Jihad is often perceived as an expression of religious fanaticism and is mostly associated with the outrageous act of irrational, insane individuals inspired by their firm belief in radical religious doctrines. Although there is some plausibility in this perception, it fails to uncover the deeper meaning of jihad. Jihad is also a language of protest that can be used by marginalized individuals to construct their identity and thereby their position in the public sphere. For them, jihad is a message conveyed to display attempts to transform and empower their marginalization and break out of their own sense of frustration. Through its public display of violence the Indonesian Salafi movement, Laskar Jihad, illustrates this particular use of jihad.

Local agents are increasingly present in the islands, and the particular kind of violence it enacts represents an attempt made by a group of people to negotiate their identity through the call for jihad and the particular kind of violence it enacts. This paramilitary organization is an extension of and transformation from an "apolitical" Salafi da'wa movement concerned primarily with the purity of tawhid and the subsequent moral integrity of individuals. The Salafi movement began to exert its influence throughout Indonesia in the mid-1980s. Its efference cannot be isolated from Saudi Arabia's immensely ambitious global campaign for the Wahhabization of the Muslim ummah that finally aims at repositioning its position as the center of the Muslim world. Thanks to skyrocketing world oil prices, which provided considerable economic benefits during the 1970s, the Kingdom sponsored a variety of da'wa activities throughout the Muslim world, working with local agents. In this way Wahhabism was exported and disseminated. This campaign was later intensified, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the takeover of al-Haram al-Sharif in Mecca in 1979.

The rise of the Laskar Jihad, which from April 2000 until its disbanding in October 2002 mobilized more than 7,000 members to fight jihad against Christians in the Moluccas and other Indonesian trouble spots, perfectly represents an attempt made by a group of people to negotiate their identity through the call for jihad and the particular kind of violence it enacts. This paramilitary organization is an extension of and transformation from an "apolitical" Salafi da'wa movement concerned primarily with the purity of tawhid and the subsequent moral integrity of individuals. The Salafi movement began to exert its influence throughout Indonesia in the mid-1980s. Its efference cannot be isolated from Saudi Arabia’s immensely ambitious global campaign for the Wahhabization of the Muslim ummah that finally aims at repositioning its position as the center of the Muslim world. Thanks to skyrocketing world oil prices, which provided considerable economic benefits during the 1970s, the Kingdom sponsored a variety of da’wa activities throughout the Muslim world, working with local agents. In this way Wahhabism was exported and disseminated. This campaign was later intensified, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the takeover of al-Haram al-Sharif in Mecca in 1979.

Signs of the expansion of the movement were first and foremost strikingly seen in the appearance of young men wearing long flowing robes (jilbab), burqas, and long beards (jijrys) and women wearing a form of enveloping black veil (niqub) in public places. Initially its presence was most significantly felt on university campuses where it formed an exclusive current of Islamic activism. Under the changing political circumstances during the first half of the 1990s, the movement spread beyond campuses. Members openly organized meetings, called halqas, and mosques, in small tight-knit communities that stand distinctly apart from the “anything goes” open society around them. To some extent it can be identified as a sect, demanding complete loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle. As its name indicates, it is a kind of refuge for pure believers who undergo an internal hijra (migration) to shelter themselves from the stains and temptations of the outside world.

The fast currents of modernization and globalization, which provided the opportunities for young people from rural villages to migrate to big cities in order to pursue higher education or seek jobs, contributed to the growth of the movement. Ironically, the social mobility of these youths has been mired in the failure of the New Order regime to fulfill its developmental promise, particularly to make good on its promise to distribute public goods and resources for all. This deficiency has been aggravated by rampant corruption and a lack of public accountability. The upshot is that many of the young rural migrants have become discontented and disillusioned with the New Order. The result of this dissatisfaction has been a profound crisis of identity among the young rural migrants in Indonesia. The Salafis began to make their appearance in the islands, and the particular kind of violence it enacts represents an attempt made by a group of people to negotiate their identity through the call for jihad and the particular kind of violence it enacts. This paramilitary organization is an extension of and transformation from an "apolitical" Salafi da'wa movement concerned primarily with the purity of tawhid and the subsequent moral integrity of individuals. The Salafi movement began to exert its influence throughout Indonesia in the mid-1980s. Its efference cannot be isolated from Saudi Arabia’s immensely ambitious global campaign for the Wahhabization of the Muslim ummah that finally aims at repositioning its position as the center of the Muslim world. Thanks to skyrocketing world oil prices, which provided considerable economic benefits during the 1970s, the Kingdom sponsored a variety of da’wa activities throughout the Muslim world, working with local agents. In this way Wahhabism was exported and disseminated. This campaign was later intensified, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the takeover of al-Haram al-Sharif in Mecca in 1979.

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themselves majestically: a sea of swarming, withering people clad in white, absorbed in chants of "Allah Akbar" whose echoes reverberated throughout the stadium. Sunlight flashed from their swords like strobe lights. In the background banners and posters fluttered magnificently, emblazoned with the slogans "Wage jihad fi sabil Allah" and "Defend Muslims in the Moluccas". At the height of his public exposure, commander-in-chief Ja'far Umar Thalib mounted the podium and delivered a speech in which he decried the "disaster" afflicting Moluccan Muslims, confronted as they were by a genocidal threat.

The Salafis' mission to fight jihad in the Moluccas is better conceptualized as a drama, because this apparently frenzied action was motivated not so much by the hope for a resounding victory as by the intention to fabricate a heroic image. It was the moment in which the Salafis proclaimed their rightful place in the political arena of Indonesia. Through the staging of theatrical scenes, they emerged on the political scene as a bunch of militant youths willing to martyr themselves for the cause of God. Wearing the distinctive uniform (white jalabiyya and turban) complete with arms on proud display, they portrayed themselves as the most heroic jihad combatants, aching to go to the frontlines.

As players in a drama, the Salafi fighters acted intentionally to capture public attention. They enjoyed the coverage in the media, including television, radio, newspapers, bulletins, and magazines, although their underpinning doctrine should have prevented them from doing so. They warmly welcomed reporters from the media who used the event (and at times sensationalized it) to sell their publications. Yet, ironically, because most of the Salafi fighters were actually unskilled combatants, their only success lay on the symbolic level, that is, in creating propaganda that influenced public opinion through the media.

Even this success was only partial; for the rise of Laskar Jihad by no means indicated the success of militant Muslim groups in taking control of the Indonesian public sphere. It served instead to highlight the marginal position of militant Muslims and their unsuccessful efforts to gain hegemony for their discourse of glorifying militancy and violence. Because these militants pursue their struggle through spectacular violence, jihadi Islam remains on the political periphery and may never succeed in actually changing the strategic landscape of the country. It certainly did not change the map of Indonesian Islam. Nor has it changed the secular system of the Indonesian nation-state. The majority of Indonesian Muslims remain tolerant and opposed to the use of violence, let alone terrorism. The wave of militancy and violence that has engulfed Indonesia has instead encouraged Indonesian Muslims to work more systematically and consistently for the dissemination of discourses on democracy, gender equality, and human rights.