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Transforming *preman* to radical Islamic Laskar in Solo, Central Java

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The development of radical Islamic understanding amongst *abangan* society is a paradox because there is a dichotomy between *santri* and *abangan*. This study aims to describe and analyse the transformation of *preman* or thugs into members of the radical Islamic army in Solo, Central Java. This research reveals why Solo is the base of a radical Islamic Laskar, how *premans* are predisposed to become members of the Islamic Laskar, and the types of radical Islam of this former *preman*. This type of research uses qualitative methods and a descriptive phenomenology approach with the social construction theory from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The results reveal that the rise of radical Islamic Laskar organisations is because of the local conditions of the community life in Solo. They are the leaders of Islamic troops, as an essential role of agents is to lead the social construction of *preman* to become members of the Laskar. Meanwhile, the type of Islamic radicalism of the *preman* was categorised as pseudoradicalism and fake radicalism.

Contribution: This research contributes to the study of radicalism formed by religious organisations. This study describes and analyses in depth the transformation of the *preman* into members of the radical Islamic army in the city of Solo and the base of the radical Islamic Laskar. The most important finding of this article is the Islamic radicalism of the *preman*, which is categorised as pseudoradicalism and fake radicalism.

Keywords: *preman*; Laskar; Islam; radical; Solo.

Introduction

The trichotomy of Clifford Geertz in the book *The Religion of Java* divides Javanese society into *priyayi, santri* and *abangan* (Geertz 1973). In the modern context, the meaning of *abangan* has undergone a shift. Assuming that during Clifford Geertz's research period in the 1960s, *abangan* was identical to those who upheld the syncretic Javanese tradition. In that case, the *abangan* means being a Muslim who is less obedient in carrying out Islamic law, especially the obligatory prayers. The more common term for contemporary *abangan* is Islamic Kartu Tanda Penduduk (KTP) or identity card (Hanik 2016). This Islamic KTP is found in various social strata in society, one of which is *preman*. Warsito (2018) initially found the religious activities of *preman* in Semanggi, Solo City.

In general, the people of Solo or Surakarta in Central Java tend to be categorised as contemporary *abangan*, not *santri*. However, according to a previous study and journalist investigation, Densus 88 made some assumptions about Solo city, which was thought to be the base of radical Islamic groups (Van Bruinessen 2014; DW 2016; Ricklefs 2012). The development of radical Islamic understanding amongst *abangan* society is a paradox because there is a dichotomy between *santri* and *abangan*. On the other hand, the radical Islamic organisation that stands out is Laskar Islamic radicalism. In this situation, more analyses in scientific studies need to challenge the assumption of how Solo became the centre of the Laskar Islamic radicalism.

On the other hand, it appears that the *preman* in Solo as an essential part of the radical Islamic army is more than just a paradox. In this context, *preman* is a subvariant of *abangan*. The term '*preman*', according to the Big Indonesian Dictionary, refers to people who commit crimes or thuggee. Meanwhile, thuggery is a lifestyle that promotes violence. *Preman* are often perceived as individuals with tattoos who hang around whilst disturbing the safety and comfort of the community. *Preman* is synonymous with 'free' and 'wildlife', so they are considered far from social norms in society.

In recent years, *preman* in Solo have become part of a radical Islamic group. In general, the relationship between *preman* and radical Islamic groups is more than just a dichotomy – it is

diametric. The remarkable conversion must first be followed by repentance. Generally, repentance is related to the religious experience of each individual. However, the interesting thing in this research is the discovery of mass conversions of *preman*, and most of them are members of Laskar Islamic radical organisations. Through the social construction theory approach from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Light, Berger & Luckmann 1967), the existence of radicals from *preman* is explored through dialectics, externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. How do they adapt to their sociocultural processes and interactions in an intersubjective world and identify themselves in social institutions?

This study also reveals and analyses how ex-*preman* can survive economically. Previously, they made money by engaging in criminal activity. After undergoing a spiritual conversion, they realised that they must abandon their former illegal practices.

The ex-*preman* in these Laskar Islamic radical organisations often consider themselves 'sharia police' when the state police have failed to eradicate immorality. However, whether they are categorised as radical Islamic groups is related to the characteristics of radical Islam. Apart from all, the fact is that many Solo people feel comfortable with the existence of radical Islamic leaders for various reasons. However, some people do not agree with their actions because they are considered to interfere with the privacy of the community's life, and their actions are considered to violate state regulations.

Research methods

The method used in this research is qualitative research. This study uses a descriptive phenomenological approach based on Husserl's philosophy and the social construction theory from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Light et al. 1967). Phenomenology views human behaviour, what they say and what they do as a product of how people interpret their world to capture the meaning of a person's behaviour; researchers try to see everything from the perspective of the person involved in the situation that is the subject of his study (Aspers & Corte 2019). Through dialectics, externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation, the social construction theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Light et al. 1967) is explored.

The data analysis process has been carried out since the beginning of the research, along with the initial data collection. Furthermore, the data obtained were compared interactively between data reduction and data presentation to obtain results. This method, known as a braided model or interactive analysis, is done in conjunction with the data collection process. This study's data analysis techniques included data collection, data condensation, data presentation and conclusion (Corbin & Strauss 2012).

In this study, one of the data collection techniques used was observation, where researchers carried out the data collection

in the field by making direct observations of the object under study. Another technique used was in-depth interviews. This is a process of obtaining information for research purposes, in which the interviewer asks relevant questions to the person (informant) being interviewed, either with or without using an interview guide (Maxwell & Reybold 2015; Sugiyono 2017). The reason researchers use in-depth interviews is that the advantage of this method lies in the accuracy of the data obtained from an informant, not influenced by outside parties.

The last technique used is documentation. This method is done by recording or copying existing data in the research location. Usually, this data is in the form of secondary data or existing data, for example, archives or other documents in the field related to this research.

Discussion
Social construction from *preman* to Islamic radicalism

The Islamic radicalism movement in Solo is not always synonymous with Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's institutions, such as Jama'ah Islamiyah (Saloom 2019). Paradoxically, the Indonesian Mujahidin Council, or Jama'ah Anshorut Tauhid, is linked to local Laskar in Solo, such as the Surakarta Islamic Youth Front (FPIS), Laskar Jundullah, Laskar Umat Islam Surakarta (LUIS), Hawariyyun to Tim Hisbah in Solo, with *preman* membership. The Islamic army and *preman* are at different poles and even hostile. Members of the Laskar are generally *santri*, whilst *preman* are *abangan*. Laskar struggled to enforce religious law, whilst *preman* were the foremost perpetrators of violating religious law. Their only similarity is that both of them are identical to the perpetrators of violence in society.

The *preman* started becoming a part of the radical group by means of a process called 'laskarisation' (Abdullah, Kamaruddin & Halim 2019; Wildan 2013). According to Khalid, a friend of Sigit and one of our informants when being interviewed, one of the figures is Hermawan Wijayanto (better known as Sigit Qordhawi). Sigit was initially a young *abangan* figure. He was known as an active person in rock band activities as a vocalist; however, after the fall of the New Order, he underwent a radical change in the orientation of his life. He abandoned the world of young people and became interested in *ghiroh* Islam by establishing Laskar Bismillah to fight the increasing immorality in Solo.

According to Khalid, Sigit Qordhawi rose to prominence after leading a fight against the perpetrators who sold liquor at the Waru Doyong Restaurant in Langenharjo, Grogol Sukoharjo Regency, in October 2005. The violence at this restaurant made Sigit and his friends Khalid and Award become suspects, and they spent several months in prison. In prison, they preached to fellow inmates, who were generally criminals. Some of these *preman* eventually changed from *abangan* to religious people. The relationship between *preman* and Laskar Islamic radical groups began from this prison.

Sigit shifted the orientation of the sweeping area from places of immorality to villages after he was released from prison, according to Khalid, so that he could face the general public. Because of this radical shift in orientation, Islamic paramilitary groups have clashed with community members. When Khalid started to oppose them, their friendship was severed because of different strategies concerning *nahi munkar*. Since then, Sigit's new group has often experienced conflicts with groups of *preman* who live in society.

The most phenomenal conflict between members of the Islamic army and a group of *preman* occurred in the case of the murder of a well-known *preman* in Solo, Heru Yulianto, known as Kipling. In March 2008, the *preman* led by Kipli held a liquor party on the street in the Kusumodilagan area, Kalurahan Joyosuran, Pasar Kliwon District, Solo City. The *preman* were reprimanded by the congregation members of the Muslimin Mosque, Kusumodilagan, because they seemed to be disturbing the community's peace. Kipling and his friends were angry with the reprimand, so they took violent action against their adversaries. Kipling's action sparked anger from the Islamic paramilitary organisation in Solo because Kipli's action was interpreted as a declaration of war. As a result of his actions, Kipli was attacked by members of the Laskar so that he died tragically, whilst seven members of the Laskar became suspects.

The Kipling murder case further strengthened the Laskar's reputation as a force reckoned with by the *preman*. The membership of the Laskar group increased in number. In contrast, the *preman* group became traumatised by this situation. According to Mr Irm, since the Kipli murder case, he has felt the difference in treatment of the *preman*. The *preman* seemed very polite and respectful when they met him and other mosque activists. His village area is well-known as a *preman* base, and some immoral activity cases have decreased dramatically.

The reputation of the Laskar was more dominant after a significant conflict between the Islamic army and the *preman* group led by Iwan Wallet in May 2012. Iwan was accused of assaulting members of the Laskar in the Gandekan area, Jebres District, Solo. A few days later, hundreds of Laskar from various groups in Solo Raya came to Iwan Walet's power base in Gandekan (Sarna & Bhatia 2020). Even though the problem of the conflict began with simple things, this conflict seemed to be gaining prominence, so the Mayor of Solo at that time, Joko Widodo or Jokowi, had to step in to handle the problem. The Mayor of Solo (now the president of Indonesia) succeeded in reducing the conflict through dialogue. In January 2019, the conflict between Iwan Walet and members of the Laskar recurred in prison in Solo. This conflict did not escalate because the two groups were separated in different prisons.

After the series of events mentioned earlier, the reputation of the Islamic Laskar group was becoming more dominant. On the contrary, *preman* from throughout Solo appeared to be calming down. On the contrary, *preman* from throughout Solo appeared to be calming down. There has also been a massive 'conquest' of Laskar members to the *preman* over the past few years. As part of the activity Amar ma'ruf, Laskar warriors approached the *preman* in a nonviolent manner, but if the *preman* fought back, they would use force to eradicate the evil. The *preman* were given four options: firstly, to repent, stop thuggery activities and to join the army; secondly, to repent, stop thuggery activities and become ordinary people; and fourthly, if they were unable to stop thuggery activities, they were encouraged to move away from the Solo area.

If the *preman* rejected the available options, it was considered a statement of 'war' against the Laskar. In general, *preman* chose one of the options offered. The first option was chosen quite a lot so that there was a process of 'laskarisation' of the *preman*. Some *preman* chose the other options, and if they chose the fourth option, they carried out thuggery activities outside the Solo area.

This process of laskarisation was preceded by religious and spiritual conversion. According to Max Heirich, religious conversion consists of two types: firstly, a conversion to another religion or belief system; secondly, the action of a person or group that makes a profound change in religion or repentance. In this context, *preman* experience the second type of religious conversion, repentance, because generally, *preman* are included in the *abangan* or Islamic KTP. The religious conversions of *preman* also consist of two types, namely, genuine and nongenuine. Genuine repentance comes from one's awareness, whilst nongenuine repentance starts from compulsion. In general, the transformation of *preman* into radical Islamic warriors through dialectics, externalisation, objectivation and internalisation is explained in the following section.

Firstly, externalisation is the initial process of social construction as a moment of adaptation to the sociocultural world. At this moment, the means used are language and action. This moment begins when members of the Islamic army come to the *preman* to be given information regarding the meaning and essence of life. The goal is for *preman* to leave the world of thuggery. Gradually, the *preman* were made aware of carrying out the principal obligation, namely the obligatory prayers. Meanwhile, religious understanding is provided through religious studies, which are held regularly. Conceptually, the moment of adjustment to the sociocultural world in the form of expressions in holy texts (the Qur'an and hadith) is used to provide legitimacy for the thoughts and actions of members of the Laskar.

This *preman* listened to the religious ideologies of the radical Ustaz, who had been brought in to deliver an exclusive sermon. This material provision is exclusive and limited, only to be participated in by certain groups. However, they are also provided with Islamic studies on various occasions, and it is open to anyone. However, for an open study, the material is moderate with moderate Ustaz speakers (Barabash & Zhukov 2019; Kafid 2018). In addition, physical training is

also provided in the form of self-defence training. This physical exercise aims to maintain their performance and stamina as a provision when on the field facing other groups that attack them. The ex-*preman* still have the character of 'fighters' as original radical Islamic groups in general. Of course, these characters are influenced by the previous thuggery culture.

Secondly, objectivation is a social reality that seems to be outside human beings so that it becomes an objective reality. Thus, there are two realities: the subjective reality of the self and the reality outside itself, the objective. Between subjective and objective reality forms a network of personal interactions through institutionalisation (Busher & Bjørgo 2020). The objectivation process can be described as follows. Firstly, the Laskar and *preman* are two different entities. Islamic Laskar figures are considered individuals with integrity, charisma and a profound understanding of religious rules. Secondly, institutionalisation or institutionalisation, building awareness into action. Process of institutionalisation, the arguments and values of religious guidelines uses to strengthen the legitimacy of their thoughts and actions. They carry out actions in society in the name of *amar ma'rūf nahī munkar* [commanding good and forbidding evil] as justified actions based on religion. Thirdly, habitualisation or habituation is the process by which rational actions have become part of everyday life. There is no need for multiple interpretations of his thoughts and actions. His thoughts and actions have become part of his cognitive and evaluation systems because his consciousness has accepted them, and the evaluation system has also maintained them. Laskar members will take action if things are found around them that deviate from religious norms. Actions range from the gentlest to the most violent. In this objectivation process, the most important thing is the existence of an agent who plays the role of an individual or a group of individuals for the process of awareness, institutionalisation and habitualisation.

Fourthly, internalisation is a process for individuals to identify themselves in their sociocultural world. Internalisation is a moment of drawing social reality into oneself. Social reality is in humans, and in that way, humans will be identified in their sociocultural world. Humans tend to group based on a sense of identity by nature. The interaction barrier cannot reveal on humans with the same identity (Rubiyanto & Abdul Chalim 2018). Likewise, fellow members of the radical Islamic Laskar, especially those from the same background, A *preman*. Amongst them can freely interact intensively, and with this interaction, self-confidence grows and feels a sense of solidarity as a 'new *santri*' group. Through Amar ma'rūf nahī, munkar is marked with short trouser (*isbal pants*) and bearded (*lihyah*) even though there are still tattoo marks on his body. His new life tends to be more exclusive than before by remaining committed to being a 'sharia police' in enforcing *Amar ma'rūf nahī munkar*. They receive religious study material instantly and minimally. Their limited understanding of religion still makes them 'fanatical' with their groups and the teachings of their leaders in their groups.

The radical Islamic type of ex-*preman* Laskar

Change in status from *preman* to becoming a member of the Islamic Laskar would have consequences related to their livelihoods. *Preman* survive and worke from the intersection of the world of streets and the world of violence. When they become members of the army, the old jobs have to be left behind. The Laskar leaders are aware of this, so they try to find jobs that do not require special skills. Interviews from various sources and observations made by researchers showed that many *preman* Laskar became parking attendants throughout the Solo area. Various malls, markets, shops, strategic roads, important buildings and other places where the Islamic army manages parking lots, whilst former *preman* uses as parking attendants. Therefore, contrasting found views, The parking attendant with full-body tattoos but wearing trousers above the ankle (isbal) and bearded (lihyah). Cingkrang pants and beard are part of the collective identity of members of the Laskar. The fact shows that there has been a shift in control of parking lots from organised *preman* to ex-*preman* members of Islamic Laskar-Laskar organisations (Bindaniji 2020).

According to FX Rudiyatmo, the Mayor of Surakarta for the 2012–2021 period, Islamic troops' controlling of parking lots by employing ex-*preman* is procedural and done according to the rules. The paramilitary group participated in the auction or appointment according to the existing rules. According to the current system, expansive and strategic parking spaces are divided among competing bidders. The goal is that certain groups do not monopolise parking lots so as not to cause conflict. Regarding the ex-*preman*, who are many parking attendants in the Surakarta area, Rudiyatmo agrees with this. According to him, with a steady job and income, former *preman* will organise their lives more regularly and not be easily influenced by other parties (Muhammad 2017).

In general, ex-*preman* are in the *abangan* category. In order to understand religion, the management of the Laskar organisation often invited them to learn to read the Qur'an and study the basics of Islamic insight. In its development, several problems emerged related to the consequences of the transformation of the ex-*preman*. According to Ustaz Ming, many ex-*preman* were consistent with their repentance by carrying out their religious obligations and leaving behind their former illegal jobs. They remained active in enforcing *nahi munkar* whilst matters of *amar ma'ruf* were left to those who understand religion. However, some amongst them are looking for opportunities and benefits from their new status. The Laskar organisation is used as a place of refuge from their problems. Moreover, there is a principle of 'right or wrong, he is my friend' amongst members of the Laskar organisation. Such a principle creates a spirit of blind solidarity that violates religious rules (Yunanto & Damayanti 2017).

In addition, some *preman* who were members of the Islamic army aimed at taking revenge against their old enemies.

Some amongst them are still found to be drug users, drunkards and others who act as they did before joining the Laskar organisation (Kistanto 2008). Money, mobile phones, and other valuables are sometimes taken from sweeping victims. They have recently been acting as guardians for people who are struggling with debt, including the debts of the leasing party taken by the individual. If the debtor has requested protection from paramilitary members, the debt collector will not attempt to collect the debt (Gregg 2014; Post, Ruby & Shaw 2002). In addition, some camp members are buying and selling motorcycles and cars from the debtors who are unable to continue instalments. According to Khalid, a former activist in the early era of the emergence of paramilitary irregulars, the organisation aims to fortify Muslims and preserve the dignity of Islam. The Muslim fortress is maintained by strengthening faith, increasing worship and enforcing *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. It seems that now this spirit has begun to shift. Not infrequently, former *preman* take advantage of paramilitary organisations for pragmatic interests (Syeikh 2019). Currently, the original values of the Laskar, which has become a stronghold for Muslims, still resides in its members.

The Laskar members who use their status for pragmatic gain will be gradually and naturally eliminated. However, the change from *preman* to former *preman* and eventually to members of the Islamic army must be appreciated and respected. In fact, in Solo, immorality is rarely found in public places and must be recognised as a significant contribution from the existence of these Islamic armies (Heirich 1964).

Meanwhile, the results of interviews with the community and observations in the field show that most of the people the researchers met supported the existence of many Laskar for various reasons. A housewife argued that currently, she could build her family's savings as her husband did not dare to gamble because he was afraid of the presence of the Laskar (Light et al. 1967). Another housewife felt that her current environment felt safer because there were no drunkards and gamblers (Joebagio 2013). The existence of Laskar has also become a behavioural revolution for the younger generation in a region. Previously, the younger generation in their village became gamblers, drunkards and drug users. It has changed towards a new generation leaving the world of immorality, a generation that is more religiously observant and a generation that is more active in work. Thus, the members of the Laskar have become heroes in their communities (Aspers & Corte 2019).

However, some members of the public feel that the existence of Laskar Islam disturbs privacy and public order. Hobbies like gambling and drinking are life choices that must be respected, and not every person can be forced to obey his or her religion (Romadlan 2019). In addition, the spirit of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* cannot be motivated by personal interests for economic gain. Moreover, some of the former *preman* involved in Laskar membership are still active as drug users (Amin 2020). Sometimes, the actions of unscrupulous members of the Laskar demean the image of Islam. Some unscrupulous soldiers, for instance, stole valuable items from

sweeping victims under the pretext of taking *ghanimah* [war booty]. Likewise, they have become protectors of other people involved in debt because debt collectors support the practice of usury. Thus, the selfish activities of debt collectors need to be curbed. The actions and thoughts of these kinds of Laskar members need to be enhanced so that they are not considered hypocritical. Religious interpretation should not be used for pragmatic interest and personal advantage. Moreover, ex-*preman*, including *abangan* groups, instantly transformed into *santri*, and consequently they did not understand science and law in Islam (Warkum Sumitro 2015).

In various works of literature, the Islamic radicalism group is generally associated with literal religious understanding and radical actions. This group desires to change the condition of society and even the state entirely. Radical religious organisations are committed to the ultimate goal of building an Islamic system. Meanwhile, through the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), Indonesia identified the criteria for radicalism: intolerance, the concept of *takfiri* rejecting the Republic of Indonesia and rejecting Pancasila as the state ideology.

When analysing the criteria for radicalism above, *preman* who are members of the Islamic Laskar organisation in Solo need to identify whether they are part of a radical group. Radicalism is synonymous with a literal understanding of religion, whilst ex-*preman* do not understand or understand little about the teachings of Islam. Radicalism tries to completely change the condition of society by building an Islamic system, whilst they only carry out eradication of immoral places in the name of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*.

If it is related to the criteria for radicalism according to the BNPT, only the criteria for intolerance are suitable. Intolerance here means narrow-mindedness, that is, intolerance to the actions they had previously committed, such as gambling, drunkenness, drug abuse, prostitution and the like. Meanwhile, other criteria such as the concept of *takfiri*, rejecting the Republic of Indonesia and rejecting Pancasila do not exist because most of them are uneducated and do not have sufficient religious knowledge, in order to prevent them from thinking about it. The appropriate criteria for radicalism from them are only acts of violence and intolerant behaviour in a narrow sense.

Based on this, the researchers analysed if the members of the army of the former *preman* consisted of two types of radicalism, pseudoradicalism and fake radicalism. Pseudoradicalism here means if they belong to the type of radical Islam but without sufficient knowledge and understanding of the ideology of radicalism. They have complete faith in Ustaz, who has influenced him to be attracted to and follow the activities of radical groups. They believe that this interpretation will give them more privilege as members of Islamic radical groups. Becoming a member of a radical group brings more honour and prestige than being *preman*, who are known for violence and thuggery.

Meanwhile, the meaning of fake radicalism here is similar to that of pseudoradicalism, but their activity in Islamic troops is linked to their pragmatic goals, especially the goal of gaining social status and financial gain (Wahid et al. 2020). This situation perpetuates the stereotype amongst members of radical Islamic groups. This was especially evident in the case of some participants who chose this religious interpretation and joined radical Islamic groups for the sake of pragmatic interest and personal advantage. Their spiritual conversion was based on an interest in gaining the honour of their social status and financial condition.

This analysis does not mean that all *preman* members of radical Islamic organisations can be undoubtedly classified as pseudoradicals or fake radicals. A thug can become a proper radical in a specific process and even become a terrorist. Researchers found that a thug later became a member of a radical army and later became a terrorist. The person has two similar but contrasting life experiences: firstly, the experience of going to prison for a criminal case; secondly, the experience of going to prison because of a terrorism case (Djelantik 2019). Members of the Islamic Laskar organisation, when asked for a response to this terrorist figure, generally respect his reputation as well as his life journey.

Conclusion

Based on the research results in the field related to the transformation from *preman* to becoming members of the radical Islamic Laskar, it started with a conflict between a group of *preman* and members of the Laskar so that the two groups knew each other. During its development, the Laskar group became more dominant and even carried out a mass conversion of *preman*. For the Laskar group, this conquest is part of the mission to *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*.

The social construction from *preman* to Laskar Islam begins with a religious conversion in the form of repentance. The process of social construction is the process of transforming *preman* into radical Islamic army groups through dialectics, externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. Externalisation through a moment of self-adaptation to the sociocultural world begins when members of the Islamic Laskar come to the *preman* to be enlightened regarding the meaning and essence of life. The objectivation process is carry the presence of agents who play the role of individuals or groups of individuals for the process of awareness, institutionalisation and habitualization. Internalisation through intensive and open interactions amongst former *preman*. In membership in the Islamic Laskar, self-confidence grows along with feelings of solidarity as a new *santri* group.

From various analyses, the researchers concluded that the members of the Laskar Islamic group who came from *preman* are generally categorised as pseudoradicals and fake radicals. However, the conclusion should not be generalised because a *preman* was also found who became a member of a radical Islamic group and subsequently transformed into a terrorist.

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