



# TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Emerging Trends and Dynamics*

THE SOUFAN CENTER  
JUNE 2021

THE  
SOUFAN  
CENTER

# **TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

*Emerging Trends and Dynamics*

THE SOUFAN CENTER  
JUNE 2021

THE **SOUFAN** CENTER

Cover photo: *Associated Press/Achmad Ibrahim*

# CONTENTS

<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>What the 2002 Bali Bombings Wrought</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Dying to Kill — with Loved Ones</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The Rise of Female Militancy in Southeast Asia</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Conclusion: Regional Responses and Dynamics</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Contributors</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>About The Soufan Center</b>	<b>37</b>

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CDS	Centre for Detention Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
IS	Islamic State
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISD	Internal Security Department
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
PRR	Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
YPP	Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

<b>Figure 1: Suicide Bombings Involving Women in Southeast Asia</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Figure 2: Arrests, by gender, for terrorist offenses in Indonesia (2000-2021)</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 3: Poster by Indonesian Police Detachment 88</b>	<b>29</b>

## KEY FINDINGS

- Suicide bombings are becoming an increasingly prevalent terrorist tactic in Southeast Asia. Thirty-four suicide bombings have been perpetrated in the region in the last twenty years, with eleven of those coming in just the last three years.
- The terrorist landscape in Southeast Asia has witnessed a growing role of women as perpetrators of terrorist violence, a trend that is likely to continue. Counterterrorism efforts must account for the multiplicity of roles women play amongst violent extremists.
- The rise of female operatives is tied to broader trends of increasingly self-directed terrorist attacks perpetrated by individual “lone” actors or groups, which complicates early detection and prevention.
- Self-radicalization online abbreviates the radicalization period to months rather than years, with acceleration in this timeframe widely attributed to information and communication technologies, including increased use of social media.
- Following the withdrawal of US forces in September, 2021, Afghanistan will be a combustible space to watch with extremists moving there in search of a new statebuilding project to replace the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.
- The most significant terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, however, still comes from organized violent extremist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah, whose operatives trained with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan before 9/11.
- The destructive legacy of returned fighters from Afghanistan to Southeast Asia has prompted pushback on potential repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and complicated conversations about effective return and rehabilitation processes for such FTFs, particularly for Indonesia which has more than 400 nationals in the camps in Syria.
- Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have been strengthening their counterterrorism capabilities in the last two decades, including legislation to deal with terrorism and violent extremism that allow for pre-emptive detention of suspects.

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the last three years, Indonesia and the southern Philippines have seen something new: women carrying out suicide bombings – some with their husbands, some with their children, and some avenging slain husbands – targeting churchgoers, police officers, and soldiers.<sup>1</sup> In Malaysia, during the May 2018 general election, a 51-year-old housewife planned to use a car filled with gas canisters and explosives to mow down voters at a polling station, raising the spectre of women killing not only with their families, but also perpetrating “self-directed” or “lone wolf” terrorist acts themselves.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the suicide bombing of a church in Makassar, Indonesia, and a shooting at a police headquarters in Jakarta have once again highlighted the potential of female terrorist operatives. Like suicide bombing, it was once assumed that women’s involvement as perpetrators of terrorist violence was culturally and ideologically anathema to terrorist groups in the region.

The use of suicide bombing as a terrorist tactic came late to Southeast Asia,<sup>3</sup> and the participation of women even later.<sup>4</sup> In the last two decades alone, thirty-four suicide bombings

---

<sup>1</sup> The Soufan Center is grateful to Susan Sim, Senior Research Fellow, for her leadership on this paper. The report draws extensively on her decades of experience in the Singapore government in various capacities—in law enforcement, intelligence analysis, and diplomacy—and as a journalist based in Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup> Mustafa, Muzliza and Zam Yusa. “Malaysia’s New Terror Threat: Women Acting as ‘Lone-Wolf’ Operatives.” *BenarNews*, July 24, 2018. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/women-terror-07242018160131.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This report defines a suicide bombing as an attack where the death of the bomber is the means by which the attack is accomplished. An event where an individual kills himself or herself by detonating a bomb when surrounded by security forces is also considered a suicide bombing. Simultaneous bombings carried out by the same network, such as the two Bali blasts in 2002, or the three Surabaya church bombings in 2018, are counted as a single event. The term “female suicide bombing” refers to a suicide attack that includes at least one female perpetrator. This means attacks committed by both male and female operators are also included. Male suicide bombings refer, however, to those carried out solely by males. See, for example: Horowitz, Michael C. “The Rise and Spread of Suicide Bombing.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2015 18:1, 69-84.

<sup>4</sup> The world’s first modern suicide bombing took place in December 1981 when a car filled with 100 kilograms of explosives was driven into the Iraqi embassy in Beirut by an operative of the Iraqi al-Dawa group, killing 61 people, including the Iraq ambassador to Lebanon, and injuring more than 100 others. The first female suicide bomber was a 16-year-old operative of the Syrian Socialist National Party who detonated a car bomb at an Israeli checkpoint in Lebanon in April 1985.

were perpetrated in Southeast Asia. When two nightspots in Bali were attacked in October 2002, Indonesian investigators were shocked to discover that the suicide bombings were carried out by two young Indonesian men. More suicide bombings followed in Indonesia, targeting two American hotels (one of which was attacked twice, in 2003 and 2009), the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 2004, and Bali again in 2005. But women were not recruited for suicide bombing missions in the region until 2016.

*The use of  
suicide bombing as  
a terrorist tactic  
came late to  
Southeast Asia,  
and the participation  
of women even later.*

Since 2015, more women than ever have also been arrested for terrorist activity in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore – about ninety compared to barely half a dozen in the fifteen years prior. Females have now taken part in eight out of the eleven suicide attacks committed from May 2018 through May 2021. This is far above the global female participation rate of one out of every ten attacks from 2018 to 2020.<sup>5</sup> This surge in female militancy in Southeast Asia has been attributed to the success of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in convincing women they have a role in the creation and perpetuation of the Caliphate, even the one now thriving

mainly on social media that some have dubbed the “virtual caliphate.”<sup>6</sup> However, nowhere other than in Indonesia have entire families killed and died together in suicide bombings, as three Indonesian families did in Surabaya in 2018. They appeared to have taken the end of times prophecy attached to the IS narrative to its ultimate conclusion, leading to Indonesia’s unique contribution to the suite of suicide bombing tactical options – the “DIY family annihilation attack unit.”

<sup>5</sup> This ratio is based on the annual data for 2018, 2019, and 2020 compiled by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) of Tel Aviv University, which shows women took part in 60 out of 569 suicide bombings during those three years. As some databases use slightly different criteria in counting suicide attacks, totals may vary across sources. Using data compiled by INSS and Vesna Markovic, we estimate some 558 females have taken part in 400 suicide attacks in the last 35 years (1985 – 2020).

<sup>6</sup> This label is often used to refer to the online ecosystem that sustains the supporters of IS and has been in use even before the group’s loss of territory in Syria and Iraq. For example, in June 2016, the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House Of Representatives held a hearing titled “Countering the Virtual Caliphate.” Committee Chairman, Congressman Edward Royce, noted in his opening remarks that “so great has been the explosion of slick and professional ISIS videos online that... a lot of people are referring to this as the virtual caliphate.” See: “Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives: One Hundred Fourteenth Congress, Second Session.” U.S. Government Publishing Office, June 26, 2016. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20531/html/CHRG-114hhrg20531.htm>.

This paper analyzes recent terrorist trends and counterterrorism in the Southeast Asian states of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and tangentially, the Philippines, given the island of Mindanao's role as a sanctuary and training ground for jihadi groups in the region.<sup>7</sup> Building upon the analysis to follow, the following can be forecast:

- Gender stereotyping often leads to female bombers receiving disproportionately more media attention than male attackers. By one count, terrorist groups have received eight times as many stories in the media when they used females as when they used male bombers.<sup>8</sup> The contagion effect<sup>9</sup> – the tendency of well-publicized acts of violence to trigger copycat acts – suggests more female attackers can thus be expected in Southeast Asia. This is particularly true if they are eulogized as martyrs and there is no concerted pushback by Islamic leaders in conservative societies like Indonesia.
- Similarly, the Philippines, where various Islamist rebel groups in the south have pledged loyalty to IS, could see more lethal attacks involving female suicide bombers now that they have demonstrated their efficacy. There is historical precedent. Over the past forty years, there have been, globally, four major escalations in the prevalence of female suicide bombings in line with armed conflicts or major insurgencies – in Sri Lanka and Turkey between 1997 and 1999, in

---

<sup>7</sup> The Philippines is home to multiple insurgencies, including the communist New People's Army (NPA) and Muslim rebel groups in the south. Much of the terrorist activity in the country is dominated by the NPA. Thailand, which is ranked second in Southeast Asia only after the Philippines in the annual Global Terrorism Index measuring the impact of terrorism, is not examined in this report, as the Malay-Muslim insurgency in its deep south prioritizes national self-determination over transnational jihadism. Rebel leaders have in the past spurned overtures from al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah as corrosive of their international legitimacy and local support, and there has been no evidence that IS has been able to make any inroads either. See, for example: "Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace." International Crisis Group, November 8, 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/291-jihadism-southern-thailand-phantom-menace>.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, Mia. "The Changing Nature of Women in Extremism and Political Violence." *Freedom from Fear*, 2016, 40-54. <http://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=1093>.

<sup>9</sup> Contagion is used in this context to refer to "copycat crimes triggered by (successful) exemplary terrorist attacks"; see: Schmid, Alex. *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 2013. Researchers have noted that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Palestinian terrorists staged a number of plane hijackings, prolonged the hostage situations to win massive news coverage, and appeared to inspire other groups to follow their example. The 43 successful embassy takeovers and five unsuccessful attempts between 1971 and 1980 also appeared to occur in clusters. Similarly, suicide terrorism became an even more popular tactic after September 11, 2001. See, for example: Nacos, Brigitte. "Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis: Terrorism, News Coverage, and Copycat Attacks." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 3.3 (2009). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/73/html>. An early 1980 statistical analysis also found that "bombings demonstrate the strongest contagion effect"; see: Midlarsky, Manus, Martha Crenshaw, and Fumihiko Yoshida. "Why Violence Spreads: The Contagion of International Terrorism." *International Studies Quarterly*, 24(2), 1980: 262.



Russia between 2002 and 2004, in Iraq between 2007 and 2010, and in Nigeria and Cameroon between 2014 and 2018.<sup>10</sup>

- In the age of an eliminated territorial IS caliphate and instead a so-called “digital caliphate” and regional affiliates, the rise of female operatives in non-conflict zones like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is worrisome. Such “lone wolves” or “wolfpacks” are acting of their own volition, making early detection and prevention even more difficult. However, the challenges posed by online radicalization are not limited by gender, as Singapore has discovered with the young men arrested by its Internal Security Department (ISD) for planning to carry out terrorist attacks.
- The most significant terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, however, still comes from organized groups like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI),<sup>11</sup> whose goal of establishing an Islamic state calls for attacks against the police, Western interests perceived to be supporting domestic secular governments, and minority groups such as Christians. As an organization, JI has long capitalized on the belief of some Muslim groups that Indonesia should have been declared an Islamic state after it broke free of Dutch rule in 1945. Despite decades of state suppression, JI has shown an organizational resilience that has allowed it to keep “recruiting, training and consolidating”.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, the United Nations Security Council 1267 Committee made this assessment: “A revived JI, with its long-established networks, could pose a significant long-term threat to the region.”<sup>13</sup>
- Violent extremists in Southeast Asia will be eagerly anticipating the prospect of Afghanistan becoming, once again, a safe haven for terrorists and other violent non-state actors following the U.S. military withdrawal this year. In the last two years, more than a dozen Indonesians have already attempted to make *hijrah* (migrate) to Afghanistan, in most cases aided and abetted by Indonesian IS operatives in Syria in the waning days of the Caliphate. There is also a pool of some 200 to 300 Southeast Asians who trained in Afghanistan three to four decades ago.

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the *Global Terrorism Index 2019* published by the Institute for Economics and Peace.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see: Sim, Susan. “Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Indonesia.” *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, edited by Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobell, and Joseph Chinyong Liow, Routledge, 2018, 255-267.

<sup>12</sup> Letter dated June 16, 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2015/441).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

---

## WHAT THE 2002 BALI BOMBINGS WROUGHT

Soon after September 11, 2001, Southeast Asian governments realized they had an indigenous, well-funded, and trained terrorist group operating across national borders in the region. Singapore uncovered a plot financed and approved by al-Qaeda to bomb Western embassies and government facilities in the island state. The target selection and reconnaissance had been conducted by a Singaporean network, the explosive materiel procured by a Malaysian cell, an Indonesian bombmaker was flying in from the Philippines to assemble six truck bombs, and the suicide bombers were being dispatched by Al-Qaeda from the Gulf. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) – the offspring of an Indonesian rebel movement founded at the country’s independence in 1945 that called itself Darul Islam (House of Islam) – had trained its fighters in Afghanistan alongside Osama bin Laden’s mujahideen during the 1980s and early 1990s, and set up training camps with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the southern Philippines to teach new recruits bomb-making and insurgent warfare. To achieve its ambition of creating *Daulah Islamiyyah Raya* – a great Islamic state of Southeast Asia – JI had also reached out to other separatist groups in the region and adopted al-Qaeda’s global agenda of *jihad* against the “far enemy.”<sup>14</sup> When JI’s plan to stage six suicide bombings in Singapore as part of Al-Qaeda’s second wave was thwarted, it turned its sights to soft targets in Bali.<sup>15</sup> The October 2002 suicide bombings of two popular nightspots in Bali killed 202 people, mainly tourists from Australia and other Western nations, as well as thirty-eight Indonesians. The bombers were two Indonesian men recruited explicitly for the operation.

The Bali attacks were also a wake-up call for regional governments, especially Jakarta, which established a counterterrorism police task force that later evolved into the elite *Densus 88* (Detachment 88), receiving security cooperation assistance, including funding and training, from

---

<sup>14</sup> For more detail, see: “White Paper on the Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism.” Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, January 2003. [https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government\\_records/record-details/983afe9e-39b1-11e7-98bd-0050568939ad](https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/record-details/983afe9e-39b1-11e7-98bd-0050568939ad).

<sup>15</sup> A separate plan by a Singapore JI cell to hijack a commercial airliner in Bangkok and crash it into Changi Airport in January 2002 was abandoned after the Singapore authorities publicized the plot through its foreign partners. See, for example: Burke, Jason. “Al-Qaeda in plot to hijack British plane.” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/14/terrorism.september11>.

the U.S. and Australia. Within a year, much of JI's Indonesian leadership was in jail or hiding with Moro insurgents in the jungles of the southern Philippines.<sup>16</sup> The JI networks in Singapore and Malaysia had already been decimated by waves of arrests by ISD and the Malaysian Special Branch. Al-Qaeda's vaunted second front in Southeast Asia was in retreat, although a JI faction continued to mount suicide bombings in Indonesia for several years before its Malaysian leader Noordin M. Top was finally killed by Densus 88 in 2009. (Top's bombmaker, fellow Malaysian Azahari Husin, had been killed by Indonesian Police in 2005.) Meanwhile, JI continued preaching its message of violence and hate through its boarding schools and private religious study groups, while also successfully recruiting members, despite regular police sweeps.

A few of the boarding schools accepted girls and trained them in archery and martial arts, but the institutions reinforced the message that women were forbidden to engage in fighting except under extreme emergency conditions.<sup>17</sup> A document called the *Handbook of Womanhood*, which was the text for a course all females had to undergo in JI schools, prescribed three main roles for a woman: as a daughter who has to obey her father, as a wife who has to obey her husband, and as a mother who is responsible for her children's well-being and education.<sup>18</sup> Women could help with JI's fundraising, administration, and some propaganda work and recruitment; yet, their main function was defined by traditional gender roles placing them in the domestic sphere, which included marrying male JI members, and preparing younger women for marriage within the group.

The Syrian civil war was a game changer. No women from Southeast Asia had gone to Afghanistan to answer the call of the mujahideen. In Syria, however, the Islamic State (IS) promised a religious utopia in their lifetime. For the first time, women and children from Southeast Asian countries, many of whom had no prior connections to extremist groups, journeyed to a foreign conflict zone. Most travelled with their families, although some women went to make new lives for themselves, and others to marry foreign fighters. All told, at least 1,870 men, women, and children from Southeast Asia sought to go to Syria after the civil war began in 2011. About half – 980 individuals – made it there, most of whom joined IS. Some 555 Indonesians, more than half female, were intercepted in Turkey and deported home, while more

---

<sup>16</sup> Al-Qaeda's main contact in JI, an Indonesian named Riduan Isamuddin but better known as Hambali, fled to Thailand, where he was arrested in 2003; he is currently in the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay.

<sup>17</sup> Some women insisted on undergoing combat training and fought alongside men during the sectarian conflict that broke out in Poso, eastern Indonesia, from 1999 to 2001, but when the conflict ended, jihad was once again restricted to men.

<sup>18</sup> See: "Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists," Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Jakarta, 2017. <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/58/Mothers-to-Bombers-The-Evolution-of-Indonesian-Women-Extremists>.

than 330 Malaysians, Indonesians, and Singaporeans were arrested before they could leave the region.<sup>19</sup>

One of the first groups in Southeast Asia to see the training potential of the Syrian conflict, JI quickly established a mechanism to deploy its most capable Indonesian members to Syria to gain combat experience under cover of humanitarian missions.<sup>20</sup> Over six years between 2012 and 2018, JI dispatched sixty-six people to Syria for short stints with Al-Qaeda affiliates, fifty of whom later returned to Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> It also sent emissaries to visit IS even though JI ideologues, mirroring Al-Qaeda, publicly denounced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of a Caliphate; JI privately urged members to focus on operational security in order to avoid attracting attention from the police and intelligence services.

While public attention since 2015 has been focused on amorphous groups of pro-IS extremists staging attacks at home and joining the battle for Marawi in 2017,<sup>22</sup> JI has been quietly amassing a war chest through legitimate businesses and member contributions, while recruiting and training an army of fighters in Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> In 2019, *Densus 88*, the Indonesian police counter-terrorism unit which has monitored known JI elements since the first Bali bombings, arrested most of the JI leadership and confiscated the businesses they were operating. In response, JI, playing the long game, appointed another leader named Ustad Arif and continued recruiting and fund-raising until Arif was arrested in October 2020. Since then, at least 100 members have also been arrested.

---

<sup>19</sup> Data compiled by Susan Sim based on published reports and interviews with officials. As not all countries have the capacity to keep tabs on citizens who go overseas to fight, the official number is certainly under-reported. For more on the Foreign Terrorist Fighter phenomenon and the scale of those who traveled to join IS, see: "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees." *The Soufan Center*, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Several of JI's former members in Malaysia made their own way to Syria to fight with Al-Qaeda affiliates. But with its networks in Singapore and Malaysia dismantled since 2002, JI is now a largely Indonesian entity.

<sup>21</sup> Yulisman, Linda. "Indonesia uncovers training site for Jemaah Islamiah terrorist network in Central Java." *The Straits Times*, December 28, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-uncovers-training-site-for-jemaah-islamiah-terrorist-network-in-central-java>.

<sup>22</sup> The southern Mindanao city of Marawi was held for five months in 2017 by a coalition of pro-IS Filipino insurgent groups. About 66 foreign fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore joined another 40 from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Chechnya to fight alongside the Filipinos. For an assessment of the impact of the Marawi conflict, see: Johnston, Patrick B. and Colin P. Clarke. "Is the Philippines the Next Caliphate?" *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/27/is-the-philippines-the-next-caliphate/>.

<sup>23</sup> Chew, Amy. "'US still the target': Indonesia's arrest of Jemaah Islamiah terrorist leader reveals thousands of recruits." *South China Morning Post*, December 12, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3113648/us-still-target-indonesias-arrest-jemaah-islamiah-terrorist>.

The Indonesian police's "whack-a-mole" approach to JI's regeneration will likely continue for the foreseeable future, so long as the group, outlawed in Indonesia in June 2007, continues to avoid overt acts of violence. This JI stance has often drawn the ire of its members, a number of whom, after years of inaction, felt overshadowed by the newer groups that pledged loyalty to IS. The rise of Aman Abdurrahman as the leading IS provocateur in Indonesia is an example of how violent extremist entrepreneurs are filling the void left by JI. Arrested in 2004 when a bomb exploded in the house where he was giving a sermon, Aman began translating the seminal works of Arab jihadi theologians while in prison. His handwritten translations were smuggled out and posted online, then compiled into books and widely disseminated. Aman became an immediate star, and he hit the lecture circuit upon his release. Back in jail a second time, Aman wrote several more *takfiri* tracts denouncing Muslims who disagree with his views, or those sanctioned by extremist groups, as takfirs, or apostates.<sup>24</sup> While he has never undergone guerrilla training or participated in actual combat, his blog nevertheless became the go-to-resource for amateur jihadists. As one follower jailed for taking part in a 2011 attack on a mosque frequented by police officers put it, Aman was filling a need:

*We liked Aman's simple and straightforward message to challenge the authorities. At a time when most of the jihadists linked to JI were laying low out of fear of arrest by the Indonesian police, Aman was like water in the desert.*<sup>25</sup>

Aman has since been sentenced to death for instigating a terrorist attack in downtown Jakarta in January 2016 that announced the arrival of IS in Indonesia. But even for him, the actions of mothers who guide their children to detonate their suicide bombs in church and fathers who sacrifice their children on suicide bombing missions against the police were too "cruel." "The actions ... could not have been undertaken by people who understand the teachings of Islam and the demands of jihad," he said in an audio statement smuggled out of prison.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> The term *takfiri* is used by some extremist groups against those who do not agree with their ideology or refuse to pledge allegiance to them, labelling them as infidels or apostates deserving of the death penalty. See, for instance: "VOA Explainer: Who Are Takfiri Extremists?" *VOA News*, June 22, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/voa-explainer-who-are-takfiri-extremists>.

<sup>25</sup> Sim, Susan. "Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Indonesia." *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, 2nd Edition, Edited by Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobell, and Joseph Chinyong Liow, Routledge, 2018, 255-267.

<sup>26</sup> Audio statement posted on the Millah Ibrahim channel on Telegram.

---

## DYING TO KILL — WITH LOVED ONES

The three Indonesian families<sup>27</sup> that plotted to carry out suicide bombings of churches and police stations in Surabaya in May 2018 had eleven children aged eight to eighteen years old with them when they detonated their bombs. The parents were supporters of IS whose plans to travel to Syria were derailed by tightened border controls and arrests of Indonesian network leaders.<sup>28</sup> They believed the world was coming to an end and decided it was preferable to die in “martyrdom operations” with their children so that their entire families could go to heaven together. After a year of watching videos of Muslims being killed and suicide bombers killing themselves for their cause, two of the older boys of one family went off on a motorcycle to bomb a church. The father, meanwhile, dropped the mother and the two younger daughters off at another church before driving off to bomb a third church himself on the morning of Sunday, May 13, 2018. That evening and the next day, two other families similarly killed most of their family members, one as police closed in on their home (which appeared to have also functioned as the group’s bomb factory) and the other in an attack on the Surabaya regional police headquarters.

Since these family suicide attacks, which killed fourteen civilians and injured more than fifty, both Indonesia and the southern Philippines have seen married couples and widows carry out suicide

---

<sup>27</sup> Terrorist networks are known to exploit family and kinship ties, partly because detection by the authorities is more difficult, and family members tend not to betray each other. The 2002 Bali bombings, for example, involved three Indonesian brothers, two of whom were executed in November 2008 for plotting the attack. The surviving brother, Ali Imron, who now works with the Indonesian police while serving a life sentence in a Jakarta prison, often tells interviewers that he did not agree with the Bali bombing; yet, he did the reconnaissance, identified the targets, and even drove the explosive-laden van into position for the suicide bomber (who did not know how to drive), because he had been assigned those duties by his brother Mukhlis, the chief planner. See, for example: Osman, Sulastri. “Jemaah Islamiyah: Of Kin and Kind.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, June 2010, 29(2), 157-175. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/186810341002900205>.

For recent examples in the U.S. and Europe, see: Hafez, Mohammed M. “The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds.” *CTC Sentinel*, February 2016, 9(2). <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-ties-that-bind-how-terrorists-exploit-family-bonds/>.

<sup>28</sup> Byman calls IS supporters thwarted from traveling to Syria “frustrated foreign fighters” who subscribe to the idea that “as the door of hijrah closes, the door of jihad opens.” As early as September 2014, an Australian whose passport was revoked to prevent him from traveling to Syria stabbed two police officers. See: Byman, Daniel. “Frustrated Foreign Fighters.” *Lawfare*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/frustrated-foreign-fighters>.

bombings targeting churches, police and military personnel. In all, nine women and three girls aged eight, nine, and twelve are known to have participated in eight suicide bombings in several cities in the region over the course of the last three years. (See Figure 1 for details.)

Dian Yulia Novi, however, is not among these statistics. The 28-year-old Indonesian woman would have been Southeast Asia's first female suicide bomber had Indonesian police not arrested her on the eve of a planned attack in December 2016. Dian was working as a domestic worker in Taiwan when she went down the rabbit hole of extremist propaganda, and on her return to Indonesia, married an IS supporter. She knew she was pregnant when she agreed to carry out a suicide bombing of the Indonesian Presidential Palace in Jakarta by detonating a rice cooker bomb. Soon after giving birth to a son in prison, she told a researcher that she had been prepared for her unborn child to die with her in the suicide attack because she “did not want to raise a child in a polluted world.”<sup>29</sup> She had believed that by dying as a suicide bomber, she would be able to intercede for her family and guarantee her ailing father access to heaven. However, she first had to be married to secure her martyrdom because “she understood from an IS fatwa that women need permission from their husbands to conduct any operation outside the home.”<sup>30</sup>

Dian was recruited to be a “bride” by an Indonesian fighting with IS in Syria, Bahrun Naim. Losing territory in the face of concerted efforts by the international coalition to drive it out of Syria and Iraq, IS had been urging its foreign affiliates to stage terrorist attacks to avenge the group's losses and demonstrate strength.<sup>31</sup> In November 2015, at least nine terrorists, French and Belgian fighters who had returned to Europe after being trained by IS – many wearing suicide vests – killed 130 people and injured hundreds in Paris.<sup>32</sup> Initial media reporting that a French woman had blown herself up during a police raid on a terrorist safehouse in Paris a few days later caused much excitement among IS women in Indonesia, many of whom professed a desire

---

<sup>29</sup> Author interview with filmmaker Noor Huda Ismail, who featured Dian Yulia Novi in his 2018 documentary “Pengantin” (The Bride) about three Indonesian migrant workers and their search for love and hope online. In the film, Dian's mother meets her grandson for the first time in prison, where Dian was raising him. The child is now with Dian's mother while Dian serves out the remainder of her 7 ½ year prison sentence.

<sup>30</sup> “Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia.” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*: Report No. 68, September 21, 2020. Jakarta. <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/97/Extremist-Women-Behind-Bars-in-Indonesia>.

<sup>31</sup> In September 2014, IS spokesman Muhammad al-Adnani, responding to the formation of the Global Coalition Against Daesh, called on IS supporters around the world to engage in attacks at home, thus extending the frontlines of the IS war across the globe. He also cited Indonesia as one of the countries where “apostates” ruled. See: “Indeed your Lord is Ever Watchful.” *The ISIS Reader*, Edited by Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, Hurst & Company, 2020, 178-186.

<sup>32</sup> Brisard, Jean-Charles. “The Paris Attacks and the Evolving Islamic State Threat to France.” *CTC Sentinel*, 8(11), November / December 2015. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-paris-attacks-and-the-evolving-islamic-state-threat-to-france/>.

on social media to follow in the footsteps of “Europe’s first female suicide bomber.”<sup>33</sup> It was later revealed that she had not in fact detonated the suicide vest, but had been killed when a male terrorist exploded the device. Yet, by then she had caught the attention of potential IS women.

In 2016, female suicide bombers were featured in plots and attacks in countries where they had not previously operated<sup>34</sup> – including France<sup>35</sup>, Austria<sup>36</sup>, Morocco<sup>37</sup>, Libya<sup>38</sup>, Bangladesh<sup>39</sup>, and Indonesia. Most of these operations, like Dian’s in Jakarta, were foiled by security forces. Although IS leadership did not then publicly endorse female combatants, its leading Indonesian recruiter, Bahrun Naim, did. In May 2016, when asked on his blog if it was permissible for single women to do *amaliyah* (jihad operations), he answered: “In the Islamic State, there are still many men to fight. It becomes an obligation for women when men no longer want to fight, as in

---

<sup>33</sup> “Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists.” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*: Report No. 35, January 31, 2017. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017344162/>.

<sup>34</sup> Schweitzer, Yoram, Aviad Mendelboim, and Yotam Rosner. *Suicide Attacks in 2016: The Highest Number of Fatalities*. INSS Insight No. 887, January 5, 2017. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/suicide-attacks-2016-highest-number-fatalities/?offset=33&posts=114&subject=253&type=399>.

<sup>35</sup> One all-female cell allegedly planned several attacks in France over a few days in September 2016, including an attempt to blow up gas cylinders near Notre Dame Cathedral. For details, see: Simcox, Robin. “The 2016 French Female Attack Cell: A Case Study.” *CTC Sentinel*, 11(6), June/July 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/2016-french-female-attack-cell-case-study/>; Rubin, Alissa J. and Aurelien Breeden. “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to Shift in ISIS Gender Roles.” *New York Times*, October 1, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html>.

<sup>36</sup> In October 2016, Austrian police arrested the wife of a Chechen terror suspect who was himself arrested in September, after they found evidence that the pair was planning a suicide bomb attack in Austria’s Ministry of Defence. See: “Female terror suspect ‘planned suicide attack.’” *The Local*, October 28, 2016. <https://www.thelocal.at/20161028/female-terror-suspect-planned-suicide-attack-in-austria/>.

<sup>37</sup> In October 2016, Moroccan police arrested 10 suspected IS female suicide bombers who were allegedly planning to strike during parliamentary elections that month. See: Rothwell, James. “Morocco arrests ten female ISIL suicide bombers who ‘planned to strike on election day.’” *The Telegraph*, October 5, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/morocco-arrests-ten-female-isil-suicide-bombers-who-planned-to-s2/>.

<sup>38</sup> During fighting between government troops and IS militants in Sirte, Libya in December 2016, several women blew themselves up in suicide attacks that killed four Libyan soldiers who had granted them safe passage to leave buildings under IS control. See: “Women bombers emerge from Islamic State redoubt to attack Libyan forces.” *Reuters*, December 3, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-sirte-idUSKBN13R2EM>.

<sup>39</sup> In December 2016, a female member of the militant Bangladesh group New JMB blew herself up during a police raid in Dhaka, Bangladesh. See: Khan, Mohammad Jamil, Md. Kamrul Hasan, and Arifur Rahman Rabbi. “Dhaka sees first female ‘suicide bomber.’” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 25, 2016. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2016/12/25/dhaka-sees-first-female-suicide-bomber>. For an analysis, see: Roul, Animesh. “The Shifting Narrative of Women’s Role in Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh’s Islamic Jihad.” *Terrorism Monitor* 16(22), November 17, 2018. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-shifting-narrative-of-womens-role-in-jamaat-ul-mujahideen-bangladeshs-islamic-jihad/>.



Indonesia.”<sup>40</sup> Bahrun Naim’s stance was validated in the summer of 2017, when an article in the IS magazine *Rumiyah* stated that the time had come for female followers to take their support for the caliphate to the next stage. Women, it said, should “rise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah (Paradise).” In October 2017, IS’s Arabic-language magazine *Naba* followed with an editorial that stated women were now obliged to engage in jihad on behalf of the caliphate.<sup>41</sup>

That year saw the highest number of female suicide bombers since 1985, when 16-year-old Sana Mehaydali staged the first suicide attack by a female and detonated a bomb that killed herself and two Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. According to the INSS database, in 2017, 137 females took part in sixty-one suicide attacks in six countries, killing 333 people. More than ninety percent had been deployed by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon,<sup>42</sup> which used girls as young as eight and, in some attacks, babies carried on the backs of female bombers to evade suspicion.<sup>43</sup> During the battle for Mosul in Iraq in the summer of 2017, the media reported that IS sent out female fighters with their children and deployed thirty-eight female suicide bombers in last-ditch efforts to prevent coalition forces from re-taking the city.<sup>44</sup> IS itself did not claim any of these operations by the women in Mosul on its usual channels, unlike other high-profile attacks,<sup>45</sup> and the INSS database was able to verify only seven of the reported female suicide attacks. However, for female IS supporters around the world, the media accounts would have suggested a tactical shift in their favor, if not in ideology, since IS was facing the extreme security pressures that jihadi groups said justified the involvement of women in combat.

---

<sup>40</sup> Cited in “Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists.” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*: Report No. 35, Jakarta, January 31, 2017. <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/58/Mothers-to-Bombers-The-Evolution-of-Indonesian-Women-Extremists>.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Winter, Charlie. “ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking with Convention.” *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, September 13, 2018. <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>.

<sup>42</sup> Mendelboim, Aviad and Yoram Schweitzer. “Report on Suicide Attacks in 2017: Fewer Attacks, More Women Bombers.” INSS Insight No. 1008, January 7, 2018. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/report-suicide-attacks-2017-fewer-attacks-women/?offset=23&posts=114&subject=253&type=399>.

<sup>43</sup> Markovic, Vesna. “Infants: The New Terrorist Weapon?” *Forbes*, April 10, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/04/10/infants-the-new-terrorist-weapon/?sh=388668f6551d>.

<sup>44</sup> Paton, Callum. “ISIS Female Fighters Use Own Children as Human Shields In Last Desperate Moments of Mosul Siege.” *Newsweek*, July 6, 2017. <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-female-fighters-using-their-own-children-human-shields-last-desperate-632934.sul/>.

<sup>45</sup> Eggert, Jennifer Philippa. “Women in the Islamic State: Tactical Advantage Trumps Ideology.” *IPI Global Observatory*, August 21, 2017. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/08/isis-women-ideology-mo>.

Against this global backdrop, it was perhaps inevitable that several female followers of IS in Southeast Asia felt compelled to demonstrate their fidelity to IS by sacrificing their own lives while eliminating perceived enemies of Islam. The women may have had other motivations, such as vengeance against security forces; perhaps some were obeying the wishes of their spouses, as some Indonesian analysts have suggested. Notably, all the suicide attacks involving Indonesian females were familial affairs. The contagion effect may also be stronger among those with personal connections to attacks deemed to be successful.

In the March 2021 Palm Sunday suicide bombing of a church in Makassar in eastern Indonesia, a newly married couple in their early 20s was said to have been avenging the police killing in January of their religious teacher, the brother of Ulfah Handayani Saleh, the Indonesian woman who carried out the suicide bombing of Jolo Cathedral in southern

Philippines with her husband in 2019.<sup>46</sup> Ulfah's elder daughter, Rezky Fantasya Rullie (alias Cici), made the "wanted list" in the Philippines (see poster) for planning the attack carried out by her parents, while her husband Andi Baso was sought for involvement in the double suicide attacks by two women in Mindanao in August 2020. Suspected of planning to conduct a suicide bombing herself, Cici was arrested in October, while Andi, an Indonesian militant responsible for smuggling her into the Philippines, was killed in a clash with Philippine security forces.<sup>47</sup>

**WANTED TERRORISTS**

**ANDI BASO**  
**INDONESIAN**  
 MALE; 17-25 YEARS OLD; LIGHT BUILT; ABOUT 5'5" IN HEIGHT  
 INDONESIAN SUICIDE BOMBER RESPONSIBLE FOR  
 AUG. 24, 2020 JOLO BOMBING RESULTED TO THE DEATH  
 OF 7 SOLDIERS, 6 CIVILIANS AND 76 OTHERS WOUNDED.  
**CASH REWARD: PHP 3,000,000.00**

**RESKI FANTASYA  
 aka CICI**  
**INDONESIAN**  
 FEMALE; 17-22 YEARS OLD; WIFE OF ANDI BASO  
 INDONESIAN SUICIDE BOMBER RESPONSIBLE FOR  
 JAN. 27, 2019 MT. CARMEL CATHEDRAL, JOLO BOMBING  
 RESULTED TO THE DEATH OF 22 PEOPLE AND  
 102 OTHERS WOUNDED.

**MUNDI SAWADJAAN**  
**FILIPINO**  
 NEPHEW OF HATIB HAJAN SAWADJAAN  
 ABU-SAYYAF SUB-LEADER RESPONSIBLE FOR  
 AUGUST 24, 2020 JOLO BOMBING RESULTED TO THE DEATH  
 OF 7 SOLDIERS, 6 CIVILIANS, AND 76 OTHERS WOUNDED.  
**CASH REWARD: PHP 3,000,000.00**

**THE COMMUNITY IS ADVISED TO BE VIGILANT AND IMMEDIATELY  
 REPORT ANY SUSPICIOUS PERSON / LOCAL TERRORIST.**

**JOINT-TASK FORCE ZAMBOANGA CITY**  
 09177102326; 09165358106; 09283969926  
**ZAMBOANGA CITY POLICE OFFICE**  
 09778558138

Wanted poster issued by the Philippines government in August 2020 (Source: image provided by Susan Sim)

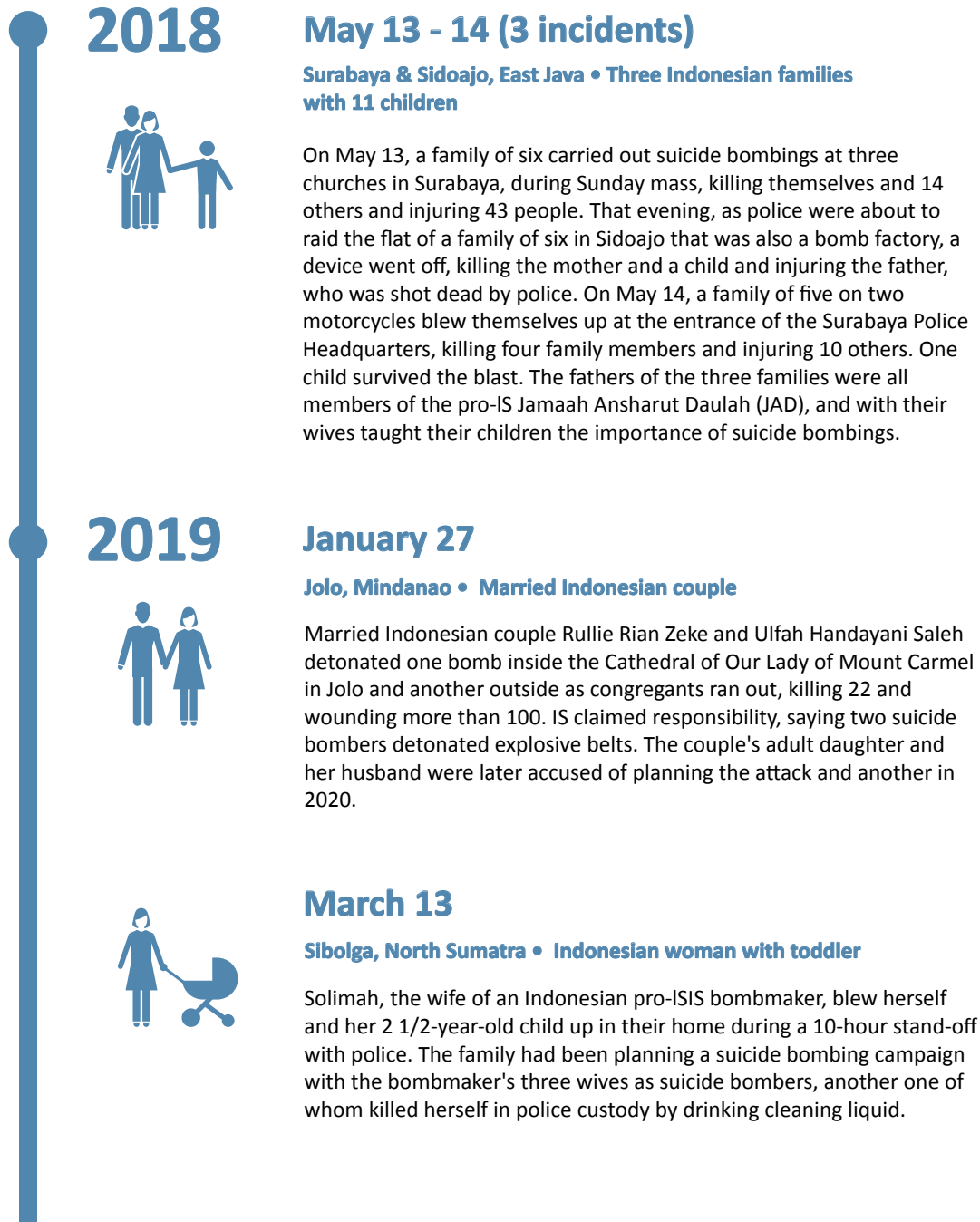
<sup>46</sup> Lamb, Kate and Agustinus Beo Da Costa. "Familial terrorism': How personal ties link suicide bombings in Southeast Asia." *Reuters*, April 1, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-blast-idUSKBN2BO4RT>.

<sup>47</sup> "Indonesian suicide bomber arrested in Jolo." *Rappler*, October 10, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/indonesian-suicide-bomber-arrested-jolo>.

**Figure 1: Suicide Bombings Involving Women in Southeast Asia**

## SUICIDE BOMBINGS INVOLVING WOMEN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the last three years, 9 women and 3 girls have taken part in 8 suicide bombings in Southeast Asia. One Indonesian woman was intercepted in December 2016 on the eve of a planned suicide bombing of the Indonesian Presidential Palace at the behest of an Indonesian IS leader in Syria. Dian Yulia Novi would have been Southeast Asia's first female suicide bomber had her plan succeeded. Her cell included another woman who had also agreed to carry out a suicide bombing in Bali.



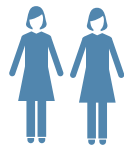


## September 8

### Indanan, Mindanao • Egyptian woman

An Egyptian woman, Reda Mohammad Mahmud, died when she detonated a suicide bomb while trying to enter a detachment in Indanan, Sulu. Her husband and one son were killed two months later when they shot at troops at a checkpoint while en route to a suicide operation. Another son, who reportedly also volunteered to be a suicide bomber, died in April 2021 in a gun battle with government troops in Jolo.

# 2020



## August 24

### Jolo, Mindanao • Two Filipino women

One bomber detonated an IED strapped to her body near two military trucks parked across from the Jolo Cathedral, and an hour later, a second woman in a burqa detonated a bomb concealed on her body when she was prevented from entering an area cordoned off by troops. The two women were identified as Nanah, widow of a Filipino suicide bomber who died in an attack the previous year, and Indah Lay, widow of an Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) commander killed by troops in November 2019. IS claimed responsibility for the attacks that killed 13 and injured more than 70.

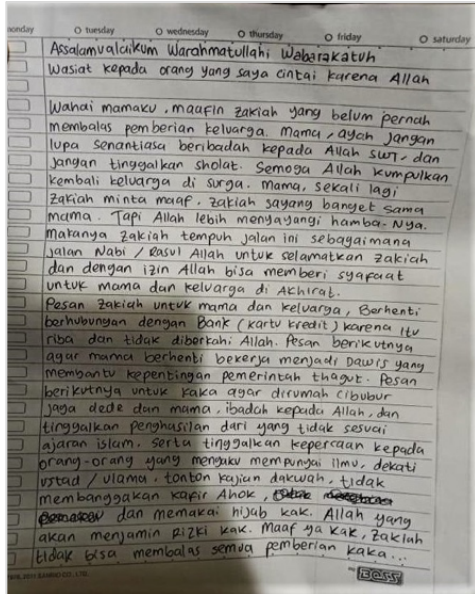
# 2021



## March 28

### Makassar, South Sulawesi • Married Indonesian couple

A newly married couple, Lukman Alfariz and Yogi Safitri Fortuna, detonated a pressure cooker bomb they were carrying on their motorcycle as parishioners were leaving Palm Sunday mass at a Catholic church in Makassar, killing themselves. Police blamed the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharut Daulah for the attack which injured 19 people. The couple have been linked to a religious study group led by a brother of Jolo Cathedral bomber Ulfah Saleh and who was killed in a police raid in Makassar in January 2021.



Snapshot of an undated letter left behind by Zakiah Aini before she staged an attack on the Indonesian National Police HQ in Jakarta on March 31, 2021. (Source: image provided by Susan Sim)

Three days after the Makassar bombing, a twenty-five-year-old Indonesian college drop-out carried out a suicide mission. On March 31, 2021, Zakiah Aini used a pretext to enter the Indonesian National Police Headquarters in Jakarta and was captured on CCTV calmly shooting at police officers with an air gun. She was killed when police returned fire. Investigators later found a letter in her home titled, “Testament to those I love because of God.” Referring to herself by name, she explained, “that’s why Zakiah took this path as the way of the prophet/messenger of God to save Zakiah and with God’s permission she could intercede for mama and family in the afterlife.” She also urged her family to stop using credit cards, her mother to stop working for the “thagut government” (a term Indonesian jihadists use to label the government as an evil oppressor), and her elder sister to wear the *hijab* (head scarf).

In an indication that she intended to commit “suicide by cop,” she also left behind an automatic pistol with several live rounds and a gun club membership card that suggested she had learned to shoot. Noting that she had uploaded a picture of an IS flag to her Instagram account hours before the attack but had no known connection to the usual pro-IS networks, the police concluded she was a “lone wolf” who self-radicalized online.

---

## THE RISE OF FEMALE MILITANCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Was Zakiah Aini seeking redemption, infamy, or both? Her motivations may never be known, but she will likely be enshrined as a cause célèbre in the online chat groups pushing women to take up arms. Across the region, more women are being arrested for terrorist offenses than ever before, albeit still not in as large numbers as men. In Indonesia, the largest country in the region with 275 million people and the world’s most populous Muslim country, forty women have been arrested for terrorist offenses since 2016, compared to five in the preceding fifteen years. As Figure 2 shows, women, however, still constitute barely three percent of total arrests for terrorism in Indonesia.

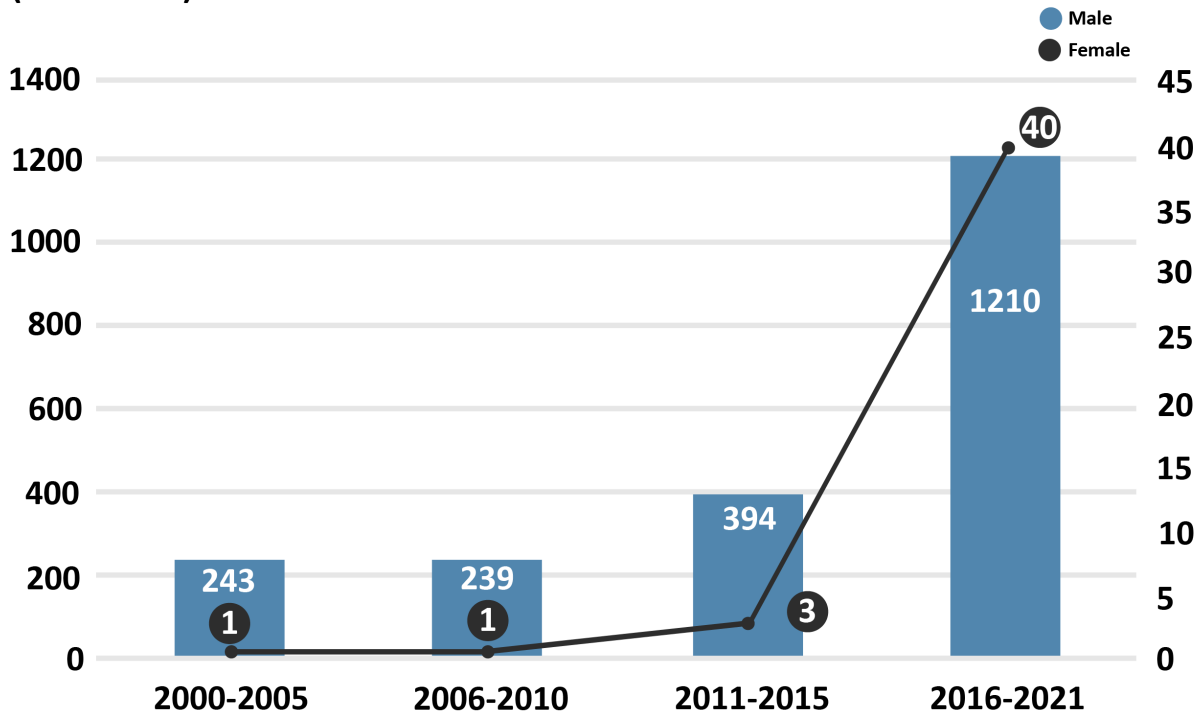
A similar uptick in arrests of female extremists has also been seen in Singapore and Malaysia, where the authorities are vigilant in enforcing laws that criminalize support for terrorism, including making plans to travel to foreign conflict zones to join insurgent groups and financing and planning terrorist attacks. Since 2016, Singapore, for instance, has dealt with six local women for planning to travel to Syria to join IS,<sup>48</sup> while Malaysia has arrested more than forty-three for IS-related activities, including the housewife who planned to ram voters with her car on polling day.<sup>49</sup> The Philippines, home to several insurgencies, announced in February the arrest of several women it described as “potential suicide bombers” planning to attack soldiers with improvised explosive devices.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Data compiled from Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs press statements.

<sup>49</sup> Mustafa, Muzliza and Zam Yusa. “Malaysia’s New Terror Threat: Women Acting as ‘Lone-Wolf’ Operatives.” *BenarNews*, July 24, 2018. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/women-terror-07242018160131.html>.

<sup>50</sup> “Philippines army says nine women arrested over bomb plots.” *ALArabiya News*, February 23, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/02/23/Terrorism-Philippines-army-says-nine-women-arrested-over-bomb-plots>.

**Figure 2: Arrests, by gender, for terrorist offenses in Indonesia (2000-2021)****ARRESTS, BY GENDER, FOR TERRORIST OFFENCES IN INDONESIA (2000-2021)**

Source: Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Jakarta; Data as of April 15, 2021

The increasing number of female terrorists in Southeast Asia is symptomatic of several broader trends:

- Social media has allowed terrorist groups to become equal opportunity instigators, as their extremist propaganda and bomb making manuals can now be accessed online by anyone with a smartphone and a reliable internet connection – an extremely low barrier to entry in 2021. Telegram and WhatsApp chat groups are used to indoctrinate men and women, groom them, and then push them to take concrete action. When pro-IS inmates at a prison holding center on the outskirts of Jakarta staged a riot and killed several police officers in May 2018, videos and images of their acts were rapidly shared among pro-IS chat groups on Telegram, with suggestions that members also take action. Two young women aged eighteen and twenty-one, members of a Telegram chat group that called itself “Turn Back Crime,” decided to go to the rioters’ aid. They were arrested outside the prison when they tried to attack police with scissors.

- Online self-radicalization is a very real phenomenon with an abbreviated radicalization and mobilization period of months rather than years. IS's unique capacity to leverage communication technologies to recruit has also greatly accelerated radicalization. For instance, the Singapore government has noted that while it used to take approximately twenty-two months for an individual to become self-radicalized before the advent of IS, this timeframe has been reduced to nine months "under the sway of the Islamic State (IS)." Some of the individuals radicalized in as little as one to two months from first exposure to IS propaganda to deciding to "take a knife to kill someone or throw a bomb at someone."<sup>51</sup> The first female to be detained in Singapore for radicalism in June 2017, a 22-year-old infant care worker, developed a wide network of foreign online contacts, including IS militants, within months of subscribing to the group's online propaganda. She made plans to travel with her young child to Syria, where she hoped to marry. She believed that she would reap "heavenly rewards" if her husband died fighting for IS and that an "elevated status" as a "martyr's widow" would allow her to easily marry another IS fighter in Syria. She told the authorities that she was prepared to undergo military training and engage in armed combat to defend IS if called upon to do so.<sup>52</sup>
- IS has provided a narrative for violence even more powerful than that of Al-Qaeda, partly due to its focus on a statebuilding enterprise. IS propaganda idealizing the rearing of children in a pure Islamic state has been particularly effective in encouraging families to make *hijrah* (migrate) to Syria. When that vision of an Islamic utopia was threatened by the West, women were encouraged to take up arms and, like the men, "hurry up for jihad" everywhere.<sup>53</sup> The Jolo Cathedral bombers went to the southern Philippines to join the Abu Sayyaf Group after they and three of their children were arrested in Turkey while waiting to cross into Syria and were deported back to Indonesia. Before they detonated their suicide bombs, they saw their older daughter married to an Indonesian militant, and entrusted their younger daughter, then only ten, to an Abu Sayyaf fighter who married her when she turned twelve.

---

<sup>51</sup>"Time taken for people to be radicalized has been shortened: Shanmugam." *Today*, September 14, 2017. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/time-taken-people-be-radicalised-has-been-shortened-shanmugam>; For more details on Singapore cases, see: Jayakumar, Shashi. "Singapore's Radicalised." *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, July 9, 2020. <https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/09/singapores-radicalised/>. For an analysis of how several young Singaporeans were influenced by IS' online propaganda, see: T'ng, Kimberly. "Down the Rabbit Hole: ISIS on the Internet and How It Influences Singapore Youth." *Home Team Journal*, 8, 2019. [https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/hta\\_libraries/publications/final-home-team-journal-issue-8-\(for-web\).pdf](https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/hta_libraries/publications/final-home-team-journal-issue-8-(for-web).pdf).

<sup>52</sup>"Detention of a Radicalised Singaporean under the Internal Security Act." Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs Press Release, June 12, 2017. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/detention-of-a-radicalised-singaporean-under-the-internal-security-act/>.

<sup>53</sup>Winter, Charlie. "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking with Convention." *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, September 13, 2018. <https://institute.global/policy/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>.



- The IS narrative is tied to a religiously-grounded end of times prophecy that prompts adherents to believe that if the world is about to end, they might as well martyr themselves now to ensure they, their families, and parents also end up in paradise. The “DIY” suicide bombings in Surabaya in May 2018 by the three families and the suicide-by-cop of Zakiah Aini were as much about dying as about killing.

To be sure, the threat of online radicalization does not only come from Islamist groups like IS, but also from the far-right. Although the demographic profiles of the countries in Southeast Asia make white supremacy-based violence and far-right conspiracy theories a hard sell, there are other actors prepared to engage in violence on behalf of their race, ethnicity, or religion. In Singapore, a 16-year-old teenager addicted to gore and violence online, was angered by an IS video showing the execution of Ethiopian Christians in Libya. He found inspiration in the live-streamed video of the 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in New Zealand. A Protestant Christian, the Singapore teenager was triggered a year later in October 2020 when three people were stabbed to death in a cathedral in Nice, France by a pro-IS militant. The teenager began making detailed plans to attack two mosques in Singapore on March 15 this year, the second anniversary of the Christchurch attack. He had bought a tactical vest, drafted a message to explain his “massacre” and settled on his mode of attack when arrested by the ISA in late November 2020.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Zhang, Lim Min. “16-year-old Singaporean detained under ISA for planning terrorist attacks on two mosques.” *The Straits Times*, January 27, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/16-year-old-detained-under-isa-for-planning-terrorist-attacks-at-two-mosques-in-singapore>.

---

## CONCLUSION: REGIONAL RESPONSES AND DYNAMICS

When Indonesia assumed the Presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in August 2020, it introduced a draft resolution on prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR) of terrorists. Indonesian leadership hoped it would provide “a comprehensive and long term strategy in countering terrorist acts and violent extremism conducive to terrorism, and preventing recurrence of terrorist acts.”<sup>55</sup> The final negotiated draft that went to a vote on August 26, 2020 contained a lot of previously agreed language from earlier resolutions, including a call for PRR measures already first highlighted in Resolution 2396 (2017) on measures to address returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs).<sup>56</sup> The draft text did not, however, address the repatriation of FTFs following objections from several European members.<sup>57</sup> However, it did encourage states to cooperate in efforts to bring FTFs to justice and to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of FTFs and accompanying family members, “particularly accompanying children, including by facilitating the return of the children to their countries of origin, as appropriate and on a case by case basis.”<sup>58</sup>

In an unprecedented move, given that all Security Council resolutions on counterterrorism since 2001 have been adopted by consensus (with no objection or veto), the Indonesian-sponsored resolution was vetoed by the United States. U.S. Ambassador Kelly Craft dismissed it as “worse

---

<sup>55</sup> Statement by H.E. Dian Triansyah Djani, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Indonesia, on United Nations Security Council: Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (Adoption), New York, August 31, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> The United States, as the informal “penholder” on counterterrorism resolutions in the Security Council, led the negotiations on UNSCR 2396 to create new international obligations that will, inter alia, “ensure appropriate prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of FTFs and their accompanying family members.” See: “FACT SHEET: Resolution 2396 (2017) on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Returnees and Relocators).” U.S. Mission to the United Nations, December 21, 2017. <https://usun.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-resolution-2396-2017-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters-returnees-and-relocators/>.

<sup>57</sup> “Counter-Terrorism: Vote on Draft Resolution.” *Security Council Report*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2020/08/counter-terrorism-vote-on-draft-resolution.php?print=true>.

<sup>58</sup> “Letter dated 31 August 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council.” United Nations (S/2020/870), August 31, 2020. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3885224?ln=en>.

than no resolution at all” since it did not call for the repatriation from Syria and Iraq of IS foreign fighters. The Trump administration, she added, was disappointed that Indonesian efforts to draft “a meaningful resolution... were stymied by council members’ refusal to include repatriation.”<sup>59</sup> The Indonesian delegate later noted that this defeat of the draft resolution on PRR of terrorists by a single veto demonstrated “a damaging signal that the [UN Security] Council, for the first time, is not united in the fight against the scourge of terrorism.”<sup>60</sup> It is also noteworthy that this vote highlighted a fissure between the United States and its traditional allies among the Permanent Members – the United Kingdom and France – which have different positions on repatriation, in opposition to that of the U.S. and Russia.

The potential return of foreign fighters and their families from detention facilities in Syria and Iraq remains an issue of great concern in Southeast Asia. Thus far, only Singapore and Malaysia have said that they will allow their nationals to return home, provided they agree to undergo rehabilitation. No Singaporean has yet taken up the offer. Sixteen Malaysians, five of them women, are said to have returned from Syria. Indonesia has some 422 nationals, almost half of them females, and seventy-eight children under the age of ten, in the refugee camps, prisons, and elsewhere in Syria.<sup>61</sup> With public opinion against their return, Indonesian leaders, including President Joko Widodo, have declared the Indonesians who joined IS in Syria to no longer be citizens.<sup>62</sup> The chief security minister Mahfud has, however, also said the government would consider repatriating Indonesian children under the age of ten on a case-by-case basis, especially if they are orphans.<sup>63</sup> But thus far Jakarta has been in no hurry to start the initial process of verifying the identity of the children. Meanwhile, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has set up a special task force to handle foreign terrorist fighters and family members who return to Indonesia on their own. Those found to have broken Indonesian law by engaging in combat or military training with IS or other rebel groups are charged in court while family members are generally subjected to a program of deradicalization before being allowed to return

---

<sup>59</sup> Lederer, Edith M. “US vetoes UN resolution over Islamic State fighters’ return.” *The Washington Post*, September 1, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/diplomats-say-us-veto-likely-on-un-anti-terrorism-resolution/2020/08/31/0a11e308-ebb7-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/diplomats-say-us-veto-likely-on-un-anti-terrorism-resolution/2020/08/31/0a11e308-ebb7-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f_story.html).

<sup>60</sup> Statement by H.E. Dian Triansyah Djani, August 31, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> This data was compiled by the Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) in February 2021, and shared by Dete Aliah, Founder and Director of SeRVE (Society against Radicalism and Violent Extremism), at a webinar organized by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore on May 24, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Gorbiano, Marchio Irfan and Budi Sutrisno. “They are ‘ex-citizens’: Jokowi disowns overseas Indonesian IS supporters.” *The Jakarta Post*, February 13, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/12/they-are-ex-citizens-jokowi-disowns-overseas-indonesian-is-supporters.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Soeriaatmadja, Wahyudi. “Indonesia refuses to let ISIS fighters and their families return home.” *The Straits Times*, February 11, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-refuses-to-let-isis-fighters-and-their-families-to-return-home>.

to their homes under the supervision of the local government. Although only one FTF – Syawaluddin Pakpahan – is known to have engaged in terrorist activity on his return home,<sup>64</sup> the authorities remain concerned that it is a matter of time before such returnees turn to militant activity.

The reality is that Southeast Asia has been through this before; the last time foreign fighters came home, they returned with connections to international networks, foreign funding sources, and refined tactics. The JI operatives who orchestrated the 2002 Bali bombings and built the suicide vests and truck bombs were trained in Afghanistan and Mindanao. Their introduction of suicide bombing in Indonesia in 2002 has had such a devastating impact that almost two decades later, *Densus 88* created a poster to warn against the continuing legacy of the so-called “Afghan veterans.” (See Figure 3)

At the moment, the online ecosystem of IS has made it easier for an individual or small group to join a militant community and to assemble small explosive devices using recipes downloaded or shared among social media chat groups. However, none of the recent attacks in Indonesia has approached anything close to the lethality of the 2002 Bali bombings. The exception might have been the suicide bombing campaign planned by the family in the North Sumatran town of Sibolga. When bombmaker Abu Hamza’s wife detonated his cache of bombs in the family home in March 2019, the resulting blast demolished the house and flattened the neighborhood. Pre-emptive evacuation measures taken by the police helped avoid further loss of life.<sup>65</sup> Contributing to this change in scale, the arrests or deaths of many bomb-makers and their known students have led to a current dearth of bomb-making proficiency in Indonesia.

On the whole, however, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have drafted, passed, and implemented robust legislation to deal with terrorism and violent extremism, including powers of pre-emptive detention. Two weeks after the 2018 suicide bombings, the Indonesian parliament unanimously passed a revised anti-terrorism law that gave the police powers to pre-emptively detain suspects for as long as twenty-one days without charge, and for another 200 days if police needed time to gather evidence. The legislation also accounts for prosecuting those who join or

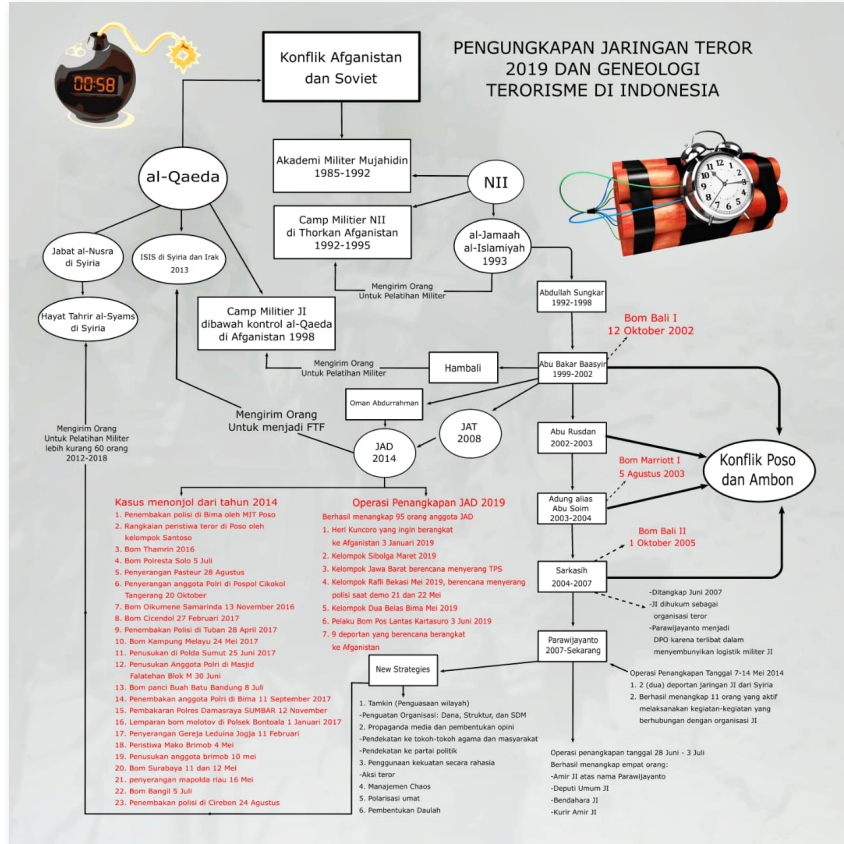
---

<sup>64</sup> Syawaluddin Pakpahan had gone to Syria in January 2013, where he joined the Free Syrian Army. He was, however, told to go home after six months when he began helping the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. In June 2017, Pakpahan, angered by rumors that the Indonesian government was planning to deploy military troops to Marawi, South Philippines, to help take back the town from IS fighters, walked into police headquarters in North Sumatra with an accomplice to kill a policeman with knives. His accomplice was killed and he was arrested. See: Soeriaatmadja, Wahyudi. “Trial of returning militant who killed cop closely watched.” *The Straits Times*, February 27, 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/trial-of-returning-militant-who-killed-cop-closely-watched>.

<sup>65</sup> Gunawan, Apriadi. “155 houses affected, some decimated by Sibolga bomb blast: Sibolga Mayor.” *The Jakarta Post*, March 17, 2019. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/03/17/155-houses-affected-some-decimated-by-sibolga-bomb-blast-sibolga-mayor.html>.

recruit for militant groups, disseminate their teachings, or take part in military-style training at home or overseas; and asking for the death penalty for those convicted of smuggling explosives or other chemicals and weapons into or out of the country for the purposes of committing terrorist acts.<sup>66</sup>

**Figure 3: Poster by Indonesian Police Detachment 88**



This poster was produced and distributed by the Indonesian Police Detachment 88 in 2019. It illustrates the “genealogy of terrorism in Indonesia,” how those who trained in Afghanistan during the Soviet conflict went on to carry out major terrorist attacks in Indonesia. It also shows how key individuals went on to found pro-IS groups that sent foreign fighters to Syria and carried out more than 20 terrorist attacks across Indonesia between 2014 and 2018. The poster also highlights counterterrorism successes by the Indonesian Police. (Source: image of original provided by Susan Sim)

<sup>66</sup> Diela, Tabita. “Indonesia toughens up anti-terror laws days after worst attack in years.” *Reuters*, May 25, 2018.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-security-bill-idUSKCN1HQ0DQ>

“Indonesia passes controversial anti-terror laws to fight ISIL.” *Al-Jazeera*, May 25, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/25/indonesia-passes-controversial-anti-terror-laws-to-fight-isil>.

In Malaysia, the government had initially used its preventive powers under the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960 to deal with the members of JI and an associated group of returned Afghan veterans who called themselves the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia. Following the repeal of the ISA in 2012, the Malaysian Parliament passed new legislation that empowered the Malaysian Special Branch to detain terrorist suspects without trial or judicial review for two years, although cases could be reviewed by a special Prevention of Terrorism Board. Other special measures laws were introduced in 2015 and 2016 to grant the government extensive powers to deal with those who engage in or support terrorist acts involving listed terrorist organizations in a foreign country, and to suspend or cancel the travel documents of any Malaysian involved with foreign terrorist organizations.<sup>67</sup>

In Singapore, the government decided that given the country's multi-racial and multi-religious composition, it would not be appropriate to try radicalized individuals or extremists in open court. It was deemed that doing so "could make things worse" and inadvertently reveal intelligence operations. The government thus opted instead for "a clear process – detain, rehabilitate and release."<sup>68</sup> The ISD thus handles terrorism cases under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for preventive detention of up to two years in the first instance or conditional release depending on the risk assessment. Under the law, a detention order must be reviewed by an independent ISA advisory board headed by a Supreme Court judge that hears directly from the accused, who has the right to counsel of their own choice, and who may question ISD officers and witnesses under oath. Those held in detention are offered voluntary rehabilitation programs that include religious and psychological counseling, as well as access to educational and vocational resources.<sup>69</sup>

While the use of preventive detention is often seen as controversial, executive action in these Southeast Asian states has also been accompanied by invitations to civil society to work with the

---

<sup>67</sup> For details of the legislative provisions, see: "The Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012." [http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%20747%20-%20Security%20Offences%20\(Special%20Measures\)%20Act%202012.pdf](http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%20747%20-%20Security%20Offences%20(Special%20Measures)%20Act%202012.pdf); "The Prevention of Terrorism Act." <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/103086/124977/F2110669281/MYS103086.pdf>;

"The Special Measures against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act 2015 (Act 770)." [https://www.cljlaw.com/files/bills/pdf/2015/MY\\_FS\\_BIL\\_2015\\_06.pdf](https://www.cljlaw.com/files/bills/pdf/2015/MY_FS_BIL_2015_06.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Singapore Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam, cited in: Hussain, Zakir. "ISIS bride and a fighter from Singapore said to have died in Syria." *The Straits Times*, August 4, 2019. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/isis-bride-and-a-fighter-from-spore-said-to-have-died-in-syria>.

<sup>69</sup> For an assessment of Singapore's approach to managing terrorism offenders, see: Jayakumar, Shashi and Raffaello Pantucci. "The Singapore Model: A New Deradicalisation Approach for the UK?" *Rusi Newsbrief* 40(2), March 2020. <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-newsbrief/singapore-model-new-deradicalisation-approach-uk>. See also: "Risk Reduction for Countering Violent Extremism." *Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS)*, 2010. <https://qiass.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/QIASS-Risk-Reduction-for-CVE-final-101414.pdf>

government on preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Such whole-of-society approaches, or community engagement initiatives, are not unique. For instance, the European Union's 2014 *Revised Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism* offers this helpful advice: "Community engagement should be broad-based and should reflect the diversity of the community." Only by involving a wider range of civil society and the private sector, it suggests, can governments draw upon the tools, resources, and insights they have to offer.<sup>70</sup>

Alarmed by the increasing number of individuals radicalized online and mobilized by IS propaganda, Singapore revamped its community-engagement program in 2016 with the introduction of a national counter-terrorism program it called SGSecure. The aim is "to sensitise, train and mobilise the community to play a part to prevent and deal with a terrorist attack."<sup>71</sup> This investment of significant resources is also acknowledgement that, even for the most advanced countries, it is "not possible to block all" extremist sites, even as "some technology companies have stepped up efforts to take down or stop the spread of extremist content on their platforms," the Minister of Home Affairs told Parliament.<sup>72</sup>

Indonesia has a less ambitious approach that is driven more by civil society organizations (CSOs). A report issued by the Asia Foundation in 2020 found that the participation of CSOs is vital in five main areas in Indonesia: in-prison reform and rehabilitation, social reintegration programs, counter-radicalization efforts, early warning systems, and policy-reform advocacy.<sup>73</sup> For instance, the Indonesian prison system, facing issues of over-crowding and outmoded practices, has accepted technical assistance from Indonesian CSOs like the Centre for Detention Studies (CDS) and Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian (YPP). CDS has helped prison officials adapt rules and programs taken from foreign models for the intake, oversight, and release of inmates, while YPP

---

<sup>70</sup> "Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism." *Council of the European Union*: Report 9956/14, May 19, 2014. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%209956%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> For details and an exposition on the government's rationale, see: Speech by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Official Launch of SGSecure, September 24, 2016. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-official-launch-sgsecure>.

<sup>72</sup> "Written Reply to Parliamentary Question on the Monitoring of Extremist Ideology Online." by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law." Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, May 11, 2021. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/written-reply-to-pq-on-the-monitoring-of-extremist-ideology-online-by-mr-k-shanmugam-minister-for-home-affairs-and-minister-for-law>.

<sup>73</sup> The report, "Prevention from Below: Civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia," written by The Asia Foundation for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, studied the challenges and successes of initiatives to tackle violent extremism in four countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, and Thailand. See: "Prevention from Below: Civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia." The Asia Foundation, October 2020. [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prevention-from-Below-Civil-Society-Efforts-to-Prevent-Violent-Extremism-in-Southeast-Asia\\_full-report.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prevention-from-Below-Civil-Society-Efforts-to-Prevent-Violent-Extremism-in-Southeast-Asia_full-report.pdf).

has developed several programs to increase the capacity of probation and parole officers.<sup>74</sup> YPP, reflecting the interest of its founder, Noor Huda Ismail, is also developing a community-based corrections model that involves the wider society in the reintegration of released terrorist convicts. Ismail has also produced several documentaries featuring former terrorists to highlight the role that women and children can play in preventing violent extremism. One of these films, *Pengantin (The Bride)*, tells the stories of two female Indonesian migrant workers who ended up in jail for terrorist offenses while a third found love and marriage. It has been shown to female Indonesian migrant workers in Singapore to warn them of the dangers of radicalism and to practice digital literacy.<sup>75</sup>

### *Is A More Gendered Approach Required?*

As a relatively recent phenomenon in Southeast Asia, the roles of women in terrorism, and a gendered dimension of counterterrorism, has received less attention in the region. Most extremist narratives “work” because they are grounded in local and relatable grievances,<sup>76</sup> perceptions and conspiracy theories that many of their target audience believe to be true.<sup>77</sup> Terrorist groups recruit by exploiting feelings of anger, humiliation, resentment, and lack of purpose; they offer in their place “an alternative form of rationality deeply rooted in culture, which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action.”<sup>78</sup> The growing body of research on women engaged in terrorism and violent extremism in the Middle East and elsewhere suggest many females are motivated by the same drivers as their male counterparts, and play multiple – sometimes overlapping – roles of perpetrator, victim,

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Author interview with Noor Huda Ismail, April 6, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> For example, Ingram (2021) has found that “a trifecta of stigma, shame, and fear” is regularly used not only to recruit and mobilize local communities to obstruct the peace process in Mindanao, but to also obstruct disengagement and reintegration efforts. See: Ingram, Haroro. “Stigma, Shame, and Fear: Navigating Obstacles To Peace In Mindanao.” *Resolve Network*, March 2021. [https://www.resolve.net.org/system/files/2021-03/RSVE\\_Policy%20Note\\_Ingram\\_March%202021.pdf](https://www.resolve.net.org/system/files/2021-03/RSVE_Policy%20Note_Ingram_March%202021.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> See, for example: “Quantifying The Q Conspiracy: A Data-Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon.” *The Soufan Center*, April 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/quantifying-the-q-conspiracy-a-data-driven-approach-to-understanding-the-threat-posed-by-qanon/>.

<sup>78</sup> Corman, Steven R. “Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication”, in *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies*, edited by Laurie Fenstermacher and Todd Leventhal, Washington, DC: NSI, Inc., 2012, 36-43.



ideologue or enabler.<sup>79</sup> And yet, there is often a tendency, as has been seen in commentary on recent attacks in Indonesia, to deny the possibility of women being motivated to perpetrate these attacks for reasons of their own,<sup>80</sup> even as structural gender inequalities have been known to make participation in terrorist groups appealing.

*Many females are motivated by the same drivers as their male counterparts, and play multiple – sometimes overlapping – roles of perpetrator, victim, ideologue or enabler.*

Terrorist groups like the Tamil Tigers, for example, offered participation in its Women's Wing as a way for women to escape traditional gender roles and limitations.<sup>81</sup> Some women who travelled to join IS have claimed they were coerced to travel by male family members. Yet, there have also been cases, admittedly more rare, of women who persuaded their entire families to make *hijrah* to Syria with them. The most famous Indonesian example is sixteen-year-old Dhaniala, who persuaded twenty-five of her relatives to sell their belongings, uproot themselves, and travel to Syria with her to live in the IS caliphate. Disenchanted by what

they saw, Dhaniala and most of her family escaped from IS and were repatriated home by the Indonesian government.<sup>82</sup> She is now part of an Indonesian civil society effort to dissuade people

<sup>79</sup> See, for example: Fink, Naureen Chowdhury, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai (editors). "A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism." *Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security*, 2016. [https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld\\_FULLL.pdf](https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULLL.pdf); Sjoberg, Laura and Reed Wood. "People, Not Pawns: Women's Participation in Violent Extremism Across MENA." USAID Research Brief, September 2015. [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE\\_RESEARCHBRIEF\\_PEOPLENOTPAWNS.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_RESEARCHBRIEF_PEOPLENOTPAWNS.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> See, for example: Milla, Mirra Noor. "Relasi dengan keluarga dan suami menjadi motif teroris perempuan dalam lakukan aksi mereka (Relationships with families and husbands are the motive for female terrorists to carry out their actions)." *The Conversation*, April 7, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/relasi-dengan-keluarga-dan-suami-menjadi-motif-teroris-perempuan-dalam-lakukan-aksi-mereka-158409>.

<sup>81</sup> Fink, Naureen Chowdhury and Rafia Barakat. "Strengthening Community Resilience against Violence and Extremism: The Roles of Women in South Asia." *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation*, 2013. [https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/13Nov27\\_Women-and-CVE-in-South-Asia\\_Policy-Brief\\_Final.pdf](https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/13Nov27_Women-and-CVE-in-South-Asia_Policy-Brief_Final.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> For details, see: Barker, Anne. "Meet the Indonesian girl who led her family to move to Syria to join Islamic State." *ABC News*, March 22, 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-23/the-girl-who-led-her-family-to-join-islamic-state/10850294>.

from joining IS by telling the stories of former terrorists and disillusioned IS followers.<sup>83</sup> On the other end of the spectrum are concerns that women make for greater zealots because they, “having broken free from traditional gender roles... can be more militant and firmer”, as one Indonesian terrorism analyst has argued.<sup>84</sup>

A clearer gendered understanding of grievances and radicalization dynamics, and the differential impacts of terrorism and counterterrorism on women and girls, is therefore critical to developing effective prevention strategies and approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration. How do we identify and stop perpetrators of violence in time? Will P/CVE programs devised by men with male terrorists in mind work as well with women? There are as yet no clear answers. Indeed the 2020 Asia Foundation study on the efforts of CSOs in Southeast Asia also found that “governments and CSOs still have an inadequate understanding of gender relations and roles in PVE, despite the prominent role of women and girls in recent, high-profile violent incidents.” A few CSOs in Indonesia have in recent years begun to focus specifically on working with female extremists and reintegrating them. But, the report cautioned, “further efforts are needed to ensure that both governments and CSOs are working sensitively and from a strong evidence base.”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> For more on Dhanias work in countering violent extremism, see: “Interview with Dhanias.” South East Asian Network of Civil Society Organisations, June 18, 2020. <https://www.sean-cso.org/interview-with-dhanias/>.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in: Arshad, Arlina. “Rise of female militants in South-east Asia poses challenge for war on terror.” *The Straits Times*, April 2, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/rise-of-female-militants-poses-challenge-for-war-on-terror>.

<sup>85</sup> “Prevention from Below.” *The Asia Foundation*, 2020.

---

## CONTRIBUTORS

### **Susan Sim**

*Lead Author & Senior Research Fellow*

Susan Sim is a Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center. She is Vice President for Asia at The Soufan Group and has worked in various capacities in the Singapore government—in law enforcement, intelligence analysis, and diplomacy—and was a journalist based in Indonesia in the 1990s. In 2009, she founded Strategic Nexus Consultancy, a boutique research firm specializing in home-front security and counterterrorism issues, in which capacity she led several commissioned research projects studying the terrorist landscape and government responses in Southeast Asia. She lectures regularly on suicide bombing modus operandi, narratives and counter-narratives, and national counter-terrorism policymaking at the NATO Centre of Excellence Defence against Terrorism in Ankara, Turkey.

### **Colin P. Clarke**

*Senior Research Fellow*

Colin P. Clarke is a Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center and Director of Policy and Research at The Soufan Group. Clarke has briefed his research at a range of national and international security forums, including the U.S. Army War College, US Air Force Special Operations School, Society for Terrorism Research International Conference, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the Counter ISIS Financing Group (CIFG), which is part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

### **Mohamed H. El Shawesh**

*Multimedia Coordinator*

Mohamed H. El Shawesh assists The Soufan Center with multimedia editing, and he is the Digital Media Coordinator at The Soufan Group. El Shawesh has an MBA in Media Management from the Metropolitan College of New York through a Fulbright scholarship granted to him by the U.S. State Department.

## **Naureen Chowdhury Fink**

### *Executive Director*

Naureen Chowdhury Fink is the Executive Director of The Soufan Center. Previously, she served as the Senior Policy Adviser on Counterterrorism and Sanctions at the United Kingdom's Mission to the United Nations, leading representation and negotiations in the Security Council and General Assembly. She has developed and implemented CT and CVE projects across the globe, in regions as diverse as West Africa and South Asia, and published widely on counterterrorism, gender, the UN, and deradicalization efforts.

## **Stephanie Foggett**

### *Resident Fellow*

Stephanie Foggett is a Resident Fellow at The Soufan Center and Director of Global Communications at The Soufan Group. Her work at TSC focuses on: multilateral security cooperation; counter-terrorism cooperation with international organizations and governments; crisis management; and narratives and strategic communications as it relates to security.

## **Amanda Schmitt**

### *Program and Communications Officer*

Amanda Schmitt is the Program and Communications Officer at The Soufan Center. She has prior experience in research and project management across the United Nations, nonprofit, and public sectors, with a regional focus on the Middle East across humanitarian policy, forced migration, international law, and conflict analysis.

## **Zachary White**

### *Intern*

Zachary White is an intern at The Soufan Center and a graduate student at Yale University. Prior to working at TSC, he worked for Fulbright in Turkey and the Peace Corps in Georgia.

---

## **ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER**

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.

