

INDONESIANS WITH AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN

27 June 2024
IPAC Report No. 95

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I. INTRODUCTION

In May 2024, six Indonesians were found guilty of terrorism by the North Jakarta District Court for having trained or facilitated training with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) nearly a decade earlier. They were part of a larger group from the extremist organisations Jamaah Anshorul Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Anshorul Sharia (JAS) that saw Yemen as a desirable place to acquire combat experience or assist fellow Muslims to defend themselves against attacks from non-believers (*kafir*) and Shi'a. Their trials produced a wealth of information on their own experiences but raised the question of how many Indonesians from other organisations had gone to Yemen to fight and how many were still there, although the number is likely very small. The men convicted were part of a JAT/JAS group, mostly from East Java, that between 2012 and 2014 had sent ten men to AQAP, in part because they believed it was winning its battle against the government and would soon be a full-fledged Islamic state.

Indonesian extremists in Yemen have always been a tiny minority of the thousands who go there for a traditional education. In early 2024, Indonesian citizens in Yemen totalled 4,886, the vast majority of them students.¹ The war had not greatly affected the Hadramaut region where most were concentrated, underscored by the fact that six polling places were set up there for the 2024 Indonesian presidential elections, four in Tarim and two in Mukalla.² A much smaller number of Indonesians study with Salafi ulama around Sana'a and Dammaj, where the conflict has been intense. Generally, however, neither the traditional nor the Salafi schools have been fertile ground for AQAP recruitment. Of the Indonesians who are the focus of this report, all were radicalised in Indonesia, not Yemen, and sought to have contacts with AQAP as part of a commitment to the global jihad that had begun at home.

A 2011 study of Indonesian students in Yemen noted:

We were not able to find any evidence of AQAP recruitment among the Indonesian student body or even much interest in Indonesia itself, at least as reflected in AQAP's propaganda. Nevertheless, there is more interest in Yemen among Indonesian extremists and this may well grow if AQAP is able to sustain its current prominent international profile and especially if it is able to mount successful terrorist spectacles in coming years.³

The Gaza war has raised the profile of Yemen in Indonesia through the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, although because the Houthis are Shi'a, this will not necessarily make Yemen more attractive as a destination for jihad. Still, the sheer number of Indonesians in Yemen makes the need for close attention to developments there important.

¹ "Pasukan Gabungan Menyerang Houthi, Seluruh WNI di Yaman Aman," *tirto.id*, 12 January 2024.

² "PPLN Sana'a bekerjasama dengan PPI Yaman menyukseskan Pemilu 2024 di Yaman," *kumparan.com*, 14 February 2024.

³ Anthony Bubalo, Sarah Phillips, Samina Yasmeen and Solahudin, *Talib or Taliban: Indonesian students in Pakistan and Yemen*, Lowy Institute, Sydney: 2011, p.7.

This report is based largely on the trial testimonies of the men convicted in May, with additional material from open-source government, media and NGO reports, and information collected from trial testimonies over the last decade by IPAC.

II. HISTORICAL LINKS TO THE HADRAMAUT

Migrants from the Hadramaut region of Yemen, known as Hadramis, have played an important role in Indonesian Islam since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, though they first arrived in the Netherlands East Indies much earlier. As Muslims and as Arabic speakers, they integrated well with local communities, and by the beginning of the second World War, they numbered about 80,000; today the figure may be over two million. Many members of the Hadrami elite claimed descent from the Prophet as *sayyid*, using the honorific title “Habib”, but many non-*sayyids* of Hadrami descent also rose to prominence over the years, particularly in Islamic political and educational organisations but also throughout Indonesian public life more generally.⁴

Indonesian Islamist organisations were not immune from the perception that it was somehow more appropriate to have someone of Arab descent at the top. Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, founders of Jemaah Islamiyah, were both from Hadrami families. So was Abdul Qadir Baraja of Khilafatul Muslimin, Habib Rizieq Shihab of the Islamic Defenders Front, and Jafar Umar Thalib of Laskar Jihad and the Forum Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, to name just a few.⁵

While Indonesians had been going to Yemen for study for decades, the numbers took off in late 1990s after the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen and as the availability of scholarships and cheap airfares increased. By 2000, some 200 Indonesians a year were going to Yemen through official channels. Schools in the Hadramaut, not that different in approach from traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) on Java, were the most popular, and many of the Indonesian students who went there were themselves of Hadrami descent, eager to deepen their understanding of their ancestral culture.⁶ Indonesians attending Salafi schools, perhaps a quarter of the total student population, also increased in number. It was here that the first signs of an extremist linkage began to be seen, particularly at al-Iman University in Sana’a.

Al-Iman became notorious after the U.S. designated its founder, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, as a terrorist and several high-profile figures associated with al-Qaeda or the Taliban were found to have studied there, including the “American Taliban” John Walker Lindh. Abu Bakar Ba’asyir’s son, Abdul Rohim, attended al-Iman around 1995, and Syaifudin Zuhri, who was

⁴ For a thorough background on the Hadrami community in Indonesia, see Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942*, Ithaca, 1999. Well-known Indonesians of Yemeni descent include the late foreign minister, Ali Alatas; the current minister of education and founder of Go-Jek, Nabel Makarim; the murdered human rights lawyer Munir Said Thalib; and Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan.

⁵ Jafar Umar Thalib studied in Yemen in 1990 with the well-known Salafi scholar Sheikh Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wad’i at his Darul Hadith school in Dammaj and helped revitalise and deepen Indonesian Salafi connections to Yemen. See Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia*, Ithaca, 2006, pp.77-80.

⁶ Bubalo et al, op.cit. p.33.

killed by police in connection with the 2009 hotel bombings in Jakarta, was reportedly a student there from 1995 to 2000. But al-Iman was always riven by rivalries and reportedly had a running dispute with Al-Qaeda for control of mosques in the area in the early 2000s, so attendance at al-Iman did not automatically make someone an AQAP sympathiser.

III. THE 2010 ARRESTS

Two Indonesian students, S and H, (full names withheld) were arrested in February 2010 by the Yemeni government on suspicion of being involved in al-Qaeda. After intensive investigation, Yemeni and Indonesian authorities concluded that they were not, but some useful information emerged from an interview with them in 2010, a transcript of which was made available to IPAC in 2014.

S, a Salafi from North Sumatra, left in June 2009 after getting advice from Abu Nida, one of the leading Salafi scholars in Indonesia, that the best place in Yemen to study was with Sheikh Abu al-Hassan al-Maribi at the Darul Hadith school in Marib.⁷ The Ministry of Religious Affairs, however, recommended that he study in Yamania University (Al Jami'ah Yamaniyah). When he arrived, he registered at the latter, and as soon as his residence permit was issued, he moved to Marib. At the time, there were about 70 Indonesians there, down from 100 the year before. S could not get a permit to stay in Marib because of the worsening security situation.

The most dangerous area in Marib was the village of Sabuan, according to S, because it was the stronghold of al-Qaeda, and there were even rumours that Osama bin Laden had once stayed there. Everyone in the area knew how to handle a gun, and some students were given military training for self-defence. Darul Hadith was very close to Sabuan, so S said that many people believed Sheikh Abul Hasan must have good connections with al-Qaeda, whereas in the Salafi community, he was seen as having become too close to the government.

According to S, Dammaj was the other dangerous area because that was a base of the anti-government rebellion and many radicals lived there, including from al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. He said there were many Indonesians there, but they were very exclusive, and you could not get close to them unless you were part of the group. The leading sheikhs there, Yahya Al-Hajuri, Muhammad Imam and Abdul Rahman Muhari, were known to be militant and very hostile toward Sheikh Abul Hasan.⁸

S noted that there were about 20 Ngruki alumni in Sana'a when he was there, one of whom was Reza Fardi from West Kalimantan, studying at al-Iman.⁹ Reza had graduated from Ngruki in 2006 and seems to have gone straight to al-Iman to continue his studies. He became one

⁷ The school was initially called Darul Hadith but was later renamed Jami'un Taqwa. It had some 6,000 students when S and H were there. In the interview transcript obtained by IPAC, the name of the sheikh was spelled Abul Hasan bin Sulaiman and Marib was transliterated as Ma'reb.

⁸ See Bubalo et al, *op.cit.* pp.38-39, for more on the divisions among Salafi ulama in Yemen.

⁹ S refers to him as Reza Fadli, but it is clearly the same person.

of the first Indonesians killed in Syria, fighting with the Suqour al-Izz militia, part of the al-Nusra Front. His death was announced over social media in November 2013.

H, the other Indonesian arrested with S, was from Central Java and studied at Ngruki from 2002 to 2006, so he would have been in the same class with Reza Fardi. He then undertook practice teaching for a year in Sragen, Central Java at a major pesantren (likely one of those in JI's network) before leaving for Yemen. He acknowledged that he held very radical views for the first three years that he was at Ngruki but began to question those views in his fourth year.

H said he left for Yemen with five friends from Ngruki, part of a program run by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's son to send four or five students every year to study there. H was assigned to an academy in Sana'a (Lembaga Pendidikan NCC), so according to the terms of his visa, he could not leave the Sana'a area. After a year, however, he moved to the school in Marib where S was studying. In February 2010 he got an ear infection and decided to go to Sana'a for treatment. He left in a car with S and a Yemeni friend, but they were stopped en route and arrested because they could not show proper documentation. For 80 days, they shared a cell with five Yemeni al-Qaeda members. The Indonesia embassy successfully negotiated for their release and on 2 May 2010, they were deported back to Indonesia.

There indeed was nothing in the background of S and H to indicate ties to al-Qaeda but it is worth noting that in 2010, contacts with Al-Qaeda appeared to be easily available in the Sana'a-Marib area; that some of the schools in Dammaj were seen as particularly radical because of the ulama who taught there; and that arrests on charges of violating the terms of a visa or residence permit, which were common, were likely to land the violators in prison where their cellmates could be al-Qaeda. We have no cases, however, of any Indonesian having been radicalised while detained in a Yemeni prison.

IV. YEMEN BEGINS TO LOOK ATTRACTIVE FOR JIHAD

Through 2010, Indonesians who went to Yemen had been attracted there only to study. As the Yemeni conflict worsened, Indonesians began to be attracted to go there to fight. They were overwhelmingly from anti-ISIS groups that were initially from Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or JAT or stayed loyal to al-Qaeda after a bitter rivalry with between al-Qaeda and ISIS developed in Syria in 2013. There is no confirmed evidence of any Indonesians having joined ISIS-Yemen, although there may well be a few cases. In 2020, an Indonesian ID card (KTP) was found by Houthi militias after they attacked an ISIS base in al-Bayda. The card had been faked, however, and no one knew of such an individual at the address on the card in Mojokerto, East Java.¹⁰ It is unlikely, though, that a non-Indonesian would have a fake Indonesian card,

¹⁰ BBC News Indonesia, "KTP WNI diduga anggota ISIS di Yaman ditelusuri Kemenlu, pangamat terorisme menyebut jaringan WNI pendukung ISIS 'masih tersebar dan aktif di Timur Tengah'", 31 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-53943014>.

so the possibility of a few Indonesians joining the ISIS contingent in Yemen cannot be discounted.

JAT was also responsible for AQAP propaganda reaching Indonesia. The AQAP magazine *Inspire* began to be translated into Indonesian by an organisation called Forum Islam Al Busyro around 2010. The forum was led by Arif Wicaksana Aji, the son-in-law of Afif Abdul Majid, a teacher at al-Mukmin pesantren in Ngruki, Solo and former JI member who had become Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's right-hand man in JAT. The magazine had two significant impacts in Indonesia. It popularised Abu Musab al-Suri's concept of "jihad cells", a strategy to protect jihadist organisations from being destroyed by government security forces.¹¹ Almost every issue had an article on how to operationalise the concept and convinced many would-be mujahidin that they could achieve victory over Islam's enemies through many small cells or even individuals working toward the same goal without organisational direction. The articles became the impetus to adopt a new strategy of individual jihad (*jihad fardiyah*). The magazine also showed a new generation of jihadis how they could make explosives from easily available materials. In 2010, *Inspire* ran an article entitled "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom" that was immediately translated into Indonesian and became the go-to manual for terrorist bomb construction.

Separately from *Inspire's* influence, AQAP's growing strength in Yemen began to attract Indonesian attention. After popular uprisings of the Arab Spring led to the eruption of civil war in Syria in 2011 and the overthrow of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen in 2012, violent Islamist extremist movements made gains in both countries. Both came to be seen in Indonesia as places where an Islamic victory was possible and thus were designated "primary work areas" (*wilayah garap utama*).¹² This perception of Yemen is largely what spurred JAT in East Java to put together a training program with AQAP.

It also helped that Yemen featured in Islamic eschatology, enhancing its legitimacy as a jihad destination. While it never had the same pull that greater Syria (Sham in Arabic transliteration) had for those who believed the end of the world was fast approaching and wanted to be present for Islam's ultimate victory, it was still mentioned in various *hadith* or traditions of the Prophet as a place where at the end of time, Islam would have standing armies.¹³

¹¹ Abu Musab al-Suri, whose real name was Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, promoted the strategy in a book called *A Call to Global Islamic Resistance* (Da'wah al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-alamiyya), a 1,600 page analysis of mistakes and failures of past jihads. A summary of Al-Suri's key concepts was published in Indonesian in October 2009 in a book called *Perjalanan Gerakan Jihad (1930-2002)* but the *INSPIRE* articles were probably more widely read.

¹² The idea of *wilayah garap utama* had become popular with the publication of an Indonesian translation of the book *Idaratul Tawahusy* by Abu Bakar An-Najdi. The dissemination of the concept coincided with a meeting in 2012 of about 50 JAT territorial and administrative division leaders in Batu, Malang. Saifudin alias Abu Fida gave a presentation of JAT's Global Jihad Program, an effort to build international connection in areas of conflict where Muslims were being oppressed. He mentioned Syria and Yemen in this context as two countries critical to efforts of the Muslim community to liberate Palestine and as places where JAT members could help the struggle by going there to fight. See indictment in the case of Achmad Basir Umar alias Basir bin Umar Bajuber.

¹³ For example, a *hadith* attributed to Abu Dawud says, "Ibn Hawalah said, 'Choose for me, O Messenger of Allah, if I reach that time.' He said, 'Go to Sham, for it is the chosen land of Allah in all the earth to which he selects his chosen servant. But if you do not wish to go there, then go to Yemen and drink from its streams. For indeed Allah has on my account taken special charge of Sham and its people.'"

A *hadith* attributed to Tirmidhi, says, "The Prophet, peace be upon Him, said that there would be other signs of the Last Hour which appeared in Sham and Yemen. On the authority of Salim ibn Abdullah ibn Umar from his father who said, 'The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon Him) said, "A huge fire will come from Hadramaut or from the direction of the sea of Hadramaut before

V. THE FIRST WAVE OF INDONESIAN MUJAHIDIN

Inspired by the idea of Yemen as a primary working area, three Indonesians with JAT connections decided to leave for Yemen in 2012. They were Fatkhi Umar alias Abu Ahmad al-Indunisy from Surabaya, a JAT member; Edi alias Abu Hamzah from Malang, who had attended JAT meetings but had not formally joined; and Salim Mubarak alias Abu Jandal, the former Salafi student. In the years since he had studied in Yemen, he had changed from quietist Salafi into a committed jihadi.

The three underwent military training with AQAP. Fatkhi Umar joined the medical team and never returned to Indonesia, while Abu Jandal and Edi became fighters but then went home in early 2013. Salim, who had become very close to radical cleric Aman Abdurrahman, left for Syria to join ISIS in August 2013. Edi returned only to sell his house but planned to return to Yemen. When he was back in Malang, he told some of his friends in JAT, including Heru Siswanto, head of the Surabaya subdivision (*mudiriyah*) about his experiences, and several wanted to go. They told Son Hadi, the JAT spokesman, of their interest, and Son Hadi told them he would look for funds, even though he was very ill at the time. Just before he died in 2013, he asked Achmad Basir Umar, better known as Basir, to facilitate their travel.¹⁴ Basir was the older brother of Fatkhi Umar, and so had good contacts in Yemen.

The first group to leave under Basir's auspices departed in January 2014 and included Edi; Yudi Lukito from Bali, and Abdullah al-Katiri, an Indonesian of Hadrami descent. Abdullah had already decided to go on his own, using funds from the sale of his house in Condet, Jakarta. They made contact with AQAP through Fatkhi and stayed for four months, undergoing military and religious training. After two weeks of specialised training, Al-Katiri was assigned to a unit tasked with repairing AK-47s. He returned to Indonesia in May 2014. After his return, Basir asked him for help in sending the next four to Yemen. He had intended to go back anyway to deal with a family matter, so he agreed to lead the group.

In the meantime, however, JAT had undergone a major crisis. In August 2014, its founder and leader, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, imprisoned at the time in the Nusakambangan prison complex, had sworn allegiance to the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi without consultation with other JAT leaders. Many in JAT did not agree with ISIS teachings and given ISIS's rivalry with al-Qaeda in Syria, preferred to align themselves with the latter.¹⁵ In a meeting on 11 August 2014 at Asrama Haji in Pondok Gede, Bekasi, outside Jakarta, top leaders of the JAT central committee (*markaziyah*) met and decided not only not to support ISIS but to split off from the main body of JAT and form a new organisation to be called Jamaah Anshor Syariah (JAS). Those present vowed to retain their commitment to dakwah and jihad as the essence of the organisation and reject any man-made rather than God-given ideology. They also vowed to

the Day of Resurrection, which will gather the people in Sham." They said, "O Messenger of Allah! What do you order us then?" He said, "You must go to Sham." See Safa Faruqi, "Nine Divine Connections between Blessed Shaam and Yemen," <https://muslimhands.org.uk>, 21 October 2020. For more on the importance of these prophecies in Indonesian jihadism, see Greg Fealy, "Apocalyptic Thought, Conspiracism and Jihad in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.41, No.1, April 2019, pp.63-85.

¹⁴ Basir had joined JAT in 2008. In 2011, he was appointed by Son Hadi as a staff of the education division of JAT East Java.

¹⁵ North Jakarta District Court, "Verdict in the case of Yudo Ratmiko", Putusan No. 127/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr", 13 May 2024.

reject “global terrorism”, as led by “infidels, the U.S. and its lackeys, Iran and Shi’a/Houthi in Yemen.”¹⁶

While JAS leaders rejected the use of al-Qaeda or ISIS-style violence in Indonesia, they, like JAT, JI, and other salafi jihadist organisations, believed that all organisations committed to the full implementation of Islamic law would face hostility from non-believers and enemies of Islam and needed to be prepared to defend themselves and the faith, with armed force if necessary. Military training and a supply of weapons were thus essential. “Infidels will be emboldened to attack if they see you don’t have arms,” said one JAS leader. “Look at India”.¹⁷

Despite the differences over ISIS, JAT and JAS initially had a commitment to work together in other areas. Yudo Ratmiko bin Ardi, for example, joined JAS but initially remained as head of syariah enforcement (Qoid Syariah Hisbah) for JAT. On 12 February 2014, he provided financial assistance for two JAT members, Acep Ahmad Setiawan and Dian from NTB, to leave to join Jabhat al Nusra in Idlib, Syria under the cover of being medical workers for the JAS humanitarian organisation, Medis dan Aksi Kemanusiaan (Me-Dan). Neither had any medical skills or knowledge, and one of the JAS members acknowledged that Me-Dan was only a cover to raise funds for JAS and to blind authorities and the public alike to its real mission.¹⁸ Ratmiko continued to help men from both JAT and JAS and sent a JAS delegation to the Salafi militia Ahrar al Sham in Syria in May 2015, also under a Me-Dan cover.¹⁹

VI. THE SECOND CONTINGENT TO AQAP

Meanwhile, plans for the hijrah to Yemen of the second group went ahead. It consisted of Heru Siswanto alias Musa, Arif Arifiyanto alias Totok, Muhammad Taqiyuddin alias Abu Ayub (head of JAT Bima who had joined JAS), and Endri Sunaryo alias Luthfi, also from JAS.²⁰ Led by Abdullah al-Katiri, they departed on 14 December 2014. All got through immigration without difficulty. They were met at the airport by an AQAP man known as Abu Hasan and taken to his house. Al-Katiri left them there and went on to handle his personal affairs before returning to Indonesia and subsequently leaving for Syria.²¹

The four remaining Indonesians were taken to meet Sheikh Abdul Aziz of AQAP and questioned about their willingness to die in battle. They handed over money that Basir had given them to buy arms and then departed for a camp in al-Jawaf in North Yemen to undergo military training. On arrival, according to Taqiyuddin, Sheikh Abdul Aziz distributed Chinese-made AK-47s and 30 bullets (7.62 caliber) for training in target shooting. After a month there,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with JAS leader, Solo, 7 April 2022, kindly made available by Nava Nuraniyah,

¹⁸ North Jakarta District Court, “Verdict in case of Sunaryo, Putusan Nomor 127/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr”, 16 May 2024, p.8.

¹⁹ The delegation consisted of Muhammad Abdullah Husein, Sayono Darmo Suwito and Dian alias Abu Umar. Husein and Sayono were deported from Turkey on 19 October 2017 and later sentenced to three years and four months each.

²⁰ Muhammad Taqiyuddin, born 30 March 1975, lived in Dompus, Bima. He was sentenced to six years in prison on 6 May 2024. Endri Sunaryo bin Ghojali was born in Tulungagung, East Java on 17 March 1982. He was sentenced to five years in prison, also on 6 May 2024. Achmad Basir Umar and Abdullah Al Katiri both received six-year sentences.

²¹ He left for Syria in 2016 and briefly joined Jabhat Fateh Al Sham, a newer incarnation of Jabhat an-Nusra. See North Jakarta District Court, “Verdict in the case of Abdullah al-Katiri”, Putusan No. No.124/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr, 20 May 2024.

they moved to a camp in South Yemen for two weeks of military training. They were then assigned to particular units by one Sheikh Abu Zakaria. Endri Sunaryo and Arif Arifiyanto were sent to learn how to make home-made weapons, including guns and bombs. Heru Siswanto was assigned to the medical team, while Taqiyuddin was put in the religious unit. They were assisted throughout by Fatkhi Umar, Basir's brother.

Taqiyuddin testified in his 2024 trial that the aim of going to Yemen was to acquire the skills to fight kafir and Shi'a in Indonesia, but Heru saw their goals differently.²² According to Endri, he told the group, "Our mission in coming to Yemen is jihad don't even think of returning to Indonesia."²³ In the end, Taqiyuddin, Endri Sunaryo and Arif Arifiyanto returned in mid-2015. Heru Siswanto, however, stayed on. His death, considered martyrdom even though he died of leukemia and not in battle, was announced by AQAP media in May 2022.²⁴

Another Indonesian death in Yemen was reported in April 2023 when "Marwan Jihadi" was killed fighting Houthis in Habban, in the Shabwah governate. According to social media postings, he had gone on his own and had only been in Yemen two months when he died. He was known by the *nom de guerre* of "Abu Kholid al-Makassariy" (Makassar is the provincial capital of South Sulawesi). According to Indonesian government sources, however, his name was not Marwan, and he was from Riau, not Makassar, although it is possible he went to school there. His real identity is not known. If it is true, however, that he left for Yemen in 2023, it means that despite the conflict or perhaps because of it, Yemen and AQAP continue to exert a pull for Indonesians.

VII. THE FAILED JI CONNECTION

JI was also interested in opening connections to AQAP but was ultimately thwarted by the war there. In 2011, the then JI amir, Para Widjayanto, decided to create an international relations unit under JI's intelligence division and put his own son in charge. He was interested in building relations with various Islamist militias in conflict areas that could provide JI cadres with military training and combat experience. The three areas he was interested in were Syria, Philippines, and Yemen. The man assigned to open communication with AQAP was Abdurrahman Yurisya (seen in legal documents as ABD Rahman alias Deni) from West Sumatra.²⁵ According to one source, he was one of the first West Sumatrans to hold a high position in JI; it may have helped that he was a graduate of an elite JI institute, Mahad Aly An-Nur in Solo.

Abdurrahman then applied to al-Andalus University for Science and Technology in Sana'a. This was a Salafi school associated with the al-Ihsan group, many of whose leaders were

²² North Jakarta District Court, "Verdict in the case of Muhammad Taqiyuddin", Putusan No.123/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr, 6 May 2024, p.11.

²³ North Jakarta District Court, "Verdict in case of Endri Sunaryo", No.121/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr, 6 May 2024, p.12.

²⁴ Jacob Zenn, "AQAP's Heru Sisanto [sic]: An Indonesian Jihadist in Yemen," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol.13, No.12, Jamestown Foundation, 21 December 2022. The article misspells Siswanto as Sisanto throughout.

²⁵ He was from the village of Sungai Durian, Lamposi Tigo Nagori, West Sumatra. See Ulta Levenia and Ivany Arbi, "Is West Sumatra on the verge of an intolerance and violent extremism crisis?", <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/>, 24 January 2023.

members of the Rashid Union, a political party founded in 2012 that among other things, advocated dialogue with both Al-Qaeda and the Houthis. Abdurrahman was accepted and left for Yemen around September 2013, together with the sons of several JI leaders who planned to enroll in Salafi schools.²⁶ Upon arrival in Yemen, Abdurrahman sought out a teacher who was active in the Rashid Union with the hope of getting in contact with AQAP. The worsening conflict, however, made it impossible for him to travel to southern Yemen to meet its leaders, and in any case, most schools in the Sana'a area forbade their students to leave the city. In August 2014, having failed in his mission, Abdurrahman returned to Indonesia. In early 2015, he left for Syria on a more successful venture to develop cooperation with the al-Nusra Front. He was arrested in August 2022 and sentenced to five years in prison by the North Jakarta District Court in July 2023.

Abdurrahman's failure was significant, because it meant that JI – the largest, most strategic, and best-resourced extremist organisation in Indonesia – ceased to make any further efforts to contact AQAP. Four years later, JI was facing a major crackdown from the police and all efforts at international outreach ground to a halt. Under Para Wijayanto, JI argued against violence in Indonesia, where Muslims were not under attack, and in 2010 rejected a request from al-Qaeda to cooperate in attacks in Southeast Asia. It still saw military training and combat experience as essential components of leadership, however. The risk for Indonesia is that anyone who acquires military skills sooner or later may be tempted to use them.

VIII. CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AQAP CONNECTION

Indonesians were attracted to AQAP because of historical connections to Yemen, ease of travel, and at least initially, the perception of its success against Houthi rebels (this illusion was quickly dashed and may have discouraged subsequent departures). While a few Indonesians like Fatkhi Umar are believed to still be with AQAP, little evidence has emerged to indicate that any more than a handful of Indonesians have joined in the last few years. There have been persistent but unconfirmed rumours that some Indonesians made their way to Yemen from Syria but nothing concrete.

Nevertheless, the AQAP connection to JAT/JAS is significant for two reasons. First, it shows that even organisations that were anti-ISIS or opposed to violence on Indonesian soil, like JI and JAS, saw al-Qaeda as an ideological ally. Even though the outreach to AQAP proved limited, Indonesian authorities will need to be alert to any local efforts to reach out to other al-Qaeda franchises.

Second, the search for training in Yemen shows that the attraction of the global jihad endures, even if its Indonesian proponents are now weak and fragmented. In the past, it has been precisely at a time of jihadi weakness in Indonesia that violent splinters have emerged, sometimes looking to international counterparts for inspiration.

²⁶ They included the son of Ustadz Mustaqim, the director of Pesantren Darusyahada in Boyolali, Central Java, and the son of Solahudin, the former head of JI's Jakarta subdivision (*wakalah*).

Finally, it is worth underscoring that Indonesians were attracted to Yemen in part because they went at a time of AQAP's growing strength and believed it would be victorious in the regional conflict. Belief in an imminent victory of Islamic forces is a powerful pull factor for would-be mujahidin – a fact to consider when thinking about the next international battle that Indonesians might be tempted to join.

APPENDIX I: MAP OF YEMEN



INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) was founded in 2013 on the principle that accurate analysis is a critical first step toward preventing violent conflict. Our mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change.

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

We are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Jakarta as the Foundation for Preventing International Crises (Yayasan Penanggulangan Krisis Internasional); our website is www.understandingconflict.org.
