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Educational Background and Individual Agency



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**AN EMPTY SPACE IN EDUCATION
AND THE SPREAD OF RADICALISM:
A Study on Former Convicted Terrorists and ISIS
Returnees in East Java**

Nina Mariani Noor and Mohammad Yunus Masrukhin



Introduction

This chapter describes the educational background and its relationship with the awareness and radical attitudes of former convicted terrorists and the returnees of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in East Java. Research on radicalism among Muslims in East Java cannot ignore their religious culture. In several academic studies, East Java is often referred to as the main base for Islam and Muslim society affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has strong roots in Islamic traditions and embraces Pancasila as the state foundation (Geertz 2006, Dhofier 1999). East Java is also home to other Islamic trends like Muhammadiyah and Salafism.

Nevertheless, East Java is also seen as a fertile ground for the emergence of radical Islamic tendencies. For decades, since the New Order regime, Islamic radical trends, commonly referred to as Islamism, have emerged and been successful in establishing strong networks in East Java. As Martin van Bruinessen (2013) observes, after the fall of the New Order Islam in Indonesia has undergone a change in a more conservative direction. This tendency also applies to some Muslims in East Java. Several radical Islamic networks, which are presumed to be thriving such as Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), Darul Islam/Islamic State of Indonesia (DI/II), and Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) constitute those organizations and networks that spread across several cities in East Java, such as Lamongan, Surabaya, Malang, Jember, and some other areas.

Academic studies on religious radicalism attempt to link the background of religious education to the radical tendency of the terrorists (ICG 2002), in the sense that religious education constitutes a factor behind the formation of radical Islamic tendencies. However, Bruinessen tries to argue that educational institutions are not the determining factors in the birth of this trend (Bruinessen 2016). This is proven by the Gontor Islamic Boarding School as a religious educational institution that has succeeded in creating such figures as Nurcholis Madjid, who is known as a progressive Muslim, and at the same time, in educating Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who is known as a terrorist perpetrator.

In the context of East Java, former convicted terrorists and ISIS returnees came from diverse religious, educational backgrounds, from madrasas, traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools, public schools, and religious and public universities. This fact shows that the educational institutions of these various types have contributed to the emergence of radical Islamic tendencies. A number of these institutions share a point of convergence regarding the radical potentials of their alumni.

This fact certainly explains that educational background is not the only determining factor—not to mention the primary determinant—for a Muslim to be progressive or radical. Nevertheless, religious educational institution cannot be overlooked as a factor for the emergence of radical tendencies among some Muslims. And this is the important issue that this chapter attempts to observe, namely about the form of relation between religious education and radical tendencies among Muslims—by focusing on former convicted terrorists and ISIS returnees. Moreover, this leads to an attempt to investigate how religious education is experienced by its alumni so that it gives them a knowledge capital—either when used as a basis for justification or as a background for the development of radical awareness.

Based on research conducted on three former convicted terrorists and three ISIS returnees in East Java, we come to an idea that the initial encounter of these informants with some radical Islamic movements took place in both formal and non-formal educational institutions such as Islamic

boarding schools, madrasahs, schools, secular and religious universities. In pesantren and schools, they commonly took the initiative to read books by Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Said Awwa, Abul 'A'la al-Maududi, and Abdullah Azam —both in their original texts and their translation. These books were read outside of the official school hours at their educational institutions. In schools and universities, they generally obtained the information and awareness about radical Islam through such organizations as Rohis and LDK. In addition, they actively attended regular public religious preachings held at mosques.

This explanation confirms the findings in previous studies that *santris* (students of religious schools), school students, and university students gain access to religious knowledge not only through textbooks available within formal institutions. They seek to deepen their knowledge by reading books outside of formal learnings intensively, so that they can give big influence from their efforts to understand Islam (Hasan 2018). The above figures inspired them to choose a path to be radical Muslims. After graduating from *pesantrens*, they looked for radical Islamic networks through their acquaintance with other alumni.

The religious learning by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir is an important meeting point for the efforts by former convicted terrorists and returnees with pesantren and public schools backgrounds in order for them to find a space for getting in touch with tendencies of Islamic terrorism. The data we have obtained from our research informants show that the religious

learning by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir has fertilized extremism. They consider that this religious learning not only provides knowledge and networks of radical Islam, but also motivation that confirms their tendencies. This religious learning also gives them access to organizations and associations, which offer practical engagement with radical Islamic activities.

Apart from religious learning (*pengajian*) and reading activities, social media provides access to the formation of a radical Islamic identity. For some informants, the emergence of their tendency towards radical Islam stems from watching the coverage of suicide bombings on television and YouTube or other sources on the Internet. Gary Bunt is of the view that after the events of September 11, 2001, the Internet has become a window for Muslims to see the activities of other Muslims around the world (Bunt 2003). This confirms what had happened in Indonesia, especially in East Java, in the 2000s.

The Bali Bombings were a critical moment that succeeded in generating enthusiasm for jihad in the name of Islam. More than that, some of the informants even got the desire to become terrorists when they were still in elementary school. During these phases, the desire to become terrorists constituted a condition for the process of religious education, which in turn was sharpened by personal quests to find terrorist networks and momentum in a more complex context.

Considering the explanation above, this study views that the religious education obtained by former convicted

terrorists and returnees does not automatically generate radical Islamic awareness. Religious knowledge obtained from educational institutions becomes a relatively neutral stock of knowledge that can emerge and be framed toward radicalism when it meets conditions outside of the educational institution that correspond to their radical Islamic aspiration. Such an Islamic tendency arises from ideology, friendship networks, or religious identities that constitute an Islamic projection.

In this chapter, most informants generally come from the older generation with lower-middle-class backgrounds, and some others come from the younger generation, who relatively have different patterns. Friendship networks connecting them with terrorist groups, human sympathy, and economic problems are conditions that made them choose to be a part of radical and terrorist networks. Some of them even decided to affiliate themselves with ISIS, or went to Syria and joined the jihadists. They were initially called to join to express their human sympathy.

Some other informants coming from the younger generation are those young people who are worried about their identity and future, and require that their youthfulness be recognized. This restlessness is then used to project religious knowledge obtained from educational institutions toward radical Islam with an argument that this tendency is an opportunity to display their identity as young Muslims who possess high ideals of Islam which in many ways are heroic in nature. In the radical Islam projection, *jihād* is a heroic act

that has become aspirations and dreams that may fulfill their aspiration.

Based on the explanation above, this study argues that although religious education is not the only determining factor for the emergence of radical tendencies, it becomes a condition that allows an individual to become radical. The search for knowledge outside of formal education by former convicted terrorists and returnees indicates that there are empty spaces in informal education that cannot fulfill their Islamic aspiration. Moreover, this education was unable to satisfy the heroic imagination that projects their awareness to find an identity. Its most important contribution is its ability to provide a stock of knowledge ready to be ideologically framed to provide arguments and religious propositions that assert their determination to be involved in radical Islamic movements.

Informants' Educational Backgrounds and Biographical Sketches

As mentioned in the introduction, there are six informants interviewed in this study. The six interviewees consist of three male former convicted terrorists and three male ISIS returnees. Unfortunately, we cannot reach another targeted informant, a female one, for an interview. This section attempts to provide a brief overview of their profiles.

Among the informants, Abu Dzar (b. 1968) is the oldest. Born in Surabaya to a religious and knowledge-loving family, his father was a mosque manager (*takmir*) and former member

of the National Police, while his mother was an alumnus of the Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Jombang. He entered the Pesantren of Gontor in 1979, and when he graduated in 1984, he was sent as a teacher to the Pesantren of al-Mukmin, Ngruki. Before leaving for the Middle East, he studied at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University in Surabaya. Before graduating from the university in 1985, he left for Syria to learn Arabic in Damascus. Afterward, Abu Dzar went to Jordan for two years to study at *Kulliyat al-Mujtamā' al-Islāmī*. He had also been to Pakistan and Afghanistan between 1987-1988 to study religion as well as military training in camps. This intellectual adventure provided Abu Dzar with the opportunity to pursue undergraduate scholarship at Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, in the field of theology until 1996. Currently, he is completing his Master's studies at the graduate program at Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya taking a major in Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI*). Based on this educational background, it can be said that Abu Dzar is an academician.

This alumnus of Umm al-Qura showed his interest in radicalism since he was a student at the Gontor Islamic Boarding School, Ponorogo. Starting from his sympathy for Muslim Brotherhood's scholars such as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, apart from studying religion in several Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, Abu Dzar also participated in military trainings and developed his radical thinking. He had learned from Abdullah 'Azzam, Muhammad Qutb, and Mahmud al-Khaffaji. This father of five children had

also joined NII, JI, and ISIS. He was once involved in a terrorist case because he hid the terrorist kingpins, i.e., Dr. Azhari and Noordin M. Top. Furthermore, he was also an actor behind the declaration of ISIS in Surakarta. Abu Dzar is known as a terrorist of three eras.

Like Abu Dzar, Aris (b. 1982), born in Lamongan, came from a relatively religious family. His father is a graduate of school for educating religious teacher (*Pendidikan Guru Agama*, PGA), and his mother has kin relation with the family of Amrozi. Aris was educated at the Pesantren of al-Islam in Tenggulun, Lamongan, until lower secondary education, and then continued his education at Secondary Technical School (Sekolah Teknik Menengah, STM). Currently, he is studying at STIE YPBI Madura, majoring in Islamic Religious Education on Ali Fauzi's recommendation. Aris was once active in JI's terrorist network due to his connection with the teachers-alumni network of the Tenggulun Pesantren, shortly after his graduation from the pesantren. He still participates in radical public religious preachings both face-to-face and through the Internet.

Aris, who shows a humble character, has an exceptional ability in building networks, both personally and through Facebook. He played a major role in recruiting jihadi groups in Medan and Poso; as a liaison for prospective soldiers who would take part in military trainings, an operator for weapons purchase and delivery, an assistant in hiding fugitives, and a manager of the main jihadi website and chat forums. Besides,

Aris is also a fundraiser. Apart from donors, some of the fund was also collected from several charity boxes placed in mosques and minimarkets.

In late 2013, Aris helped connect individuals from various groups wishing to go to Syria. He was arrested on June 19, 2014, and eventually sentenced to a reasonably light sentence, four years and ten months in prison. Aris spent his time in prison from 2014 to 2017. Based in Jatirogo, Tuban, the man called 'Aris Tuban' is now working as a writer, researcher, and correspondent for counter-radicalism content at ruangobrol.id. Early in 2021, he had just published his first book (Setyawan 2020). The book recounts his experience when he fell into the abyss of terrorism.

Unlike the previous two informants who have a pesantren background, Gafar Saleh (b. 1980), who was born in Panggul, Trenggalek, is a D1 graduate in informatics at ITS, Surabaya. While studying at the university, he also attended religious studies at 'Ma'had Umar bin Al-Khattab, Surabaya. Furthermore, he had also participated in several religious gatherings like those of JI in Magetan, the *tarbiyah* activities of PKS in Sidoarjo, those of FPI in Paciran, and the gatherings in the Tafaqquh Fiddin Foundation supervised by Ustaz Abu Fida in Surabaya. Gafar also had contact with several radical organizations such as FPI, MMI, and MIT. His close association with Islamist groups led him to work as a news reporter in several Islamist media such as Muslim Daily, al-Muhajirun, Arrahmah, and al-Mustaqbal.

In 2011 Gafar was arrested for carrying explosives, and was caught again in 2014 for the same criminal charge. After being released from prison at the end of 2019, the father of two began to change his social environment by more frequently attending Jamaah Tabligh's public religious gathering at the Temboro Pesantren in Magetan, East Java, while pursuing his new hobby, archery. He sometimes participates in counter-radicalization programs held by BNPT (National Counter Terrorism Agency) as well.

Unlike the previous informants who have formal ties to political organizations, Syamsul Mubarak (b. 1982), originally from Jember, is an informant who grew up in NU's traditional religious culture. He even owned an official membership card of the Youth Movement of Ansor. He spent his primary, lower and upper secondary education in Jember. In 2000, he moved to Malang to study Law at Merdeka University (UNMER) of Malang. During his university education, Syamsul was active in LDK, HMI, and BEM. He had contacts with various radical networks such as MMI, NII, and JAT. He also joined the Muslim Lawyers Team (TPM) to assist Ustaz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's terrorism case. The peak was when he decided to leave for Syria with the aim of aiding humanitarian missions for six months in 2014. Three years after returning from Syria, he was arrested by Densus 88.

During his childhood, for one year Syamsul attended religious education in a pesantren in his village, precisely at Al-Zaytun Islamic Boarding School. He followed a public religious learning held by JAT and another one by Salim

Mubarok Attamimi (read: Abu Jandal). He had worked in Magistra Utama Malang and the Firdaus Training Center Foundation. Now he works as an owner of a fruit candy, "Calina Candy", and as a distributor of student worksheets (*Lembar Kerja Siswa*, LKS) in Malang. Syamsul currently initiates the foundation of Fajar Ikhwan Sejahtera (FIS) together with Head of East Java's Regional Task Force to give trainings for former convicted terrorists in East Java.

Like most of the previous profiles, Wahyu Faza 'Syafa'at (b. 1991), originally from Bangil, is a person who lives in the midst of a religious family. Wahyu's father is an alumnus of the Al-Irsyad Islamic Boarding School in Bondowoso and owned a Tahfiz Islamic boarding school, while his mother is a housewife. Both of his parents come from Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Wahyu almost spent most of his education in public institutions: a state elementary school in Bondowoso and Bangil, State Junior High School 1 in Bangil, State Senior High School 1 in Bangil, and bachelor studies in Informatics Engineering at Muhammadiyah University. He only attended Islamic religious education in Ma'had Umar bin Khattab in Surabaya. Currently, Wahyu manages his business in herbal medication, help to develop small and medium levels of micro enterprises (*Usaha Mikro Kecil Menengah*, UMKM), and is an active member of Fajar Ikhwan Sejahtera (FIS).

This man with six brothers had joined ISIS and had been to Syria with Abu Jandal in 2014 for eight months. His interest in radicalism has emerged since his childhood. It started when he watched a television broadcast about the 9/11

tragedy at the World Trade Center, USA. Because of his deep empathy for Muslims at that time, Wahyu desired to carry out a humanitarian mission. That was his main goal when he traveled to Syria. Meanwhile, he decided to leave radicalism after he got into prison in 2016 and was rehabilitated there.

Similar to Wahyu, who came from a Arab family (read: Saudi Arabia), Danang Barokah (b. 1978) from Surabaya also has Arab blood, Yemen. He comes from a wealthy family, from a family of entrepreneurs. His father and mother manage a dressmaking business. Currently, Danang is managing his business in Muslim fashion after having worked in the state-owned ship manufacture of PT PAL and having experience in auto air conditioning service.

Danang attended his elementary education in the Al-Irsyad Elementary School in Semampir, then went to the Mujahidin Junior High School in Perak, and the Trisila Senior High School in Undaan; meanwhile he pursued his higher education at the Sepuluh November Institute of Technology (ITS) in Surabaya, taking a major in Shipbuilding Engineering. He has never affiliated himself with any Islamic organization. Nonetheless, he diligently participated in religious studies held by the Salafists, and then public religious gathering by Abu Bakar 'Ba'asyir and Abu Thalut at the Sabilillah Islamic Mosque. From these two teachers, his sympathy for the three Bali bombing prisoners—who were sentenced to death—grew. In 2014, he decided to leave for Syria with Abu Jandal and joined ISIS.

Education and Access to Radical Understandings

Looking at the informants' profiles above, it can be seen that their educational backgrounds are very diverse, ranging from Islamic boarding schools associated with radical organizations and movements, Islamic boarding schools that never teach radicalism, to formal public schools. Two of the six informants received their education in Quranic sciences at Ma'had Umar bin Khattab in Surabaya. As for the rest, some are former students of the Al-Islam Pesantren in Tenggulun Lamongan, where the three Bali bombers came from, while the other is a former student of the Gontor Pesantren in Ponorogo who later served as a teacher at the Pesantren of Ngruki in Sukoharjo.

In their claim, two informants (Wahyu and Gafar) got access to books with radical views, like that of Abdullah 'Azzam, entitled *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah*, when they studied at Islamic boarding school. However, they did not get the book from their teacher but from their fellow students in the dormitory. Meanwhile, an informant who is an alumnus of the Gontor Pesantren (Abu Dzar) admitted that he became interested in radicalism when he read many books of Muslim Brotherhood, which that he got from a bookstore of the pesantren. He loved reading and consumed books from such Islamic movement scholars as Abul A'la Maududi, Said Hawwa, and Hasan al-Banna. This passion peaked when he entered his final year of education at the Gontor Pesantren. Before leaving for the Middle East, he studied at IAIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. Before his graduation in 1985, he went to Syria and

studied at a school of Arabic language in Damascus. Later, he left for Jordan for two years to study at *Kuliyyat al Mujtama' al-Islāmī* (Faculty of Muslim Society). He went to Pakistan and Afghanistan between 1987-1988 to study religion as well as involved in military training camps. Afterward, he received an undergraduate scholarship at Umm al-Qura University, Mecca, in the field of Islamic theology until 1996.

The second former convicted terrorist (Aris), better known as Aris Tuban, is still related with the family of Amrozi (one of the Bali bombers). His parents sent him to study at the Al-Islam Pesantren in Tenggulun Lamongan until his lower secondary education from 1995 to 1998. During his lower secondary education, Aris began to get acquainted with books by Syekh Abdullah Azzam, which were sold within the al-Islam Pesantren by some fellow students. For Aris, the most impressive books were *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah* and *Di Bawah Naungan Surat At Taubah* (Under the Shade of Chapter At-Taubah).

“I was there for three years, rather short. Yes ... indeed there I came to know these thoughts. There at the time [I came to know], for example, the books of Shaykh Abdullah ‘Azzam, available there. So (the books) became the students’ reading material. Just like the Javanese proverb, *witing trisno jalaran soko kulino* (the beginning of love comes from frequent [sight]). Because I often saw [them], so I became curious.”

After three years, Aris finally graduated from the pesantren and continued his studies at a Secondary Technical School (STM). Between 1999 and 2002, due to its teachers’ involvement in JI’s special operation units, the al-Islam

pesantren became a center of jihadi activity. Many of JI's initial bombing operations —the 2000 Christmas Eve bombing, an assault on the ambassador of the Philippines in Jakarta, and the Bali bombing itself—were partly planned or started from Lamongan (IPAC 2015). At that time, Aris no longer studied at Al-Islam because he had already sit at STM between 1999 and 2002, but he still attended public religious preachings organized by religious teachers, who were the colleagues of his teachers from Al-Islam (Setyawan 2020, 48). The seeds of radicalism that he had got since lower secondary education were fertilized. The two former convicted terrorists (read: Abu Dzar and Aris) were connected, and directly involved in terrorist activities.

Meanwhile, Gafar, the third former convicted terrorist, completed his formal education from kindergarten to upper secondary education in Trenggalek. All of the basic education levels he took are public schools: TK Wonocoyo 3, SD Wonocoyo 3, SMPN 1 Panggul, and SMA 1 Trenggalek. After graduating from upper secondary education, Gafar continued his study of the D1 level in Informatics at ITS Surabaya, which he completed in two years. He took a training of Qur'an memorization and learned Arabic at Ma'had Umar bin Khattab in Surabaya, up to the third level (three years). He also studied in Malaysia for eight months. If Abu Dzar and Aris began to be exposed to radicalism through the books they read, Gafar experienced this directly through public religious preachings (*pengajian*). He himself admits that he is not typically a person who loves reading. He says "he most frequently attended

religious forums than reading books. While joining MIT (read: East Indonesian Mujahidin),” he continues, “I received material from public religious preachings in the forms of teachings and fatwas from Santoso, Aman Abdurrahman, and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir.”

Gafar’s involvement in terrorist acts was as an explosives carrier in January 2011 when the Operasi Cipta Kondisi (Operation for Condition Creation) was carried out in front of the Magetan Police Headquarters, East Java. Because of the case, he was sentenced to two years and three months’ imprisonment, and was paroled on July 11, 2012. Afterward, he acted as a transporter of pipe and tupperware bombs through JNE package delivery to Wajo, South Sulawesi, in 2014. In addition, he was active as a news reporter in several Islamist media mentioned above (read: Muslim Daily, Almuhajirun, Arrahmah, and al-Mustaqbal). He learned a lot about journalism from Muhammad Jibril, a son of Abu Jibril.

From the educational backgrounds of the three former convicted terrorists above, it can be concluded that when they started to be exposed to and participate in extreme movements, their educational background did not reach the level of higher education; except probably Abu Dzar, who had studied at IAIN, and then moved to Syria (read: Damascus). Like the others, Gafar only had a D1 degree from ITS of Surabaya. This is in line with what Sidney Jones (2014) has stated that the educational background of MIT’s followers tends to be lower than that of JI’s followers.

Once again, those three former convicted terrorists were not exposed to radical understandings from formal education, but from books they accessed within the pesantren environment—those books were not taught in the curriculum. This acquired understanding later found its way after they attended extremist public religious preachings and joined radical organizations.

Jihad with Humanitarian Aid: Islamic Heroism?

In this study, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, we were able to interview three ISIS returnees. Their age ranges from 30-40 years old. Their educational backgrounds also vary. It can be said that these returnees come from the younger generation of terrorism who came to know their radical understandings from the Internet.

Syamsul, a law graduate, received his formal education from elementary, lower and upper secondary education in Jember. Then he completed his studies in law at UNMER Malang from 2000 to 2004. As mentioned before, in his childhood he learned religion in his hometown; later he studied at the Al-Zaytun Islamic Boarding School for a year. There little Syamsul came to know radicalism. However, at that time, he did not realize that the Al-Zaytun Islamic Boarding School had close ties with NII. During his studies at universities, he was active in LDK, HMI, BEM, MMI, and JAT, and had been in contact with the Muslim Lawyers Team (TPM) to assist Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's terrorism case.