

US “Jihadi Express”: Indonesia - Afghanistan - Syria - Philippines

By [Andre Vltchek](#)

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It was late at night but the new Terminal 3 at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport outside Jakarta was still bustling with families and friends waiting for their loved ones returning from abroad.

My friend Noor Huda Ismail was just arriving from Singapore, and I decided to pick him up and discuss ‘certain issues’ with him in the car, on the way to the capital. Lately he and I were busy, awfully busy, and a one-hour journey seemed to be the most appropriate setting for the exchange of at least some essential ideas and information.

Huda could easily pass for the most knowledgeable Indonesian “expert on terrorism”; a Muslim man who grew up and was educated in the *madrasahs* that have produced some of the most notorious jihadi cadres in the country. Later he became the man who managed to ‘get away’ from the extremism, to study, and to finally become a respected filmmaker and a thinker.



Noor Huda Ismail and Andre Vltchek

For years, both of us have been studying a complex web produced by Western imperialism – a web, which has literally destroyed entire countries, while locking other ones ‘behind bars’, in virtual neo-colonialist slavery. All this done in the name of ‘freedom’ and democracy, naturally, and often using various religions as tools, even as weapons.

Inside the car we managed to quickly ‘compare notes’. Huda filled me in on his groundbreaking film [‘Jihad Selfie’](#), while I informed him about my political revolutionary novel [‘Aurora’](#), and my big work in progress, a book about Afghanistan. I also mentioned my future ‘Afghan’ film, a dark love story, a drama about betrayal, collaboration and the virtual collapse of one family; a film which I’m preparing to produce and direct sometime during the next year.

“Afghanistan,” he says, “that’s where the roots of so many things lie... You recall that in the 80’s, the U.S. was using some local, Indonesian, jihadi cadres,

sending them to Afghanistan...”

I knew about it; I knew something, but not everything. The fact that both Indonesian and Malaysian citizens went to fight against the Soviet Union, Karmal, and then Mohammad Najibullah’s government in Afghanistan, was something that I have never yet addressed in my books or films. Now I suddenly felt that it was important, extremely important, to address this fact.

“Huda,” I asked, as we were slowly progressing through perpetual traffic jam of Jakarta, “how many Indonesian men went to fight in Afghanistan, after the 1979 Soviet intervention?”

Huda didn’t hesitate. He always knows the numbers:

“Just from one group, there were 350 fighters. Indonesians fought in Afghanistan, and were based in a camp belonging to Ittehad-al-Islami (Islamic Union). Ustad Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf ran the camp. Of course Rab Rasul Sayyaf is Wahhabi, and the Wahhabis have been fully funded by the U.S. What we are seeing now, all those ‘terrorist threats’, is a blowback effect, of what the U.S. has done in the region, specifically in Afghanistan. And even the ISIS now: in 2003 they came to topple Saddam...”

Could I meet one of the Afghan ‘alumni’ here in Jakarta?

“Of course you can,” he nodded, “I’ll arrange it, while you are here.”

Before an encounter with an “Afghan” jihadi cadre, I traveled to the city of Bandung, where I met Iman Soleh, a professor at the Faculty of Social and Political Science (University of Padjadjaran- UNPAD). He is yet another renowned authority on ‘terrorism’. He came to my hotel, accompanied by his wife, Professor Antik Bintari, a conflict management expert who teaches at the same university.



Professor Iman Soleh and his wife, Professor Antik Bintari

For quite some time, professor Iman Soleh and I discussed the link between the ‘old guard’ Southeast Asian (mainly Indonesians and Malaysians) jihadi cadres, so-called ‘Afghan alumni’, and the vanguard, a ‘new wave’, that which is now trying to destabilize, even destroy both Syria and the Philippines.

While the name ‘jihad’ itself has been used habitually and ‘liberally’ all over the Western mainstream media, it was clear to all of us at the table that behind the brutal combat as well as most of the horrors unleashed in such places like Syria and Philippines, hidden are the geopolitical interests of the West in general and of the United States in particular.

Professor Soleh has explained the latest ‘dynamics’:

“Since World War Two, the U.S. was afraid of so-called ‘domino effects’. Among other things that are now happening in the Philippines under president Duterte, the government is curbing activities of the multi-national mining conglomerates, and the West cannot accept that. Philippines are putting its environmental concerns above the short-term profits! For the millions of left-wing activists here in Indonesia and all over Southeast Asia, Duterte is a role model.”

Therefore, following the imperialist logic, the Philippines have to be attacked and destabilized, as has already been done to Syria. Defiance is punishable by death. And how else other than through the most effective weapons which the West has been utilizing for years and decades: extremist religious terrorist groups. What better assembly of fighters to choose for that difficult task than the jihadists from the groups that had already proven to be so effective and lethal in places such as Afghanistan?

By now, almost nobody who is at least to some extent informed on the subject has any doubts that the West is mainly interested in maintaining ‘perpetual conflict’ in several

regions of the world. As Professor Soleh observes:

“I think all this is not just to ‘destabilize’ the Philippines, but also because the country has conflict areas that could be ‘nurtured’. The best example is predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao, vs. the rest of the Philippines, which is predominantly a Catholic country. As we know, the Philippines is also involved in the South China Sea dispute with the PRC, and the U.S. is trying to fully dominate the region...”

And President Duterte is committing an ‘unpardonable crime’ in the eyes of Washington and London, by trying to resolve the territorial conflict with China, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

But back to the “Jihadi Express...” It is important to understand the background:

The Indonesian jihadi, Salafi group Darul Islam, fought for a caliphate and against the secular and socialist state headed by President Sukarno, in the 1950’s and well into the 1960’s. “Terror is halal”, they used to say.

Professor Saleh further clarifies:

“Eventually the Indonesian state dismantled ‘Darul Islam’, but there was an offshoot of it created soon, ‘Komando Jihad’.”

Komando Jihad later transformed into a transnational Southeast Asian group *Jamaah Islamiyah* (with its spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir). The group has been maintaining active links and cooperation with al-Qaeda and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, to name just two religious guerrillas.

“Fighters from Komando Jihad then went to Afghanistan. Ideologically they were hard-core Salafis, but with the Western support. They received Western help to acquire weapons and other basics. According to my contacts in the Indonesian intelligence community, the U.S. was backing this infiltration of Afghanistan by ‘Komando Jihad’ and by others. I’m also in possession of a piece of information that the Indonesian army (TNI) commander in the 1980’s, General Moerdani, was supporting Indonesian and Afghan jihadists, by supplying them with the weapons (including the AK-47’s).”

“Again, according to my Indonesian intelligence sources, the ‘departure’ itself of the Indonesian jihadists for Afghanistan was also directly helped by the U.S., under the cover of ‘Islamic study groups’ and other ‘communities’, and the route that was utilized was: Indonesia - Malaysia - Philippines - Afghanistan”.

These are not well-publicized facts, but they should not surprise anyone familiar with Indonesian history: after the brutal 1965 U.S.-sponsored military/religious coup, Indonesia rapidly transformed itself from an anti-imperialist, internationalist and progressive country into the closest Western ally in the entire Southeast Asia. The main ‘ideology’ of the new fascist pro-Western regime of General Suharto became “anti-Communism”. For months and years, the Communists as well as alleged ‘Communists’ were slaughtered all over the

archipelago, while Communist ideology was banned, as were the Chinese language and culture, including dragons and cakes. The anti-Communist propaganda became the main sample of the 'intellectual' diet. The fourth most populous country on Earth went through a total reset, became one of the most 'religious' places on Earth, and soon after collapsed both socially and intellectually.

Allegations of "atheism" against the Communists were used in Indonesia in order to stir and radicalize thousands of potential and already existing jihadi cadres. Anti-atheism, even anti-secularism, became the rallying cry of those who were ready to sacrifice their lives for the ultimate goal and dream -a caliphate.

The West in Afghanistan played the same 'game', during the "Soviet era", as it did in Indonesia after 1965, and elsewhere. It is clear and obvious that the imperialist scheme designed in Washington and London has been interchangeable and successfully applicable in many different geographical locations.

In Kabul, in March 2017, a legendary Afghan intellectual, Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi, explained to me:

"The biggest mistake the Soviet Union made here was to attack religion outrightly. If they'd first stuck to equal rights, and slowly worked it up towards the contradictions of religion, it could perhaps have worked... But they began blaming religion for our backwardness, in fact for everything. Or at least this is how it was interpreted by the coalition of their enemies, and of course by the West.

Now, why is the present Western invasion so 'successful'; why is there so little in terms of intellectual opposition? Look at the regime in Kabul... During its rule, the US convinced people that Western intervention was 'positive', 'respectful of their religion and cultures'. They kept repeating 'under this and that UN convention', and again 'as decided by the UN'... They used NATO, a huge group of countries, as an umbrella. There was a 'brilliantly effective' protocol that they developed... According to them, they never did anything unilaterally, always by 'international consensus' and in order to 'help Afghan people'. On the other hand, the Soviet Union never had the slightest chance to explain itself. It was attacked immediately, and on all fronts."



US Air Force, Bagrani Base, Afghanistan

In reality, the West has always been using (and finally it has managed to divert) Islam. Some great Muslim scholars, including those that I met in Tehran, actually believe that Washington, London, Paris and other centers of the Western imperialism and neo-colonialism, actually succeeded, in many parts of the world, to create a totally new and (to many true and intellectual Muslims) unrecognizable religion.

Indonesian jihadi cadres hardened in Afghanistan and trained by the Pakistanis eventually returned to their country. There, they went to “work”, participating in such bloodlettings and killings as those in Ambon (Maluku) and Poso (Sulawesi). In Ambon the conflict continued from 1999 to 2002, and while it lasted, allegedly 8,000 people died, while thousands belonging to both sexes were involuntarily and brutally circumcised and genitally mutilated. In Ambon, I saw the jihadi cadres in action, hacking to death a young innocent boy, right in front of the eyes of a cheering crowd of onlookers. I later described the horror of this incident in my novel [*“Point of No Return”*](#).

Little did I know, then, what I was *really* witnessing and trying to document. Only much later, in Bandung, in May 2017, a couple of professors, Iman Soleh and Antik Bintari, explained to me:

“Poso and Ambon, that’s the “Afghani Link”. During those massacres, there were still some ‘old jihadists’ from the Afghan days, participating in the actual fighting. However, there were also some ‘fresh’ fighters there, many of them undergoing exercises with the Indonesian ‘Afghans’. Poso and Ambon conflicts were in fact serving as two training grounds. After that, a new generation of combatants had risen”.



Mr. Farihin, Jamaah Islamiyah
Fighter

That same night - very late at night - after driving for hours on hopelessly congested

highway that connects the cities of Bandung and Jakarta, I met Mr. Farihin, an active member of the outlawed “JI” (Jamaah Islamiyah), a man who personally met Osama bin Laden, a warrior who fought in Paktia and other provinces in Afghanistan, a former Mujahideen, an unapologetic jihadist.

I was longing to know, to understand, how the old ‘Afghan alumni’ were thinking, how they saw the world, and what their goals were.

Mr. Farihin was actually an impressive human being: upright, strong, manly, proud, extremely polite, and totally brainwashed...

His hatred for Communism knew no boundaries; it was epic. He dreamed, he ‘saw’ Communists everywhere, all over the world: in Syria, in the present-day Russia, even in Karzai’s and Ghani’s Afghanistan. Anything remotely secular, anything that was not a caliphate, was “Communist” in his simple but determined mind of a combatant.

We began with Osama bin Laden:

“I met Osama fleetingly, in 1987 and 1988, but in those days he was not an ‘ulama’. He was funding Mujahideen. He was a contractor in Paktia Province and he was based in the north of that province, in an Arab camp, helping Mujahideen and also building the roads. After Soviets entered Afghanistan, Osama’s people made a ‘council’; it was like a shadow Mujahideen government.”

Mr. Farihin came to Afghanistan in 1987. After his group NII (*Negara Islam Indonesia* – Islamic State of Indonesia) received ‘an invitation’ from Mujahideen.

What prompted him to go to Afghanistan?

“There was news all over Indonesia, that a Muslim country was attacked by the Soviet Union. My initial desire was to fight the USSR. At the beginning I was not allowed to fight, and it was not Afghanistan where I was sent; it was Pakistan. I was ordered to study at Etihad Islami Military Academy there. At some point, all foreign jihadis had to leave Pakistan, so we were moved directly to Afghanistan. In Paktia Province they built an entire camp for us. We were attacked by the Soviets there, on several occasions; us, as well as the ‘Arab Camp’. MIG-21 jet fighters were used. But by then, Russians were already beginning their withdrawal. After the Soviets left, Afghanistan was still governed by a Communist government, so we fought it, too. I was ready to fight: first the Soviets, than that Communist Afghan governments. I saw Russian prisoners, pilots, shackled, in Pakistan. I was not afraid of them.”

I quickly noticed that Mr. Farihin was not proud of the support his group and Mujahideen in general were receiving from the United States and the rest of the West. He kept repeating that he did not “see” any direct U.S. support, that supplies just kept coming from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Muslim countries. For him, it was essential that his fight in Afghanistan would be seen as a ‘pure’, pan-Islamic struggle.

I was not there to contradict him, I was there to listen.

He spoke about the fronts on which he had fought: Nangarhar, Jalalabad among others:

"I was rotating between the fronts. The war, the battles were 'orderly'".

"But what was the goal?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate one single moment.

"The goal was simple: in Afghanistan we wanted to prevent the Communist ideology from being accepted."

How much did he know about the Communism?

"Actually, my knowledge about it was very shallow. That's fine: we were war machines for Mujahideen. What we were told was that the Communists don't believe in God, and that they are professing secularism."

I wondered whether they knew anything about the improving medical system, about the all of a sudden decent education, about public housing, transportation, and culture?

"Almost everything done by the Communists was good, I know... But because they believed in Communism and socialism, it was not right, it was 'haram'. Our pledge to God was what really mattered. In terms of importance, God was Number 1, and only then came the world of humans."

I asked him how he sees Afghanistan now.

"As long as their government is Communist, we'll fight it... And I pray that Taliban wins."

For a moment I thought that I had misunderstood: the Afghanistan government is Communist? Doesn't he know anything about the U.S., about the Western occupation?

"Yes but the U.S. went to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban, not Communism. The government is still Communist; a puppet regime of Russia."

I quickly changed the subject, but things did not improve. I asked him about Syria, about Iraq. He replied politely:

"I train, we train volunteers who are ready to go and fight in Syria. It is because Syria is not only Communist, you know - Assad and Russians - but also it is Shi'a."

Being Shi'a is an arch crime in today's Indonesia. People are getting killed, ostracized, and intimidated for being Shi'a. I witnessed it once, on the island of Madura.

"'Aghan alumni' are training fighters that are ready to go abroad, both ideologically and militarily. Whether the government knows, I'm not sure."

Perhaps intelligence knows. During Suharto era, the fight against Communism was supported. I saw Indonesian intelligence operating in the Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan. We were told by the Pakistani intelligence that the Indonesian intelligence was deployed in the region. Indonesia was then supporting Mujahideen, and we were receiving some Indonesian supplies, including food. Indonesia and Pakistan were then very good friends; Pakistani intelligence made our life very easy: we were going back and forth, freely, between Afghanistan and Pakistan, across the border, while civilians were not allowed..."

And what was their fee? Certainly jihad is not fought for free?

The lowest pay was then US\$150 per month, a lot of money in poor Indonesia, in the late 1980's. Between US\$300 and US\$400 for the officers.



Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) goodies on display in Jakarta

Before we parted, we talked about Afghanistan, the country. He remembered it fondly:

"I like the country, it is beautiful. I liked religious life there. Afghans were very kind to us, treated us like guests... We were offered their women, too, to marry, but the dowry was too high. Some had blue eyes, and we wanted to marry them, badly, but really: we couldn't afford their women with our modest 'salaries'."

Does he miss Afghanistan?

"Yes."

"Me, too," I nodded. "But I'm going back, soon."

We didn't embrace. By then he sensed that we belonged to the opposite sides of the barricade, and that most likely we were arch enemies. But until we parted, both of us remained polite, excessively polite: the Afghan way.



Dina Y. Sulaeman

“Jihad in Indonesia – against the Western imperialism? Oh no, no way...” smiles Dina Y. Sulaeman, an Indonesian political analyst, an author of the book [*“Salju Di Aleppo”*](#) (Snow of Aleppo):

“Jihad in which Indonesians want to participate is based on hate...In my book, I explain that the Indonesian fighters in Syria are mainly affiliated with several groups: ‘Ikhwanul Muslimin’, ‘Hizbut Tahrir’ and Al Qaeda/ISIS. Unfortunately these groups have supporters in Indonesia. They keep spreading fake photos and videos about Syria, to ignite sympathy, even anger of Indonesian people, so they give donations or even join jihad. It’s a good deal for them. They are waging ‘holy war’, they’ll go to heaven, and plus they get paid. They accuse president Assad of being ‘infidel’. That’s their rallying cry.”

“Indonesian mass media ‘coverage’ is only directly translating what is said by the Western media: the CNN, the BBC and others.... If not those, then at least Al-Jazeera which is often even worse... As a result, Indonesians are ‘very concerned’ about Syria.’ Of course, in my books I’m trying to correct the misconceptions, but the propaganda apparatus is so powerful.”

“Like in Afghanistan,” I add.

Earlier I asked Noor Huda Ismail:

“But the Afghan ‘alumni’ and the ISIS do not necessarily like each other, do they?”

Huda nods, but then he adds:

“Al-Qaeda and ISIS do not get along well. In the context, most of the fighters, those who support ISIS, they have been gathering in the same mosque. They are using social media. Maybe the Afghan ‘alumni’ and the ISIS supporters do not like each other, but they share the same ideology; the root, the matter is the same, which is toppling and challenging the secular systems.”

“Including the one in Indonesia.”

“Yes, including the one here.”

Jihadi Express is now rolling, gaining speed. One country after another is being shred to pieces under its merciless wheels.



Destroyed Aleppo

Those who think that it is “all about oil” are mistaken. The West is of course trying to control, fully and brutally, all that moves in the Middle East, North Africa and as far as Iran and Afghanistan. But that’s definitely not all: jihadi groups, created by the West and its allies in the Gulf, have been used to destabilize the two greatest adversaries of the West: Russia and China.

Soviet Union was tricked into Afghanistan in 1979, and then brutally destroyed. Afghanistan itself was ‘sacrificed’ in the process, its social structures broken, and all hope its people were enjoying, choked. China is now also greatly suffering from the operations of several Muslim terrorist groups, as well as from other religious implants, which are without exception supported by the West.

The Philippines is most likely the next ‘front’. It has been for years and decades, in Sulu and elsewhere, but as this report goes to print, things are deteriorating, getting more and more desperate there.

To fight terrorism in such places like Syria and Afghanistan, has been and will be increasingly, one of the main foreign policy goals of both Moscow and Beijing; in order to help those countries under siege, but also in order to prevent them from becoming the training grounds of the ‘anti-Communist’ and anti-secularist terrorist armies.

Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. Three of his latest books are revolutionary novel [“Aurora”](#) and two bestselling works of political non-fiction: [“Exposing Lies Of The Empire”](#) and [“Fighting Against Western Imperialism”](#). View his other books [here](#). Andre is

making films for teleSUR and Al-Mayadeen. Watch [Rwanda Gambit](#), his groundbreaking documentary about Rwanda and DR Congo. After having lived in Latin America, Africa and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides in East Asia and the Middle East, and continues to work around the world. He can be reached through his [website](#) and his [Twitter](#).

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About the author:

Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His latest books are: "Exposing Lies Of The Empire" and "Fighting Against Western Imperialism". Discussion with Noam Chomsky: On Western Terrorism. Point of No Return is his critically acclaimed political novel. Oceania - a book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific. His provocative book about Indonesia: "Indonesia - The Archipelago of Fear". Andre is making films for teleSUR and Press TV. After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and the Middle East. He can be reached through his website or his Twitter.

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