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## **Masculinity Among Indonesian Militants**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The path into and out of extremism is influenced by various factors. One under-researched factor is the role of masculinity — how manhood and its accompanying sense of perceived responsibility drive individuals to resort to violence. How valid is this argument?*

### **COMMENTARY**

INDONESIAN MILITANTS often frame their participation in violent groups like Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) or Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) in masculine tropes — as protectors, warriors, or brothers. Such 'masculinity' often drives them towards a sense of perceived responsibility to defend the *ummah*.

At the same time, their pathways out of violent groups are also defined by their ability to recraft and negotiate their new masculinity to one that is less toxic in society. Existing work on radicalisation and de-radicalisation will not be sufficient without seriously considering the role of masculinity. One way to further understand the possible relationship between masculinity and violent groups is to study the lived experiences of former or reformed militants.

### **The Case of Syahrul Munif**

Syahrul Munif, 40, is a returned Indonesian IS fighter. His life history should not be taken to represent all experiences of Indonesian militants but to highlight how context shapes one's masculinity that eventually influences one to join and leave violent groups.

The selection of Syahrul from the network of Indonesian foreign fighters is due to its significance to the region and growing impact globally of Indonesian foreign fighters.

They have fostered other violent movements across Southeast Asia (particularly in Malaysia, Singapore, and The Philippines), and have well-established networks originating from the Darul Islam (DI) rebellion in the mid-20th century.

Furthermore, Indonesian fighters have participated in conflicts across the globe ranging from Afghanistan in the 1980s to recent struggles in Syria. Many of them have now taken up new roles within violent networks in the region.

These include serving as military trainers, financiers, recruiters, advisors and even as participants in ongoing violence or attacks. Additionally, their previous experiences often enhance their capacity to commit acts of violence and can provide focal points for organising those who failed to do '*hijrah*' to Syria – to join the jihad there.

### **No Radical History or Background**

Unlike many Indonesian men who became foreign fighters, Syahrul does not come from a community with a strong JI influence. Instead, he was a member of the largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in East Java that often adopts a principled position of moderation on issues. As a young man he was actively involved in NU, he felt constantly confronted by 'a glass ceiling' because he did not come from 'blue blood' NU family.

After graduating from high school, he went to a local university to study law. Through his passion for Islamic activism while studying between 2000 until 2004, he became a student leader. This activism gave him a sense of meaning and belonging as a man to a group that has social standing in the society.

Mingling with Islamic activists in Malang, East Java, allowed him to attend Islamic sermons at a local mosque by an ustad, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who was then the senior leader in Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI). This was a jihadi organisation led by Ba'asyir whose sermons deepened Syahrul's commitment to the Islamic cause.

When there was a split within MMI and Ba'asyir left to establish a new jihadi group called Jamaat Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), Syahrul followed. But Syahrul quickly left JAT because he did not see any 'concrete action' by JAT to respond the challenges faced by Muslims globally. As a man, he needed that 'action' partly to demonstrate one's commitment to Islam.

### **Need For 'Concrete Action'**

After leaving JAT, Syahrul met with an IS recruiter, Abu Jandal, an Indonesian of Yemeni descent who offered him opportunities for 'concrete action'. "We must help our oppressed brothers and sisters. Moreover, you will get paid and can always come back home once the mission has been accomplished," Abu Jandal said. Syahrul was very motivated to go when the recruiter said he could always come home after the mission.

When Syahrul was in Syria with IS, he soon felt uncomfortable to see the brutality of the group. Although he had agreed with the idea of defending the oppressed, he was disillusioned by IS' broken promises and their unIslamic ways such as beheadings.

More importantly, he also felt guilty about lying to his parents and wife regarding his departure to Syria.

This was something very emotional for him as he would have brought him to tears by it during the interview. After six months, Syahrul decided to travel back to Indonesia and then arrested by the Indonesian authority.

### **Recrafting and Negotiating Masculinity**

Inside the prison, Syahrul reflected his harsh experience with IS that had seriously challenged his pre-existing ideas about masculinity as not emphasising violence. He admitted that when he became a student activist, he held hard-line religious ideals. But while he valorised men who could forward 'concrete action', it did not mean he championed violence. In this regard, understanding the subtle diversity of gendered performances of masculinity among the Indonesian militants is critical.

After three years in prison, Syahrul needed time to adapt back to normal life – his work, family, the local community, and Indonesian society. It was at this crucial time that he met Arif Tuban – a reformed convicted terrorist who was running a community website, [www.ruangobrol.id](http://www.ruangobrol.id).

Arif encouraged and provided an opportunity for Syahrul to become a guest speaker in various prevention activities, including with the national counter-terrorism agency. Arif also helped Syahrul to restore his reputation in the community by introducing him to the local police and involving him in joint deradicalisation assistance activities.

### **Need for Wider Research**

In retrospect, Syahrul's commitment to the jihadi network came through a desire for leadership (which he did not find in NU) and the desire to do good (through humanitarian work). It also demonstrates that joining and leaving violent groups could be a highly gendered process.

Thus, without incorporating masculinity perspective such as acknowledging the struggles of men with social status, employment and the family, any work on radicalisation and deradicalisation will not be sufficient. But how valid is the argument that masculinity drives radicalism?

More research needs to be done to determine this conclusively. A larger number of participants in the research would in turn allow for more robust findings. The end result could be the potential to transform the traditional way of dealing with the issue of violent extremism not only in Indonesia but also in the region.

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