLJU 1351 (Court of Appeal (Putrajaya) September 7, 2020).

¹²⁴ Polis Diraja Malaysia, "Tangkapan 14 Individu Yang Disyaki Terlibat Dalam Kumpulan Pengganas Islamic State" (Siaran Media Polis Diraja Malaysia, July 23, 2016).

¹²⁵ Polis Diraja Malaysia, "Tangkapan Sembilan Suspek Yang Terlibat Dalam Kumpulan Pengganas Islamic State (Is)" (Siaran Media Polis Diraja Malaysia, August 13, 2016).

¹²⁶ Polis Diraja Malaysia.

¹²⁷ "Malaysia Detains 16 Terror Suspects across 6 States," TODAY, October 9, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/malaysia-arrests-16-suspected-militant-links>.

¹²⁸ Ben Otto and Yantoultra Ngui, "Islamic State Plotted to Attack Saudi Royals During Malaysia Visit," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-targeted-saudi-royals-in-malaysia-1488882196>.

the men were directed by Wanndy to prepare a car bomb.¹²⁹ He was known to have used a decentralized method to form and communicate with the cells where each cell member was assigned to one particular task without knowing the identity or tasks of other members of the cell.¹³⁰

The rise of Wanndy as a key online recruiter and planner added a whole new dimension to the extremism landscape in Malaysia. Unlike part of Lotfi’s network, Wanndy’s network had no prior links to any form of militancy, came from various social and educational backgrounds and were predominantly younger in age. One can also draw the distinction between the group of early militants who left from Syria, i.e. Lotfi and the KMM group (the ‘old guard’) and the militants who left after that. The former comprised of individuals who were of older age, had previous militant experience in Afghanistan, had backgrounds in religious education and links to militant groups. The latter can be characterized as a more amorphous mix of individuals who are younger in age, had no prior links or militant experience and no religious backgrounds.

Drivers of Radicalization

The drivers of radicalization in the Malaysian case can be divided into two factors: external and internal as shown in Figure 8. External factors are factors and developments that occur outside of the country that act as pull factors that attract fighters to the cause. Internal factors are those that occur within the country and act as push factors.¹³¹



Figure 8: Radicalisation driver model for Malaysian foreign fighters (Created by the authors)

External factors include the role of charismatic personalities that act as networks hubs, the romanticization of jihad and militancy, ideological factors and moral factors. It is argued that in

¹²⁹ Otto and Ngui.

¹³⁰ Mustafa and Azmi, “Arrests of Suspects Foiled Terrorist Plot, Malaysian Police Say.”

¹³¹ Works by scholars such as John Horgan, Tore Bjørgo and others have used similar push-pull models to describe terrorist disengagement. A clear distinction has to be made between their work and the work in this paper as the latter deals with terrorist engagement as opposed to disengagement. For more information on the push-pull model with regards to terrorist engagement, see Mary Beth Altier et al., “Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-Seven Autobiographical Accounts,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 305–32.

the Malaysian case, the role of charismatic personalities remains the primary factor. Other factors can be considered secondary factors.

Charismatic individuals/leaders such as Yazid Sufaat, Lotfi Ariffin, Akel Zainal, Fudhail Omar and Muhammad Wanndy, who functioned as network hubs and pioneered the recruitment of the three phases of Malaysian fighters into Iraq and Syria remain the key factor that resulted in the radicalization and decision of these individuals to leave for the battlefield. For example, Lotfi was looked upon by the wider foreign fighter and Islamist community as a role model, teacher and ‘hero’. This may have been due to his background in religious education, his prior jihadi experience in Afghanistan and the fact that he was a well-known PAS leader and preacher. For example, Wanndy himself in a Facebook posting in 2016 had stated

“Ustaz Lotfi Ariffin was supposed to be awarded Tokoh Maal Hijrah (Malaysian government award for prominent Muslims who have contributed to society) and recognized as an icon but instead was insulted for carrying out his responsibility (referring to) Jihad Fisabilillah as he sacrificed his property, his self and life to the religion of Allah...Ustaz Lotfi is a legend. If Indonesia has Imam Samudera, we from Malaysia have Ustaz Lotfi, Noordin Mat Top and many other Malay mujahidin who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the religion...takbir Allahuakbar...!” (translated)¹³²

Apart from Lotfi, personalities such as Fudhail Omar, Akel Zainal and Wanndy played a key role as recruiters and role models. The number of individuals going to Iraq and Syria had substantially decreased after the death of these individuals.¹³³ This highlights the role of personalities in recruitment.

The romanticization of life as a fighter inside Iraq and Syria through the prolific use of social media by fighters also played a key role as a driver of radicalization particularly among Malaysians. Akel Zainal was one of the many who was known to have frequently posted stylized images of himself in combat gear with firearms. These posts solicited much awe and support from their followers. As noted in Figure 9, a post of Akel in 2016 in front of a tank had garnered the following comment from a follower, “So stylish, you are giving us the motivation to (make) *hijrah* to help the religion of Allah in Syam” (translated).¹³⁴ Jihadis such as him had earned celebrity status online. Akel also had a large ‘fanbase’ among young women. According to a Malaysian counter-terrorism official, school-going teenage girls would often wait for school to be over so that they could log on to Facebook and check for the latest daily updates posted by Akel.¹³⁵

¹³² “Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹³³ Interview with Malaysian counter-terrorism official, July 2021.

¹³⁴ “Anuar Khairul,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹³⁵ Interview with Malaysian counter-terrorism official, May 2021.



Suka Komentari Bagikan

Anda, Khairul Nizam, Abu Pungguk Al Malizi, dan 200 lainnya

2 kali dibagikan

Lihat 30 komentar lain

 **Yohyo Ila'nun AlSaba Malizia** Hehe...sungguh bergaya memberi kami semangat tuk hijrah join bantu agama Allah di bumi syam...insya Allah...ya ikhwan...wassalam...

Suka · Balas · 2 · 8 jam · Telah disunting

 **Arian Shah Mam** ini toyota @ honda...?hehehehe...

Suka · Balas · 1 · 6 jam

Figure 9: Akel Zainal posing in front of a tank.¹³⁶

The portrayal of life in Syria as being peaceful and accompanied with many advantages also attracted individuals to the cause. For example, as can be seen in Figure 10, Fudhail Omar had posted photos of children of KN playing in the Furot River in Syria with the words, “Although without families by their side, they are happy under the care of the Islamic Caliphate because they are the golden children of the Khilafah” (translated).¹³⁷ Another post by Malaysian fighter Zahar al-Shamy in 2015 called upon Malaysians to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State as basic amenities like gas and water were free and there was no need to pay for any extra tax apart from the *zakat* (religious tax).¹³⁸

¹³⁶ “Abu Miswak Sembilan.”
¹³⁷ “Abu Qutaibah,” Facebook Profile, 2016.
¹³⁸ “Zahar Al Shamy,” Facebook Profile, 2015.

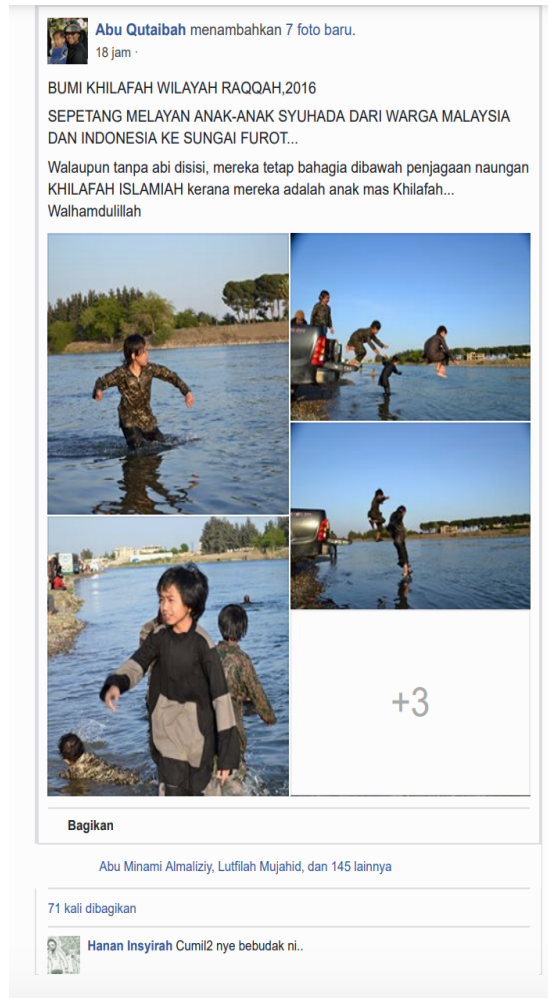


Figure 10: A posting by Fudhail Omar in 2016 showcasing life inside Syria.¹³⁹

Salman Rahim was known to be a prolific user of social media among the Malaysians. Apart from a personal Facebook account, he had a separate account-cum-blog titled ‘Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam’ (A Tour of the Syrian Lands) which was filled with photos and posts of his experience travelling to Syria and his daily life.¹⁴⁰ The blog outlined in detail his journey by road from Malaysia up north into Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, India and finally into the Middle East and Syria.¹⁴¹ His writings which often read like a novel garnered a large following. His posts had gained more than 4,000 likes and his videos were akin to a travel show where he would frequently interview his fellow comrades and narrate what was going on in Syria.¹⁴² He also took on to Twitter to post parts of his travel photos as seen in Figure 11.

¹³⁹ “Abu Qutaibah.”

¹⁴⁰ “The Social Media Life of a Malaysian Jihadist.”

¹⁴¹ “Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam,” *Abu Haziq* (blog), September 13, 2016, abuizuddin.blogspot.com.

¹⁴² “The Social Media Life of a Malaysian Jihadist.”



Figure 11: Selected posts of Salman Rahim during his travels on the journey to Syria.¹⁴³

Moral factors are another key driver of radicalization among Malaysian foreign fighters (and IS supporters, in general). The notion of Islam being under threat from Western powers and Muslims being killed by Western forces have frequently been quoted as a reason for those joining the fight in the Middle East. There have been numerous Facebook posts by fighters of children who have been killed and injured in the fighting and the destruction caused by Assad’s forces on Muslims in Syria, calling for people to take up arms and join the resistance. This together with the concepts of the Muslim *ummah*, where all Muslims are one regardless of borders and nationalities and it becomes a religious obligation for Muslims to defend their brothers who are persecuted and attain retribution for those who are killed drove these individuals to travel into those theatres and fight. In 2016, a Facebook post from a Malaysian IS fighter stated

“Why have we forgotten that they (referring to Western forces) have killed so many Muslims in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Pattani, Palestine and who bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki...But you are sad when we kill a few infidels to remind them...Islam will not win with demonstrations and elections...If you think that, you are wrong... Everything is only with jihad” (translated).¹⁴⁴

Lotfi Ariffin himself, had stated that he had traveled to Syria to perform jihad for the sake of the Syrians who were persecuted. Salman Rahim had been motivated to join the jihad in Syria to “help the Muslims who have been persecuted.”¹⁴⁵ After having failed to join the jihad in Pattani and Arakan (with the Rohingyas), he made his way to Syria.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Salman Rahim, “@salmanrh76,” Twitter Profile, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ “Wak Suparjo,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹⁴⁵ “Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam.”

¹⁴⁶ “Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam.”

 **Abu Qutaibah** membagikan foto Muhammad Dahree.
2 Mei pukul 14:08 ·

Ambil masa seminit anggap yg dlm gmbaq tu adik hangpa...mekasih





Muhammad Dahree Masha'Allah มัสยิดหัวโหมและหัวโลก
2 Mei pukul 3:28 ·

#ฉันนาลิลลาฮิวะอินนาลิลัยฮิรรอญ์
หากเด็กคนนี้เป็นลูกหลานเรา...จะรู้สึกอย่างไร
อย่าลืมหลังละหมาดทุกๆวัน...ขออวดแต่พี่น้องของเรา
#Save_Allepo

Bagikan

10

 **AbuHamzah AlFateh** membagikan kiriman Ninlawan Donlakhham.
29 Juli pukul 19:13 ·



Ninlawan Donlakhham menambahkan 5 foto baru.
29 Juli pukul 7:07 ·

Warga Khilafah yang sedang beraktivitas di pasar Ghandura, utara Manbij, menjadi korban pembantaian pesawat udara Amerika Serikat. Anak-anak banyak yang menjad...

[Lihat Selengkapnya](#)

Figure 12: Examples of Facebook postings by Fudhail and Wanndy relating atrocities committed against Syrians. The post on the left translates to “Take a minute and consider the child in the photo to be your own younger brother...Thank you”.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ “Abu Qutaibah”; “AbuHamzah AlFateh,” Facebook Profile, 2016.



Figure 13: Twitter postings from Salman Rahim. The one on the left translates to “I am not a terrorist...but I fight to defend the Muslims who are being persecuted in the land of Syria.” Another post on the right which includes a newspaper cutting of Lotfi and Salman translates to “We are not terrorist militants... we defend the fate of (Muslims) in the land of Syam who are being persecuted and killed.”¹⁴⁸

Ideological factors include concepts such as jihad; *hijrah*; martyrdom; the formation of the Islamic Caliphate and governance under the sharia; eschatological narratives propagated by IS involving the ‘end of times’ and the return of the Imam Mahdi (saviour of the people) as shown in Figure 14. A suspected Malaysian IS fighter had stated in a 2016 Facebook post, “Jihad is war in the path of Allah. There is no other meaning for it. Some people think that you can do jihad without war... this is the wrong view”¹⁴⁹ (translated). Literal interpretations of holy texts and verses from the Quran that were propagated by IS through their media publications had contributed to the misinterpretation and radicalization of individuals as evidenced in the example.

The concept of martyrdom had also attracted many to the cause. A White Paper by the Malaysian Government in 2014 revealed that the Malaysians who had gone to Syria had believed that the war in Syria is a war in the path of Allah and that paradise is the reward for those who die in the war.¹⁵⁰ Many of them had no fear for death, were prepared to surrender themselves to God in totality and welcomed death and martyrdom. In a memorial written by a fellow fighter named Abu Hamza,

¹⁴⁸ Salman Rahim, “@salmanrh76.”

¹⁴⁹ “Menuju Dabiq,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹⁵⁰ “White Paper: Addressing the Threat of the Islamic State Group” (Government of Malaysia, 2014), 10.

Fadhlan Shahidi was said to have been waiting eagerly without fear for his turn to achieve martyrdom.¹⁵¹

Apart from martyrdom, based upon interviews with Malaysian terrorist detainees, Mazlee Malik and Yazid Zulekli stated that the re-establishment of the Caliphate was one of the major motivations among Malaysians for joining or supporting IS. They note that most detainees cited the urgency for an Islamic Caliphate ruled by a Caliph as the solution to the problems faced by Muslims.¹⁵² This is concurred by a report released by the United States Agency for International Development outlining five drivers for support among Malaysians which include the concept of the Caliphate and living in an Islamic system of governance.¹⁵³ Malaysians were attracted to IS' alleged Islamic legitimacy and had felt a sense of self-realization by living under the Islamic Caliphate and sharia in accordance to puritanical Islamic notions.¹⁵⁴ IS and the Caliphate it declared in June 2014 together with the array of ultraconservative norms and laws that it enacted represented the "epitome of 'genuine' Islamic rule."¹⁵⁵

Eschatological narratives that IS had propagated is another key ideological factor that had attracted Malaysians into the Middle East. IS had not only advocated and sought the formation of an Islamic Caliphate but had also claimed to be the group that was responsible in bringing about the 'End of Times'.¹⁵⁶ According to a *hadith* referenced by the group, the time had come whereby the imminent "final battle" known as the *al-Malhamah al-Kubro*, between the Romans (force of evil) and an army of soldiers carrying black flags (force of good) led by Imam Mahdi (the Messiah) would take place in the Syrian town of Dabiq.¹⁵⁷ IS had portrayed the war in Syria to be the final battle and it's soldiers to be the forces of good. According to Malaysian officials, several of the 200 Malaysians detained for IS sympathies had expressed a desire to be part of the apocalyptic battle that IS had propagated.¹⁵⁸ Two detainees had admitted that they left for Syria to be part of the cataclysmic battle against the Shias, Christians and Jews.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹ "Hamzah Al-Kelate," Facebook Profile, 2015.

¹⁵² Maszlee Malik and Mohd Yazid Zulkepli, "ISIS in Malaysia: Understanding Their Logics," *Islāmiyyāt* 40, no. 1 (June 26, 2018): 15–22.

¹⁵³ Greg Fealy and John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State" (United States Agency for International Development, January 6, 2016), 17, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2016/PBAAD863.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Osman and Arosoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of 'Moderation,'" 7.

¹⁵⁵ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence: Nuancing Religiopolitical Legitimacy and Conceptualizing the Appeal of ISIS in Malaysia," 88–89.

¹⁵⁶ Schulze and Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad," 124.

¹⁵⁷ Schulze and Liow, 124. In fact, IS had strategically named one of its media publications, *Dabiq* to re-emphasize the point.

¹⁵⁸ Schulze and Liow, 124.

¹⁵⁹ Schulze and Liow, 124.

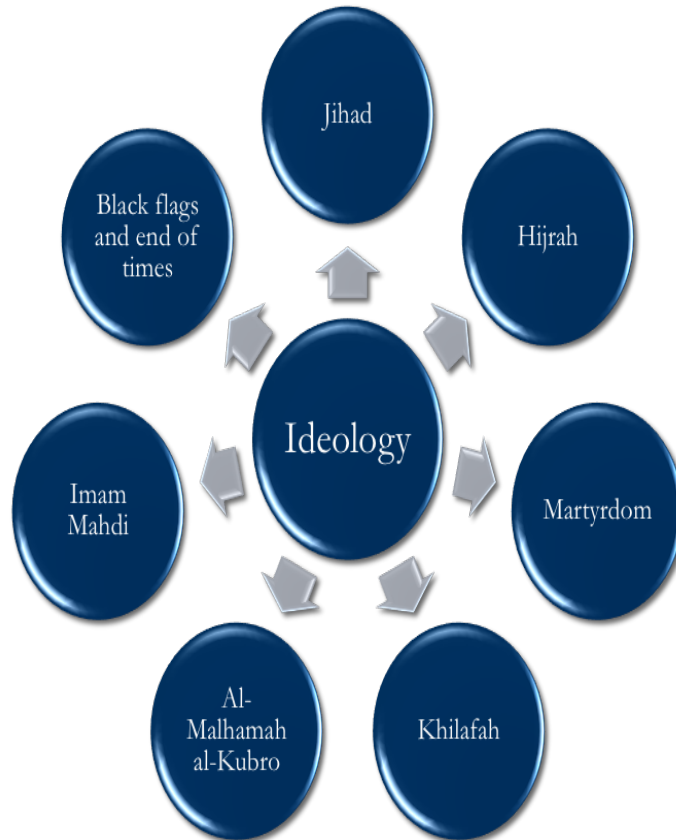


Figure 14: Key ideological narratives that functioned as pull factors for Malaysians. Chart created by the authors.

Wanndy, for example, had mentioned on at least three occasions that IS had paved the way for the *al-Malhamah al-Kubro* and the emergence of the Imam Mahdi on his Facebook accounts.¹⁶⁰ In a 2015 interview, Wanndy had stated

*“At this moment I am in Raqqa, Syria, and I will not turn away from my duty to fight for the establishment of the Islamic State's Caliph leadership in preparing for the al-Mahdi's rule... The Islamic State (IS) is the movement which is making preparations for al-Mahdi rule towards the end of the world.”*¹⁶¹

In a chat on Telegram, Wanndy had further stated, “The best of leaders is Al Mahdi that has received guidance... the best army is the people that have gathered in Dabiq in order to face the Romans in the Al Malhamah Al Kubro”.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ “Muhammad Wanndy,” Facebook Profile, 2017; “Wakasilu HuruHara,” Facebook Profile, 2016; “Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh,” Facebook Profile, 2016.

¹⁶¹ “From Syria, Malaysian Jihadist Gives Reasons for Joining IS,” Benar News, September 11, 2015, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/Malaysian-jihadist-09112015161150.html>.

¹⁶² Wan Mohd Nor and El-Muhammady, “Radicalisation and Paramilitary Culture,” 112.

Akel Zainal and Fudhail Omar had posted similar statements on their Facebook and Twitter accounts respectively in 2016.¹⁶³ In fact, Fudhail Omar's twitter profile bio states, "Awaiting the appearance of Al Mahdi" (translated).¹⁶⁴

Internal factors, on the other hand, involve discontentment with the government and administrative system in Malaysia. Whilst studies have argued that the politicization of Islam in Malaysia, the Islamization of the state bureaucracy and the institutionalization of Salafi-jihadi thought has led to an increase in fundamentalism and a higher propensity to radicalization¹⁶⁵, Malaysian militants have felt otherwise. Despite being identified as an Islamic State, Malaysian IS fighters have considered Malaysia to be a *thoghut* (oppressor) and *murtad* (apostate) government that is in cahoots with the West, namely the United States. They have not considered Malaysia an Islamic State as it is not ruled by the Sharia and instead follows democratic principles. Wannady, for example, had mentioned that the Malaysian government was a *thoghut* state on at least three occasions in his Facebook posts and condemned them for joining the US in the coalition against terrorism.¹⁶⁶ In one post, he mentions

"To thoghut Malaysia, as long as you are the United States coalition's ally in fighting the Muslims and the Islamic Caliphate, we will not stop fighting you" (translated).¹⁶⁷

He had also demonstrated similar distrust towards the government and religious authorities in Malaysia in his Telegram chats.¹⁶⁸ Another Malaysian suspected fighter by the name Abu Salim Malayzi had expressed his unhappiness with the secular government and referred to Malaysia as being governed by the *kuffar* (infidel).¹⁶⁹ Senior IS militant and KN member Zainuri Kamaruddin had referred to the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia as *thoghut* governments in an IS propaganda video as mentioned above.

While rising Islamic conservatism as a result of the continued use of Islamism by political parties such as UMNO and PAS¹⁷⁰; and the institutionalization of Salafism and Wahabbism¹⁷¹ may have contributed to an increase in extremism in certain cases, it served only as an initial driver of radicalization, inculcating a sense of Malay-Muslim exclusivism and 'us-versus-them' thinking.

¹⁶³ "Sri Subekti"; Fudhail Omar, "@FudhailO," Twitter Profile, 2016.

¹⁶⁴ Fudhail Omar, "@FudhailO."

¹⁶⁵ Osman and Arosoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of 'Moderation'"; Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum," *Brookings* (blog), April 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/malaysias-isis-conundrum/>; Chin, "Malaysia."

¹⁶⁶ "Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh," Facebook Profile, 2016; "Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh II," Facebook Profile, 2016; "Sayyaf Hamzah Al-Fateh."

¹⁶⁷ "Abu Hamzah Al-Fateh," 2016.

¹⁶⁸ Wan Mohd Nor and El-Muhammady, "Radicalisation and Paramilitary Culture," 112.

¹⁶⁹ "Abu Salim Malayzi," Facebook Profile, 2015.

¹⁷⁰ James Chin, "Race and Religion In Command: Malaysia Returns to Identity Politics," *Global Asia* 15, no. 1 (March 2020), https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/race-and-religion-in-command-malaysia-returns-to-identity-politics_james-chin#.

¹⁷¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism Is a Major Factor" (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, May 16, 2016).

However, the ultimate push factor that is seen to have driven fighters out of Malaysia and into the Middle East is their sense of discontentment with the secular, democratic system.

Referring to Figure 8, there is no one particular template for a radicalization pathway for Malaysian militants. Internal factors, i.e. socio-political developments in Malaysia are seen to feed into external factors giving rise to the radicalization of an individual. As each individual is unique, a particular individual may be influenced by one, two or a complex mixture of a few or all of these factors and fall anywhere within the Venn diagram.

A unique case study would be Salman Rahim and Wanndy himself. Rahim is not seen to be the typical extremist. He had lived and worked in London for ten years between 1997 and 2007 before coming back to Malaysia. He had considered himself *jahil* or ignorant in his early days.¹⁷² He even notes in his blog, of his time mixing and staying with Americans and Israelis whom he considered his fellow travelers in Thailand,¹⁷³ which is atypical of the stereotypical Islamist extremist who would consider them infidels and express a profound hatred of them. Rahim had been primarily motivated by a mix of two factors: a discontent with the local government whom he viewed as corrupt (internal factor) and a desire to help fellow Muslims who were persecuted (external factor – moral). He had mentioned in his personal blog that he had to leave Malaysia “as fast as possible” after the Pakatan Rakyat (then Malaysian opposition coalition) lost in the 2013 elections as the governing system in Malaysia was ridden with corruption and cronyism.¹⁷⁴ Wanndy, on the hand, was influenced by a mixture of ideological factors (external), i.e. a belief in eschatological narratives propagated by IS and a discontent with the local government (internal) as evidenced from his postings mentioned above.

Conclusion

This article analyses the Malaysian foreign fighter networks that had travelled to engage in terrorist activity in Iraq and Syria between 2012-2019. It is found that the Malaysian foreign fighter phenomenon is primarily driven by charismatic personalities who were able to act as role models and attract their followers into conflict zones. There were three phases of movement into the Middle East led by three individuals namely the Al-Qaeda linked Yazid Sufaat, Lotfi Ariffin who was linked to Syrian-based rebel group AAS and IS-linked Muhammad Wanndy Mohd Jedi. The first wave of Malaysian fighters never joined IS but joined AAS under the influence of Lotfi and the shift to IS only took place after the death of Lotfi in September 2014. The three phases also highlight the shift from physical recruitment during phase one, to a mix of physical and online recruitment in phase two and completely online recruitment in phase three.

Even though the Malaysian foreign fighters were not the key leaders of the global foreign fighters’ force, nevertheless, they were critical members of the Southeast Asian forces deployed in Iraq and Syria. While many Malaysians died and many have survived, their importance from the political, security and ideological perspective cannot be ignored or downplayed. Even those who have died

¹⁷² Chris Lau, “Face-to-Face with a M’sian Jihadi in Syria,” Malaysiakini, August 2, 2014, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/270378>.

¹⁷³ “Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam.”

¹⁷⁴ “Jelajah Jalinan Bumi Syam.”

such as Lotfi, remain important sources of inspiration for undertaking martyrdom in accordance with Islamist extremist causes. The point being, by partaking in an Islamist extremist struggle in an endeavor to champion an Islamic State and the Caliphate, the Malaysian foreign fighters became part of a legacy that has continued to inspire radicals in Malaysia and probably beyond. The fact that the Islamic State despite losing key leaders and territory in Iraq and Syria has continued to be relevant to this day demonstrates the crucial role that foreign fighters have played in the conflict in Iraq and Syria, and probably more important, in their home states such as Malaysia.

As the Malaysian foreign fighters were motivated by internal (push) and external (pull) factors to make *hijrah* and undertake training and combat in Iraq and Syria, it signals that various factors were at play to motivate them to undertake these actions. It also indicates the various drivers for radicalization that counter-terrorist agencies must be cognizant of and that terrorism continues to be relevant to this day. It has to be noted that there are a number of Malaysian fighters who still remain in Iraq and Syria and whose statuses remain to be unknown of. The recent capture by the Taliban forces of two Malaysians who were alleged to be members of IS in Afghanistan is testament to this.¹⁷⁵

From a policy perspective, apart from charismatic leaders that act as key recruiters and network hubs, the Malaysian case shows that there are two groups that remain a cause of concern. The first group refers to those who have had some form religious education from hardline institutions in the Middle East and South Asia such as India, Pakistan and Yemen and who make the cross-over into radicalism and militant activity. This group is similar to the so-called ‘old guard’ highlighted in the paper. It has to be noted that there still remains a fairly large population of Malaysian students going into the Middle East,¹⁷⁶ with many of them remaining undocumented. There is always a likelihood that some of them would end up in hardline institutions, establish networks with militant groups and cross-over into the path of militancy. A recent case that has come to light is that of Ahmad Mustakim Abdul Hamid, a Malaysian national who was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in Somalia for being a member of Al-Qaeda linked group, Al-Shabab.¹⁷⁷ Mustakim, had been radicalized while studying at Iman University in Yemen, an institution alleged to have links with extremists, and had made his way into Somalia via Kenya to join the terrorist group.¹⁷⁸ The second group of individuals correspond to those who do not have any religious background or education and who get attracted to extremist ideology for reasons that have been discussed, similar to the ‘new guard’. The security services must take cognizance of both these groups.

¹⁷⁵ Farik Zolkepli, “Taliban Claims to Have Caught Two Malaysians Fighting for IS-K in Kabul,” *The Star*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/28/taliban-claims-to-have-caught-two-malaysians-fighting-for-is-k-in-kabul>.

¹⁷⁶ Gehan Aboella, “Malaysian Embassy in Cairo - Egyptian Students’ Issue in Malaysia to Be Solved,” Sada Elbalad English, December 5, 2019, <https://see.news/malaysian-emb-in-cairo-egyptian-students-issue-in-malaysias-to-be-solved/>.

¹⁷⁷ “Malaysian Man Sentenced to 15 Years’ Jail for Assisting Al-Shabaab Terrorist Group,” *The Star*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/09/24/malaysian-man-sentenced-to-15-years039-jail-for-assisting-al-shabaab-terrorist-group>.

¹⁷⁸ Wong Chun Wai, “M’sian Terrorist Ahmad Mustakim Radicalised While at University in Yemen,” *The Star*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/10/04/msian-terrorist-ahmad-mustakim-radicalised-while-at-university-in-yemen>.

Lastly, the continued presence of Malaysian foreign fighters in conflict zones together with their first-hand experience of jihad abroad, the development of a special brotherhood among foreign fighters, their ideological fortifications and skills in undertaking military operations is a clear reminder that the need for continued vigilance is necessary to prevent these fighters from undertaking operations in Malaysia in the near future. The biggest risk posed would be the importation of jihadist ideology, battlefield experience, bomb-making and other knowledge and networks from conflict zones back to Southeast Asia.

Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

Appendix

List of known Malaysian foreign fighters

Fighter name	Photo	Nom de Guerre	Date of Birth	Place of Origin	Link Person	Date of travel	Killed
Mohd Lotfi Ariffin		Abu Musab	1968	Kedah	-	31 Jan 2014	14 Sep 2014
Zainan Harith		Abu Turob	1962	-	Lotfi	18 Apr 2014	21 Aug 2014
Mohd Rafi Udin		Abu Ain/Abu Awn al-Malizi	1966	Negeri Sembilan	Lotfi	18 Apr 2014	Jan 2019
Zainuri Kamaruddin		Abu Talha al-Malizi	1967	Perak	Lotfi	18 Apr 2014	Jan 2017
Zid Saharani		Abu Hoor	1972	Perak	Lotfi	Jul 2014	29 Aug 2015
Murad Halimuddin Hassan		-	1966	Kedah	Lotfi	Aug 2014 – Dec 2014	21 Oct 2016 (died of heart attack in Malaysia)
Abdul Samad Shukry bin Mohamad		Abu Aisyah	1959	Selangor	Lotfi	Feb 2014	Feb 2015
Muhammad Fudhail Omar		Abu Qutaibah	1992	Kedah	Lotfi	2 May 2014	Jun 2017
Zulqarnain Ghaz Abd Ghani		Abu Khattab	1984	-	Lotfi	27 Apr 2014 – 28 Aug 2014	Sep 2014 (returned to Malaysia for treatment)
Muhammad Aqif Heusen Rahizat		Abu Sufyan Malayzi	1992	Johor	Lotfi	28 Dec 2013	-
Wan Mohd Aquil Wan Zainal Abidin @ Akel Zainal		Abu Aqeel	1979	Kelantan	Lotfi	Jan 2014	Mar 2019
Mohammad Fadhlun Shahidi Mohammad Khir		Abu Muhajir	1993	Kedah	Lotfi	13 May 2014	9 Sep 2014

Ahmad Salman Abd Rahim		Abu Suleiman	1976	Kedah	Lotfi	Apr 2015	26 Jan 2016
Mohd Nizam Ariffin		Abu Afghan	1979	Perak	Lotfi	6 Mar 2014	12 Jun 2017
Abdul Halid Dari		-	1962	Kedah	-	Sometime in 2014	-
Ziyad Hakimi		Abu Suarez/Abu Dzar al-Ghazi	-	Kelantan	Lotfi/Zainuri/Nizam	Sometime in 2014	-
Muhammad Afiq Heusen Rahizat		Abu Dubais al-Malayzi/Abu Qaqa al-Malayzi	1989	Johor	Aqif	6 Apr 2014	2 Oct 2014
-		Abu Syamil	-	-	Fudhail	-	Sometime in 2016
Hassan Zakaria		Abu Adam	1991	Terengganu	Akel Zainal	3 Sep 2014	15 Nov 2016
Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki		-	1988	Pahang	Dr. Mahmud Ahmad	5 Mar 2014	26 May 2014
Mohd Izzul Imam Mohd Isa		-	1995	Selangor	Akel Zainal	5 Mar 2014	25 Aug 2016
Ahmad Asyraf Arbee		Abu Luqman al-Malizi	1984	Selangor	Zainuri	Sometime in 2014	Jan 2017
Sazrizal Mohd Sofian Tahyalan		Abu Badar al-Malizi	1990	-	Halid Dari	Sometime in 2014	Jan 2017
Muhammad Zahar		Zahar al-Shamy	1977 or 1982	-	-	-	-
Mohamad Syazwan Mohd Salim		-	1985	Selangor	-	23 Sep 2014	3 Jan 2016

Mohamad Shazani Mohd Salim		Abu Aydan	1988	Selangor	-	23 Sep 2014	18 Sep 2015
Mohd Amirul Ahmad Rahim		Abu Uqashah Malizi	1990	Selangor	-	Oct 2014	29 Dec 2015
-		Abu Jihad	-	-	-	-	-
-		Abu Faz al-Malizi	-	-	-	-	May 2014
Fadzly Ariff Zainal Ariff		Abu Ubaidah	1984	-	-	11 Oct 2013	26 Sep 2015
Muhammad Wanndy Mohd Jedi		Abu Hamzah al-Fateh	1990	Melaka	-	26 Jan 2015	29 Apr 2017
Nor Mahmudah Ahmad (Wanndy's wife)		-	1989	Kedah	Wanndy	26 Jan 2015	-
Mohd Faris Anuar		Abu Qudamah al-Malizi	1995	Kedah	Wanndy	23 Sep 2014	23 Nov 2015
Khairul Anuar		Abu Hamza al-Malizi	1994	-	Wanndy	-	-
Zulfadli Jafri		-	1992	Sarawak	Wanndy	23 Oct 2016	Arrested
Mohd Ridwan Mohd Musa		-	1987	Johor	Wanndy	23 Oct 2016	Arrested

Table 1: Selected list of documented Malaysian foreign fighters (compiled by the authors). The list is by no means an exhaustive one.