

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 31 July 2017

---

## **Clandestine Movement in the Indonesia-Malaysia Migration Corridor: Roots, Routes, and Realities**

*Andrew M. Carruthers\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- One of the world's largest clandestine flows of people passes through the Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor.
- The East Malaysian state of Sabah's porous borders enable undocumented Indonesian immigrants to continue engaging in their longstanding patterns of clandestine mobility.
- State efforts to police clandestine movements are easily avoided, and a recent proposal to build a border wall on Sebatik Island misses the mark.
- An account of the roots, routes, and realities of Indonesian migrant movement is needed to more fully understand the challenges posed by these clandestine cross-border dynamics.

\* *Andrew M. Carruthers* ([Andrew\\_carruthers@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:Andrew_carruthers@iseas.edu.sg)) is Visiting Fellow in the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

## INTRODUCTION

On 1 July 2017, Malaysia's Immigration Department began a national-scale operation to flush out Malaysia's *pendatang asing tanpa izin* (PATI), or "illegal immigrants." Referred to as "Ops Mega," the crackdowns target undocumented immigrants who failed to register for a temporary "Enforcement Card" or E-Card in the period from 15 February to 30 June. In February, the Immigration Department encouraged employers to enroll their undocumented workers in the E-Card programme, which would have enabled PATI to continue working in Malaysia without penalty for one year while they waited for official legal documents. Employers of 1) immigrants with lost or expired passports or 2) immigrants who entered Malaysia through clandestine channels called *jalan tikus* ("mouse paths") were to accompany their workers to immigration offices for the two-day enrollment process. Immigration introduced the programme to address critical labour shortages across various sectors, and anticipated that 400,000 to 600,000 undocumented immigrants would enroll. These projections did not materialize, however, and only 155,680 PATI enrolled in the programme, prompting large-scale national crackdowns in the form of Ops Mega.

Thus far, 3,393 individuals have been investigated, and 1,035 PATI have been detained. The vast majority of detainees – 940 individuals or 90 percent of the total number arrested – were found in peninsular Malaysia. Informants privy to ongoing operations in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, however, suggest that crackdowns there face three practical obstacles. Urban and peri-urban operations in the peninsula have yielded a greater number of arrests, as many undocumented immigrants are employed in factories located in or on the edges of cities. In contrast, Sabah's undocumented immigrants mostly work in the plantation sector, living in estates far from cities which they rarely leave. One informant alleges that operations in Sabah have largely taken place in urban and peri-urban areas, therefore yielding fewer detentions vis-à-vis similar operations in the peninsula. Second, undocumented immigrants aware of or anticipating impending immigration raids will flee en masse to dense forests, where they wait until they have successfully evaded capture. Third, recently-deported immigrants or those avoiding crackdowns will take advantage of Sabah's notoriously porous borders, leaving or re-entering the state through a multitude of cross-border *jalan tikus*. These clandestine channels meander along waterways and jungle paths that prove difficult to police, and their sheer numbers make them impossible to regularly monitor on either side of the Indonesia-Malaysia border. The Chief Representative of the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau once estimated these paths to be around 1,000 in number, saying, "There aren't just a thousand roads to Rome, but there are also a thousand roads to Tawau."<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on fieldwork data and preliminary material from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS project, this article analyzes one such "road to Tawau." First, it offers a brief history of two different cross-border flows to Sabah, with special reference to the routes of ethnically Bugis Indonesians who constitute the vast majority of Indonesian migrants in the state. Second, it highlights one widely-known clandestine route on Sebatik Island, where Indonesia and Malaysia share a land border that divides the island cleanly in half. Finally, it describes how a proposal to build a wall intended to disrupt clandestine movement along

---

<sup>1</sup> See "Tak Tahu Kapan Selesai, TKI yang Dideportasi Selalu Kembali," *Pro Kaltara*, 17 December 2015.

this route is unrealistic, and fails to take into account certain realities about migrant movement and Sabah's porous borders. It also suggests how emerging efforts to police this particular "road to Tawau" reflect broader transnational concerns about ongoing developments in the southern Philippines.

## THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CLANDESTINE ROUTES

In April 2017, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi made a two-day official trip to the East Malaysian state of Sabah, visiting the 100,000 square kilometer Eastern Sabah Security Zone (Esszone) established by Prime Minister Najib Razak following the 2013 Lahad Datu Standoff.<sup>2</sup> On 17 April, the Deputy Prime Minister met with Esszon's committee to discuss bolstering border security effectiveness, with special reference to issues of kidnappings, encroachment, and terrorist threats from the southern Philippines.

Recent policing of Esszone—which encompasses Sabah's Tawau, Semporna, Kunak, Lahad Datu, Kinabatangan, Sandakan, Beluran, Pitas, Kota Marudu, and Kudat districts—has witnessed a slew of successes, and Tawau's Joint Forces Headquarters announced in April that no encroachment by Sulu militants had been detected since January.<sup>3</sup> In advance of the trilateral Sulu Sea patrols by Indonesian, Malaysian, and Philippine forces that began this June, the Headquarters Commander stated that confronting terrorism, militancy, and the cross-border flows of illegal drugs and firearms remains the highest security priority. The Commander explained that curbing the flow of undocumented immigrants is far less critical from a security perspective, characterizing these flows as a reflex of transnational kinship networks and longstanding patterns of mobility and barter trade.

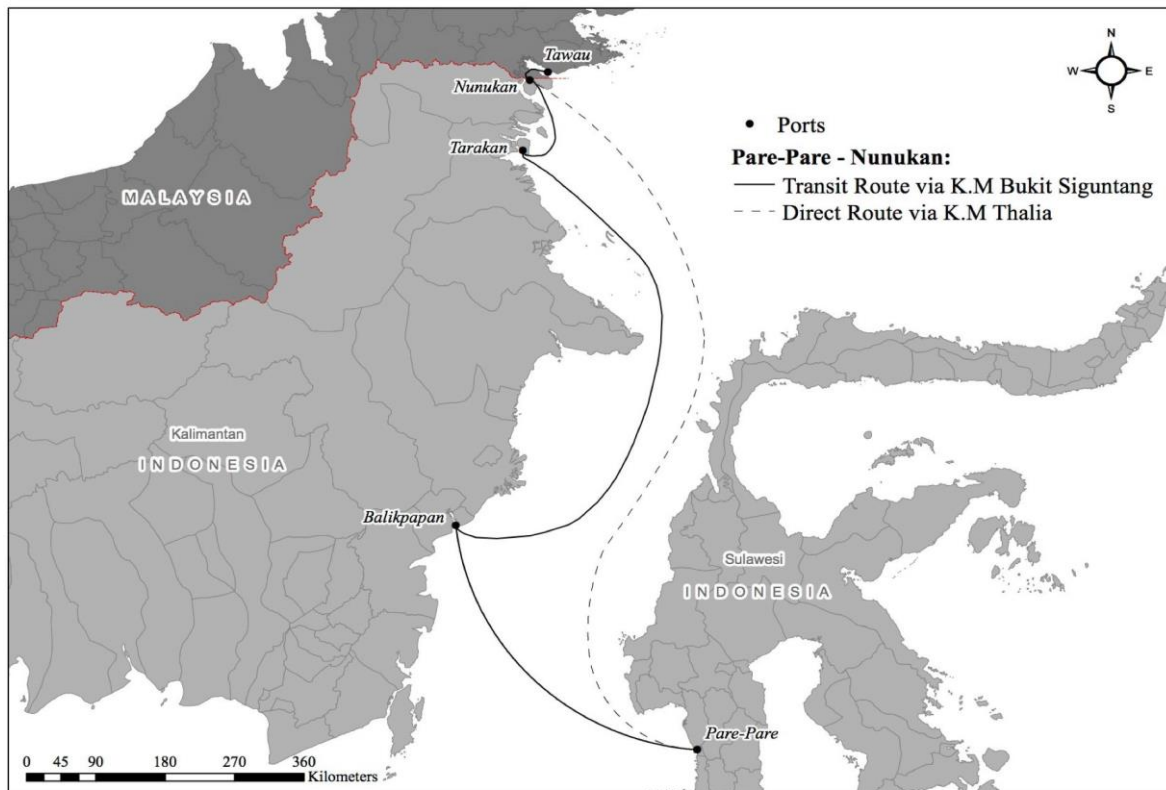
There are two distinct cross-border clandestine flows to Sabah, and both are rooted in historical processes. The first is from the Sulu archipelago in the southern Philippines. Migration from Sulu to Sabah began in the fifteenth century due to the displacing effects of Spanish colonization, with a second wave occurring in 1970-1977 due to the Mindanao insurgency, and a third occurring from 1978 onward. Migrants in the second wave settled in Sabah as political refugees, while those who followed in the third and largest wave were considered "illegal," newly ineligible for refugee status due to a peace treaty signed between the southern Philippines' Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippines government.<sup>4</sup> Today, many Sabahans are wary of ethnically Suluk/Tausug and Bajau immigrants from Sulu due to the 2013 Lahad Datu standoff and concerns about ongoing terrorist activity in the region.

---

<sup>2</sup> Two-hundred thirty members of the "Royal Security Forces of the Sultanate of Sulu" moored their boats in Lahad Datu on 11 February 2013 as part of a sovereignty claim over Sabah. Militants engaged in skirmishes with Malaysian forces, before being repelled on 24 March.

<sup>3</sup> In December 2016, General Operations Forces foiled an attempted kidnapping in Semporna and killed Ibrahim Hamid, a core operative within Abu Sayyaf. In March 2017, Esscom reported that three Malaysians kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf terrorists off Lahad Datu's waters had been rescued by Filipino forces off the Sulu archipelago, testifying to the boons of ongoing collaborative security measures taken by Malaysian and Filipino commands.

<sup>4</sup> See Kamal Sadiq (2010), *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press: Pp. 46-48.



**Figure 1:** Ferry routes from Pare-Pare, South Sulawesi to Nunukan on the Indonesia-Malaysia border (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project).

The second flow has its origins in Indonesia, and is most closely associated with the migratory patterns of the Bugis — a people renowned as much for their seafaring spirit as for their assimilatory strategies. From their ancestral home in today’s South Sulawesi province, the Bugis have long migrated and settled throughout Southeast Asia in search of socio-economic advantage. In the nineteenth century, they began traversing Borneo’s east coast, eventually settling in Tawau in the north. The trading and plantation communities they developed there grew to such a degree that by 1915, the British North Borneo Herald characterized their settlement in the area as “Bugis Town,” praising them for their industriousness.

Today, Bugis migrants from South Sulawesi no longer sail their traditional schooners to Tawau, a district widely known as a Bugis enclave. Rather, they take Indonesian ferries from Pare-Pare, a South Sulawesi port city, to Nunukan, a regency in the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan on the Indonesia-Malaysia border (see Figure 1). From there, migrants who intend to enter Sabah have two options: enter by way of one officially-sanctioned channel, or consult networks of informal migration brokers or family members who aid their entrance by way of illicit cross-border channels.

## THE ROAD TO TAWAU

After arriving in Nunukan, Bugis migrants disembark at Tunon Taka port. Migrants seeking documented employment in Tawau will then go to Nunukan proper, where they arrange relevant contractual documents enabling them to work in Sabah. Some plantation companies like Sime Darby have Nunukan-based agents and offices that facilitate this process. Once these arrangements are taken care of, migrants return to Tunon Taka port, where they select from seven available ferries that travel daily to Tawau. One-way tickets cost IDR 200,000 (S\$20.69), plus an additional port tax of IDR 15,000 (S\$1.55). After boarding, ferries cross the international maritime border and navigate Wallace Bay. Nearing Malaysia's coastline, ferries are regularly stopped by Malaysian Marine Police, who enter the vessels and inspect travel documents, sometimes detaining passengers (See Figure 2; See also Figure 3). Ferries then dock at Tawau's new port terminal that began operating in December 2016, where they undergo immigration processing. The one-way trip takes about one hour.

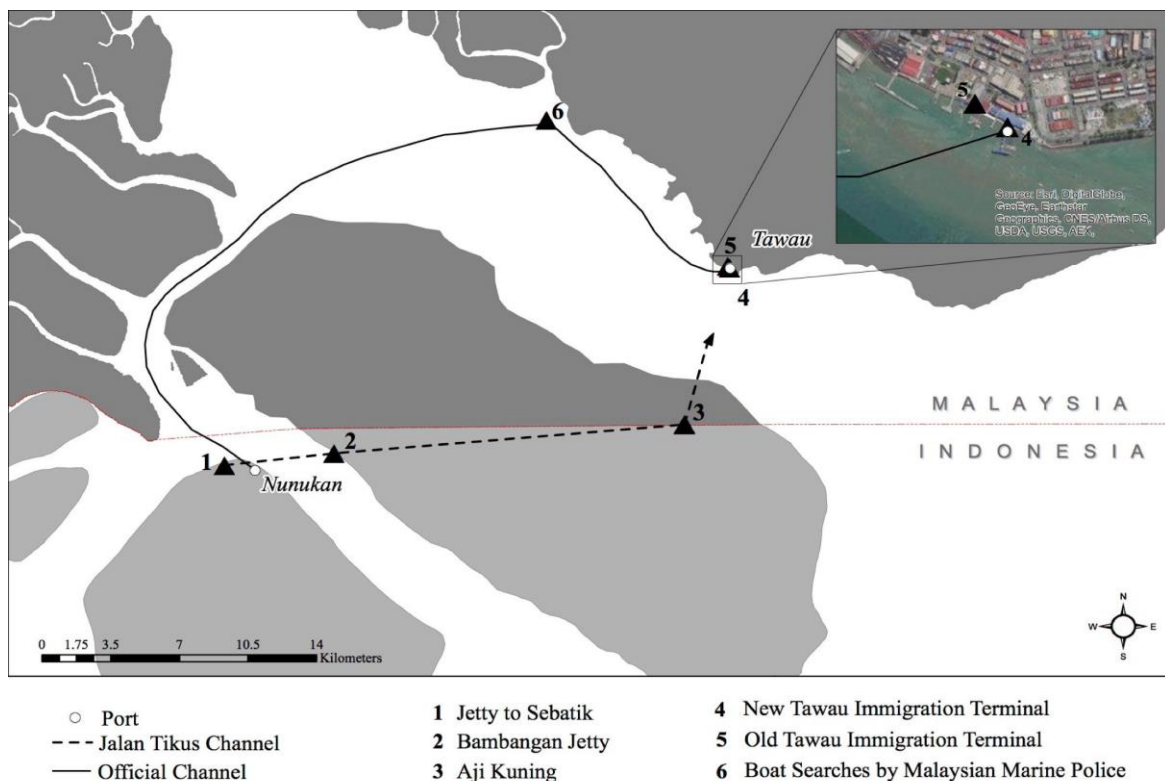
Many Bugis migrants, however, will forego this "official" route, instead availing themselves of a multitude of clandestine channels that cut across the Indonesia-Malaysia border. I highlight one well-known channel here, which has figured in recent controversies surrounding clandestine cross-border movement.

Like the official route, the clandestine channel detailed here begins when migrants disembark from Thalia and Bukit Siguntang ferries at Tunon Taka port (See Figure 3). From there, they move west to a small jetty, where they take speedboats at a cost of less than IDR 50,000 (S\$5.17) to Bambang on adjacent Sebatik, an island renowned for the Indonesia-Malaysia border that divides it cleanly in half. They then travel to Aji Kuning, a town straddling the border, where (depending on patrols), they may walk freely into Malaysia. On the Malaysian side, they take boats which bring them along Sebatik's rivers and into the bay adjacent to Tawau. Using situational awareness of maritime policing patterns, speedboat captains then deposit passengers somewhere along Tawau's coastline, sometimes in bustling areas like Tawau's old immigration terminal, other times in less busy settings. Migrants with family contacts or knowledge of these routes may only pay a nominal fee to speedboat captains (up to RM50 or S\$16.10). For these more experienced migrants, the clandestine channel is cheaper and potentially faster than the official one, enabling them to bypass a lengthy immigration process. In contrast, more wary undocumented migrants may enlist the services of *callo*' or migration brokers who "smuggle" them across the border, paying — according to one Malaysian official — as much as RM2000 (S\$644.19) for their journey.

This route has been the object of three controversies over the past year. In September 2016, a ten-minute video was produced by an Indonesian TransMedia investigative journalist who posed as an undocumented immigrant and—armed with a hidden camera—demonstrated the ease with which Indonesian migrants slip past Sabah's porous maritime borders. Joining Bugis immigrants from South Sulawesi, the journalist travelled from Nunukan to Tawau, allegedly gaining entry by offering security officials RM50 to RM100 (S\$16.10 to S\$32.21).



**Figure 2:** Malaysia’s Marine Police perform a regular inspection of passenger ferry Mid East Express as it approaches Tawau (Photograph by the author).



**Figure 3:** Official and Clandestine “Roads to Tawau” (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project).

The undercover video circulated widely on social media and provoked embarrassment and outrage in Malaysia. It allegedly led Sabah to impose a two-week interregnum of cross-border movement and trade, which according to informants, had tangible socio-economic effects on the Indonesian side of Sebatik.

The second controversy was a tragic one. In January 2017, a boat carrying forty undocumented Bugis Indonesian migrants departed for Sebatik Island. Rather than traversing a closely-monitored Tawau-Nunukan official channel, the ferry departed from an undisclosed location in Tawau under the cover of darkness. Due to overcrowding and stormy conditions, the ferry capsized, and all but one passenger drowned. Uncensored

images of dead women and children floating in the sea off Sebatik Island circulated on messenger applications and social media. This tragic event highlights the humanitarian challenges posed by clandestine movement along unsanctioned channels.

The third issue surrounds the controversial idea to build a concrete wall along the Malaysian side of the Indonesia-Malaysia border on Sebatik. Intended to cut off clandestine cross-border movement and trade, this Trump-esque proposal was put forth by Sabah assemblyman Datuk Abdul Muis Picho, and is supported by Member of Parliament Darell Leiking. Just as U.S. President Donald J. Trump's mandate to "build a big, beautiful wall" on the US-Mexico border has been internationally panned by scholars, security analysts, politicians, and journalists, the proposal for Sebatik Island is equally worthy of sober critique.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say, the Sebatik proposal fails to take into account the everyday realities of clandestine cross-border mobility.

### **OF WALLS AND REALITIES: IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL (STILL) COME**

The Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor has been characterized as a setting for some of the largest clandestine migrant flows in the world.<sup>6</sup> I have sketched one particular cross-border flow here – that of Bugis Indonesian migrants from South Sulawesi to Sabah – to provide a grounded snapshot of these large-scale dynamics. Two final points regarding Sabah's ongoing efforts to police the Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor may be made here.

First, calls for a costly border wall stretching across Sebatik Island are diagnostic of Sabahans' growing frustrations with their state's porous borders, but the proposal – if it turns out to be more than mere rhetoric – should be shelved. While the Sebatik route is perhaps the best-known clandestine channel, an estimated thousand alternatives would remain open, especially cross-border land and river routes leading from Nunukan to Sabah's Kalabakan constituency. Furthermore, one Malaysian researcher informed me that her Bugis respondents on Sebatik would consider such a wall as a kind of symbolic reminder that there is "more" to be had in Malaysia. This suggests that the wall would potentially backfire, motivating rather than discouraging migrant movement. It would do little to curb longstanding patterns of Bugis migration that reflect and are shaped by transnational kinship networks and socio-economic aspirations.

Second, Malaysian respondents allege that state forces have differentially policed the two clandestine flows leading to Sabah, with greater emphasis on securing routes from Sulu rather than those from Nunukan. This is due to security reasons and perceived threats associated with migrants from the southern Philippines, a place embroiled in conflict and ongoing terrorist activity. In response, Suluk/Tausug migrants have allegedly begun

---

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the many critiques of Trump's proposal, see Jorge Ramos, "Donald Trump's Wall Is Totally Useless," *TIME*, 28 January 2017 (<http://time.com/4652648/jorge-ramos-donald-trump-wall-useless/>).

<sup>6</sup> For demographics see Graeme Hugo (2007), "Indonesia's Labor Looks Abroad," Migration Policy Institute. See also Kevin McGahan (2008), "Managing Migration: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement and Border Controls in Malaysia." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

traversing clandestine Nunukan-Tawau routes, accompanying and posing as Bugis migrants. Assessments of potential security risks remain to be seen, but Indonesian forces have reportedly intensified patrols on Sebatik, and immigration in Nunukan has begun more rigorous background checks before issuing passports and travel documents.

In the meantime, however, policy should be placed on reinforcing pre-existing migration controls, and immigration officials concerned with illicit cross-border movement should publicly emphasize the boons of officially-sanctioned routes versus the potential risks and hazards of unsanctioned channels.

<p><b>ISEAS Perspective</b> is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, and Veena Nair</p>
---	--	--