



PORTRAITS

OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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Front cover: "Rahma", by Jefri Tarigan
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❗❗ "Violent extremism undermines our collective efforts towards maintaining peace and security, fostering sustainable development, protecting human rights, promoting the rule of law and taking humanitarian action."

- The United Nations Secretary General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2015)

About

In South East Asia, there remains a limited understanding of the factors that lead individuals and groups towards and away from violent extremism and radicalization, but it is to an extent rooted in local contexts and experiences. This region is home to incredibly diverse and dynamic communities who hold a plethora of religions, ethnicities, languages, and systems of governance. This not only means that differences between groups can seem more pronounced, but also that the causes of violent extremism vary significantly from community to community, even within one country or province.

Those who join extremist groups often have complicated stories and non-linear motivations. Furthermore, the choices they make have both a direct and indirect effect on the people around them: spouses, family members, neighbours, friends, and members of their community. Exposure to violence can have devastating lifelong impacts on people's physical and psycho-social well-being.

The United Nations Development Programme employs an inclusive, human rights-based approach that is specifically tailored to the region in order to better understand, prevent, and mitigate violent extremism. As part of a wider joint programme in partnership with the European Union to prevent violent extremism and promote tolerance and respect for diversity, UNDP interviewed people in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia who have been affected: survivors, former terrorists and extremists, refugees, and returnees. Each of the narratives featured here presents at best an incomplete picture, but by sharing snippets of their raw lived experiences, we can begin to understand what violent extremism means in the context of South East Asia.

** The identities of some of the subjects have been obscured for their protection.*

Abdul

After the siege of Marawi, the only thing Abdul was able to salvage from his home was his bed frame. Everything else had been reduced to rubble.

On the day the siege broke out in 2017, Abdul had been in Iligan City buying food in preparation for Ramadan, traditionally a time of spiritual reflection and heightened devotion in Islam. When he returned, he spotted armed rebels shooting in the streets.

"I thought it was the usual *rido*. It turned out to be something far worse. We didn't expect that extremists would be in our city. We never thought that this would happen." *Rido* is a type of conflict characterized by sporadic outbursts of retaliatory violence between families, kinship groups, as well as communities.

The next day, Abdul and his family fled. He heard that the extremists had started to use bombs. They stayed with a relative for three days in Iligan before proceeding to Cagayan de Oro where they then lived with another relative for a year.

"There were seven of us all in all, and we were very afraid. The vision and actions of extremists do not conform to the teachings of Islam. I don't think any religion would condone this kind of violence. Islam aims for peace."

Opposite, upper, Abdul with pictures from his home

Opposite, lower, a close-up of the destruction of Abdul's home (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal





Those living on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines have experienced violent conflict for more than four decades. This violence has significantly decreased since the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014, however some groups still fight to stand in the way of peace. In 2017, ISIS-affiliated groups occupied the city of Marawi. The five-month-long battle between ISIS and government security forces that followed became the longest urban battle in the modern history of the country. Two years on, the Philippines government is seeking to reintegrate former fighters back into the community as one measure in their broader strategy to prevent the possible resurgence of ISIS in the country.

Left, rubble of what were once buildings in Marawi
Right, religious ornaments inside St Mary's Cathedral which was desecrated by ISIS fighters during the siege

Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan





A view of the Banisilan - Guiling - Alamada - Libungan Road in Mindanao (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal

Ana

Back in 2017, Ana had no idea her husband had joined ISIS-affiliated groups. She remembers how ISIS recruiters started showing up at Barangay Gacap in Piagapo, Lanao del Sur where she lived earlier that year.

"They would go to the masjid and talk people into joining them. I don't know exactly what they told my husband. We had family problems and we needed money. Then, suddenly the ISIS recruiter showed up at our house," she says. Ana says her husband didn't tell her that he was going to fight and thinks that even he didn't know that the ISIS recruiters were planning to bring him to Marawi.

"He left late at night. It was around 11pm. He just told me he was going somewhere, but then he didn't come back. We had no contact the whole time that he was in Marawi. I thought he was going to die there. I felt like I was going to die too, because our children were still very young and I didn't know if I could raise them alone."

Ana says that her husband fought for around one month before he decided to escape and surrender to government forces. She is relieved he returned. "The only thing that joining that group brought us was fear. My parents were even telling me that I should leave him because they didn't support his decision to join. I think he did it because he thought it would help us improve our lives. That didn't happen."



Ana (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal



Ummu (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal

Ummu

Ummu's husband and son joined an ISIS-affiliated group that attacked Marawi City. Her husband died there.

"It was his decision to join them. I could not stop him," she says. "My son was also recruited by ISIS when he was just 13 years old. When the recruiters came to Barangay Gacap in Piagapo, Lanao del Sur, he would go on errands for them and they would give him money. They managed to brainwash him."

"Fortunately, my son didn't go with them when they headed to Marawi," says Ummu. "I also made him surrender to the government. I was afraid that the soldiers or the police would go after him since he was identified as an ISIS member. Now, he's 16. I hope the bad decisions he made as a child will not affect his future."

"I would tell anyone not to join ISIS. It does not do anyone any good."



A man rides a buffalo in Alamada, Mindanao (Philippines, 2019).
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal



Four at a door in Lanao del Sur, Mindanao (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal



Odin (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal

Odin

Odin is a farmer. In 2017, he joined ISIS together with several other men from his community because recruiters told them that the group would be able to bring peace in Mindanao. They also offered him money.

Extremists looted cash, gold, and jewelry worth tens of millions of dollars when they occupied Marawi. This was then used to recruit boys and men in the impoverished southern province of Lanao del Sur. The average family income in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao where Marawi and surrounding areas are located is half of the national average.

Once in Marawi, Odin says he felt he had no choice but to fight. "When we went to Marawi, we were shocked to hear explosions. We didn't know it would be like that. We had relatives living there; we thought we might be able to rescue them. That turned out to be a mistake because once you were in the war zone, it was hard to get out. I thought to myself, I won't get anything from this, just death."

"We didn't know any better. We are not educated so it was easy for ISIS to trick us," says Odin. "Now the local government asked us what we wanted. We told them our demands, but until now they haven't followed through. How can we change our lives if we don't have capital to start small businesses? We are really poor. If we had money, we wouldn't be asking for help."



Allen (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal

Allen

"I was a tricycle driver," says Allen. "I was about to go through Mapandi Bridge in Marawi City, but then a man wearing black clothing blocked my path. He was pointing a gun at me, so I stopped. He then handed me an M16 and said I should join them. I joined them because I felt I couldn't get out; I was forced."

Allen was also offered money; P50,000 was provided to ensure his loyalty. There were other young men like him who were also happy to have been provided with such a relatively large sum. He says that propaganda and misinformation was also used to convince them to stay.

"We were told that the Christians living in Marawi would steal our homes," says Allen. "At the time, I was happy when someone got killed when I shot them, but I was also afraid because someone might shoot me."

Allen was inside the main battle area for nearly the entire duration of the siege Marawi before being injured by a piece of shrapnel hitting his head. When asked if he would ever join an extremist group again, Allen expressed mixed views. He says, "I won't fight anymore. I won't go back. But I believe my contributions in the fight of Marawi will earn me a place in heaven. I hope my brothers who have died are now in paradise."



Jumar (Philippines, 2019)
Photographer: Alecs Ongcal

Jumar

Jumar has wounds, not from bullets and bombs, but from a stroke partly brought on by stress and anxiety. He lives in Datu Piang, Maguindanao, where violent conflict is still common. "It's traumatic to live in constant fear," he says.

Jumar can no longer remember the exact day of his stroke; he explains that conflict-ridden days bleed into one other. He is certain, though, that fear has been his constant companion over the last few years.

Conflict leaves scars that can be invisible. Jumar survived his stroke, but he continues to live in fear. "It's hard to make a living when it's like this. We are always scared. We get sick from this. I hope the fighting stops."



Somjai (Thailand, 2019)
Photographer: Mallee Osten-Tan

Somjai

Somjai is a Buddhist leader of a Muslim majority community in Pattani, Thailand. For the last ten years, she has been bridging divides between people in her village.

“My role is to take care of my people when they have problems and solve local disputes. It’s important to maintain a sense of unity. I want to keep conversations open and prevent members of our diverse community from feeling siloed. Encouraging everyone to attend religious ceremonies like weddings, or working a harvest together are great ways of getting people to feel united”.



The South of Thailand has seen levels of unrest in the last few decades, escalating in 2001 and especially in 2004. With the ongoing insurgency being driven by tensions between the state, Muslims, Buddhists, as well as small minority groups who have their own customs and identities, there are concerns that communities are growing further apart.

Upper and lower, Somjai speaks to a Buddhist monk and a local Muslim leader from her small community in Pattani. She maintains that open communication is important to build social cohesion. (Thailand, 2019)

Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan



Street food in Pattani (Thailand, 2019)
Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan



Since the 2002 Bali bombings, Indonesia has led the region in effective approaches to addressing violent extremism. However, the transnational reach of the Islamic State has brought with it new challenges. Some Indonesians have travelled to Syria and to the Philippines, drawn by the idea of a caliphate and a sense of righteousness in fighting what they see as threats to Islam. This coupled with the incidence of several attacks involving families such as the 2018 Surabaya bombings suggest that the nature of violent extremism continues to evolve.

Opposite page, a stretch of rice fields across West Java
Upper right, workers clean green mussels in the Kalibaru area, North Jakarta.
Lower right, workers load goods onto a ship for domestic distribution at Jakarta's traditional port of Sunda Kelapa in Jakarta (Indonesia, 2019)

Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



Rahma

Rahma is 34 years old. She has three children, two of them with autism. She was ill when her husband's company went bankrupt, and it seemed to them that they had no economic solution to support their healthcare.

"At that time, we were at the lowest point of our lives," she explains. "After I saw the caliphate declaration online, I became hooked. Someone who was already in Syria told me how the health facilities there were incredible: all free of charge and highly professional. My husband and I, we took out loans, sold our house and everything we had, gathered up our family and left."

They flew to Turkey and then crossed over the border to Raqqa with the help of a smuggler in the middle of the night. Rahma was carrying her one-year-old child. When she arrived, she was still very sick; a doctor in Raqqa examined her and told her she had to go to a hospital in Mosul, Iraq. It took about 8 hours for her to get there by road. The reality of what she saw when she arrived shocked her.

"I have never in my life seen such a hospital - no-one trying to keep wards clean and there was human waste scattered everywhere in the bathrooms."



Rahma (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



"There was one thing about my experience in the caliphate that still makes me shudder. My neighbor in Raqqa was a Syrian girl, only 15 years old. Her child was one year old. I asked her, how come you are married at this young age? She said, "My parents wanted me to marry an ISIS fighter, but I want to play and to go to school. I have to take care of my child now." I was sad hearing that.

Women under ISIS are meant to be a 'baby factory'. ISIS go after girls who have only just had their period for the first time. They want to make many children and then teach them to be terrorists. There are a lot of women who were passed from fighter to fighter, stuck in a cycle like a rotating trophy. That disgusted me. I came to the conclusion that ISIS was really not Islam."

- Rahma



An alleyway in the densely populated area in Kampung Kubur, Medan, North Sumatra (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan

Farah

Farah is 60 years old and the mother of Rahma. She was exposed to ISIS propaganda on the internet. Tempted by the promise of a more decent life with adequate social services, she left for Syria with 26 members of her family and one child in 2015.

Getting into Syria was not easy; it cost her everything she had. She also had her passport and Indonesian identity card confiscated by the guards at the border, so that she could not be identified by other authorities and be tempted to escape. After spending more than a year in Syria, she and her family realized that they were not going to receive any of the services that were promised to them.

In August 2017, Farah and her family were able to return to Indonesia after handing themselves over to the Indonesian government. They were placed at a house in Depok close to the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) office and questioned by Densus, a special detachment on anti-terror. Today, Farah and her family are continuing to rebuild their lives.



Farah (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



Farah stands in her kitchen (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan

Amir

"When I was younger, I had no direction in my life. I thought of religion as the way to find meaning, and after the first Bali bombing, I became interested in jihad."

Amir began to meet with Islamist groups, and with more radically minded clerics. In 2005, he became acquainted with Syaifuddin Zuhri who began to directly mentor him.

"There was a bond between he and I," says Amir. "I was willing to contribute my energy, my money, my thoughts, everything to help him in his activities. Soon Syaifuddin said he deemed me worthy to join in his plans to bomb the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels."

Amir and his counterparts carried out the attack on July 17, 2009. He was on the run for about one month before the authorities caught up with him. Throughout his detention, Amir says he was stubborn and maintained that the attack was religiously justified. Some of those imprisoned with him did not agree with what he had done. The prison invited several clerics to build a dialogue with those imprisoned for terror offenses.



Amir (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



Amir (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



"I reflected on my actions. I came to understand that I had swallowed radical preaching raw before I had learned how to critically consider whether certain things were right or wrong. In Indonesia, there are no obstacles to worship; we are free. If a country is already safe why should I be trying to make it unsafe? I had attacked my own community, exploding a bomb resulting in the deaths of my fellow innocent Muslims."

"When I got out of prison, people around me were a bit awkward, and a little scared. But when there was a community service I could get involved with, I decided to join. People started to see the change in me. They even trusted me to lead a prayer at the mosque. I feel like we can prevent terrorism by consulting more ex-terrorists. We have valuable experiences and knowledge to share."

- Amir

Khairul

After 12 years in Malaysia studying religious education under the leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Khairul came back to Indonesia with the intention to be involved in terrorist activities and help influence the younger generation. He was eventually arrested and convicted for his involvement in a bank robbery in 2010, an attack on Hamparan Perak sub-precinct police station that killed three policemen, and also for conducting extremist military training in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

While he was in prison, he realized his son was no longer going to school because he was being bullied; other children would say things like, "Your father is a terrorist. He commits treason."

"That really affected me," says Khairul. "I came to think that being stigmatized is dangerous for the younger generation. Children who do not pursue education and feel like they are outsiders are vulnerable to becoming terrorists themselves. If the children are not tracked and monitored after their parents are arrested, does not it mean a child's education is at risk of being abandoned? The children are victims in this. They pay the price for their parents' choices."

"When I became a terrorist, that decision was full of action," says Khairul. "Now I am repentant and back on the right path, but I must be able to prove it also with action. Rehabilitating these children is my way of doing that."



Khairul, and a groundsman from his school (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



When he was freed from prison, Khairul established an Islamic boarding school which acts as a place for trauma healing for the children of terrorist convicts. The school has the support of Indonesia's National Agency for Combating Terrorism (BNPT), which has also established a similar center for the children of militants in Lamongan, East Java.

Left, a student at Khairul's school finishes his homework (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



Children from Khairul's school assembled in a classroom (Indonesia, 2019)
Photographer: Jefri Tarigan



“When the war broke out in Syria, I watched the news and followed social media to keep up with the daily developments. From the things I watched and read online, I believed my Muslim brothers were being oppressed. I felt angry inside, and I wanted to do something about it.

I got in touch with jihadists through social media. Most of them were asking for us to help in spreading their ideology and raising funds to assist some of the Malaysians who wished to go over and help the jihadists in Syria. I created my own Telegram group, and then recruited my members via social media by chatting to them through messenger.

I didn't have any family problems at the time or anything. I actually have a very good relationship with my family - my parents, my siblings - and I always spend time with my wife and kids. I was stable financially and had a career. I was respected in my workplace. But I became really focused on my job, and facilitating my own jihadist group. In my eyes, our fight was to help the oppressed brothers in other countries. I was in deep, but no-one realized it.

- Ahmad



Ahmad (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Jules Ong



Ahmad at the mosque (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Jules Ong



Ahmad plays with his children in the park (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Jules Ong



Panorama of Kuala Lumpur, with the Petronas Twin Towers (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Jules Ong

There are currently around 180,000 refugees who have made Malaysia their home - for now. But Malaysia currently has no legal framework that recognizes the status of refugees, and addresses their specific protection needs. By law, refugees are considered illegal immigrants, at risk of arrest and detention for immigration offences.

Upper, Kuala Lumpur's busy Bukit Bintang area
Lower, a mechanic takes a break in Kuala Lumpur

Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan



Mohammad & Soraya

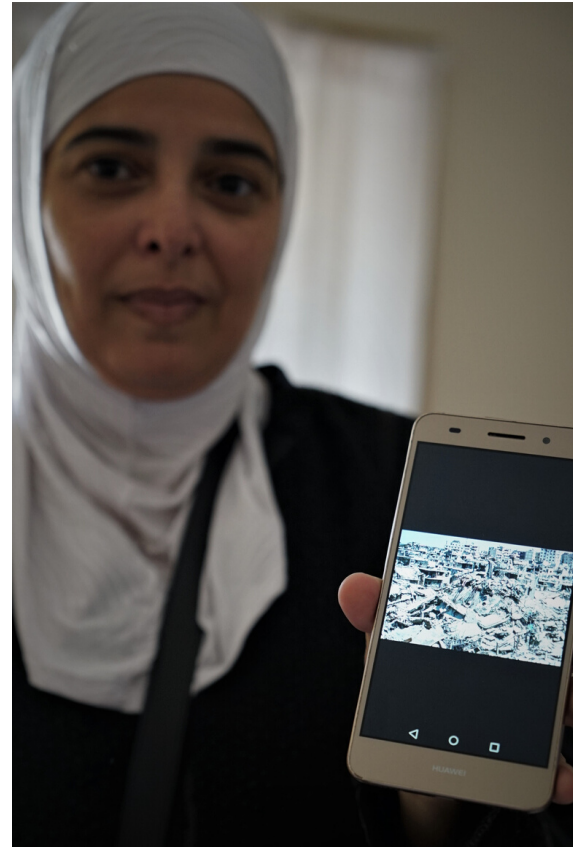
Mohammad, his mother Soraya, and their family are refugees in Malaysia who escaped ISIS-related violence in Syria.

"First, they bombed Damascus with tear gas that fell from airplanes," says Soraya. "My children couldn't breathe and so I took them to the nearest emergency hospital to save their lives. There was no electricity at the time. It was dark; there was smoke and fire everywhere. It makes me sad to think of this. The next day there was another bomb, a car bomb near our house which is close to a school."

Mohammad nods. "All the glass broke, and a piece of glass cut my head."

He was one of the lucky ones.

"People were screaming as they took the bodies of their little children out of the school," says his mother.



Soraya shows what remained after the bombing of their home (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan



Mohammad and the scar (Malaysia, 2019).
Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan

Ahmad & Fatima

Mohammad's father, Ahmad, is worried for the future of his children. Both he and Soraya are older parents and have diabetes. They struggle to afford insulin – as a result, Ahmad's teeth have fallen out, he has losing sight in one eye, and he has nerve pain down his legs.

"I want to be useful in Malaysia, I want to work even if it's just to volunteer. I have skills. People think that we can just go back home," he says. "But where would we go back to in Syria? Our house is gone, our livelihood is gone, our dignity is gone."

"We don't want to go back to our country because what we have seen is a lot. People dying, and people killing. It is not a place you can live again. Syria is gone. What I know about my country is just memories in my mind. We want our kids to go to a better school, to join normal life away from war, away from fighting to survive."



Ahmad and his daughter Fatima (Malaysia, 2019)
Photographer: Mailee Osten-Tan



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