

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S WEAK BUT RESILIENT AND EVOLVING THREAT ENVIRONMENT

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Southeast Asia's Weak but Resilient and Evolving Threat Environment

After the collapse of the so-called Islamic State (IS)'s territorial Caliphate in the Middle East and the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy and travel movements, the Southeast Asian terrorist landscape has weakened significantly. Likewise, successful counterterrorism operations of regional states, sharp monitoring of the cyberspace, actionable intelligence disrupting terrorist plots as well as arrests and surrenders of militants across Southeast Asia have also contributed to the declining trend of terrorism. However, the terrorist threat persists, evolving along different trajectories and becoming more diffuse and difficult to detect.

The appeal of IS's ideological narrative has arguably weakened among some Southeast Asian violent extremist groups. Moreover, the region's oldest and most organised jihadist network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), has seemingly moved away from violence, although it still harbours ambitions of establishing a radical Islamic state in Indonesia. Growing religious conservatism has also increased the influence of some regional hardline Islamist groups, and attempts by some states to marginalise them, which potentially has a further radicalisation effect.

Likewise, the Southeast Asian diasporic networks, particularly those in Syrian camps with active exposure to IS' propaganda, constitute future asymmetric security threats to the region. Against this backdrop, the current issue features five articles looking into various dimensions of the Southeast Asian threat landscape, discussing its evolution and future trajectories.

The first article by **Navhat Nuraniyah** examines the variation in Islamists' responses to state repression following the 2016 anti-Ahok mass mobilisation in Indonesia. Focusing on the case studies of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the author explores why the former chose strategic withdrawal and the latter overt resistance. She argues that organisational dynamics and characteristics provide a better explanation for radicalisation, or a lack thereof, compared to external clampdowns or theological doctrine. The article also considers the potential for militant splinters in both groups, pointing to FPI as carrying a higher risk of producing violent offshoots.

Next, **Amy Chew** studies the evolution of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s tactics since Para Wijayanto's leadership. From the violent attacks of the past, the group increasingly today seeks to infiltrate state institutions such as political parties, mass organisations and government agencies, among others, to further its cause. The author highlights a number of recent arrests to underscore the spread of JI's influence across Indonesia's political, religious and social spheres.

Potential strategies to mitigate JI's security threat are also discussed, especially in the lead-up to the 2024 legislative and presidential elections.

The third article by **Nur Huda Ismail** explores radicalisation among segments of Indonesia's diaspora community, in conjunction with the proliferation of social media and the shift in the Islamic State (IS)'s online strategy to promote a decentralised virtual caliphate. The author identifies two particular groups, Indonesian domestic migrant workers and Indonesian nationals in Syrian displaced persons camps, as vulnerable targets of online pro-IS propaganda. He concludes by underscoring the need to amplify the credible voices of moderate Islamic groups and rehabilitated former militants to counter radical narratives online.

In the fourth article, **Rueben Dass** and **Thomas Koruth Samuel** study the decrease in terrorism-related activity in Malaysia since the pandemic. According to the authors, the country remains a potential target for terrorist groups, even as security services have assessed them to currently have limited abilities to carry out attacks. This is attributed to the elimination of influential Malaysian terrorist leaders, the dismantling of terrorist cells, and the movement disruptions caused by the pandemic. Nonetheless, Malaysian authorities remain cautious and proactive in their counter-terrorism efforts.

Finally, **Nurhati Tangging** and **Kenneth Yeo** evaluate the combatant surrender programme in the Philippines that was initiated in 2018. The programme has facilitated the reintegration of a number of terrorist surrenders, particularly between 2020 and 2022. The study explores the motivations of terrorists, highlighting factors such as exposure to violence and coercion. It also examines the terminology used for surrendered combatants and the rehabilitation efforts by local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The research concludes that the programme effectively reduces terrorism but challenges persist, including the need for continued government financial support to ensure its sustainability, and alternative funding options.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via <https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd>

Repressed Therefore Radicalised? Explaining Variation in Islamists’ Responses to State Repression in Indonesia

Navhat Nuraniyah

When the Indonesian government proscribed the non-violent Islamist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in May 2017, some observers warned of the “radicalising effects” of repression.¹ The banning of traditionalist Islamist group, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), in late 2020 also raised concerns over potential backlash.² The country’s largest moderate Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), even urged its followers to remain vigilant against the latent threat of “ex-HTI and ex-FPI” members who “continued to operate underground”.³ This article goes beyond such unsubstantiated claims to investigate how HTI and FPI have actually adapted to the changing political environment and what explains their divergent tactics. It also assesses the potential for militant splinters.

Introduction

In late 2016, Indonesia’s various Islamist movements jointly organised a mass mobilisation that toppled Jakarta’s then Christian-Chinese governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a close ally of President Joko Widodo. Since then, these groups have fractured over whether or not to keep up political opposition against the Jokowi government. This is best illustrated through the cases of HTI and FPI. Broadly speaking, the former chose strategic withdrawal and the latter overt resistance. While both groups avowedly condemn terrorism, this article argues that FPI, which advocates *shariah* implementation within the existing Pancasila-based Indonesian Republic, has a higher risk of producing violent splinters than HTI. This may sound counterintuitive since HTI is ideologically more radical, given its aspiration to replace the nation-state system with a transnational caliphate.

Two factors are proposed to explain the variation: a) organisational goals and identity; and b) leadership and organisational structure. HTI defines itself as an “intellectual-political movement” with a long-term goal of raising awareness among Muslims to establish a caliphate. It prioritises meaningful cadreisation over fleeting mobilisation and thus prefers temporary retreat for the sake of endurance. FPI’s identity as a “fighter of immorality”⁴ signifies a short-term orientation to combat perceived deviance through direct political actions. FPI’s unique mission and characteristics therefore hinge on its continued visibility and contentious activism.

Further, HTI’s formal hierarchical structure enables the organisation to enforce decisions upon its members, while its culture of discipline safeguards against radical offshoots that deviate from the non-violent principle. In contrast, FPI’s informal, charismatic style accommodates the fluid relationship between members and mere sympathisers who are bound together by affective ties to FPI’s Supreme Imam, Habib Rizieq Shihab. Rizieq’s arrest in 2020 provoked visceral reactions among members and sympathisers alike, some of whom turned to terrorist tactics, as evidenced by FPI’s Condet splinter.

The data used in this article was collected through dozens of interviews and participant observations with Islamist activists during this author’s fieldwork in 2022. By comparing FPI and HTI, the article seeks to shed light on the overlooked radicalisation of traditionalists – often considered ‘tolerant’

alternatives to ‘Salafi violence’ – while critically assessing the security threat posed by the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) movement.⁵ The article begins with a brief discussion of repression-dissent literature before proceeding with an analysis of the two case studies.

Bringing Back Islamists’ Agency Into Repression-Dissent Nexus

In social movement literature, repression has been found to generate backlash,⁶ radicalisation,⁷ decline and death of mobilisation.⁸ To explain the variation, early research focused “on the environmental facilitation or suppression of movement activity rather than on internal characteristics or dynamics of the movement themselves”.⁹ The structural factors said to determine its effects include the intensity and form of repression;¹⁰ its timing in the protest cycle;¹¹ and regime type.¹² However, as Johnston argues, even in highly authoritarian regimes with no obvious change in political opportunity structure, activists have nurtured a “contentious cultural code” in ostensibly apolitical associations, such as the Boy Scouts movement and community centres.¹³ Recent scholarship has thus placed a greater emphasis on the agency of activists and groups in manoeuvring the political environment.

For instance, Gade’s study of the Lebanese Tawhid Movement details how severe repression led to the continuity but also the fragmentation of the militant Islamist alliance, with sub-groups choosing different pathways: disengagement, strategic retreat, co-optation and arena shift.¹⁴ In Egypt, Al-Anani distinguishes between the Muslim Brotherhood’s formal and informal responses to repression after the 2013 coup. The former was shaped by institutional factors – e.g., organisational adaptation and leadership – while the latter had to do with activists’ experiences and emotions.¹⁵ Alsoos attributes Hamas’ longevity despite repression to its organising strategies instead of ideology or environment.¹⁶ However, these studies have tended to focus more on the causality of organisational resilience rather than explaining responses to repression. As such, this article seeks to extrapolate the reasons behind organisational adaptation strategy in the face of state repression.

This article also draws on and contributes to the wider scholarship on the radicalisation of HT and traditionalists (including Sufis).¹⁷ The known cases of HT members’ radicalisation outside the Middle East are arguably related to the emergence of viable Islamist alternatives instead of political repression. For instance, HT Britain’s former leader, Omar Bakri Muhammad, had long expressed ideological dissatisfaction with the organisation but did not leave until he managed to form a new extremist group, Al-Muhajiroun.¹⁸ Indonesia has seen only a handful of cases of former HTI members crossing over to terrorist groups, particularly the Islamic State (IS).¹⁹

As regards traditionalists and Sufis, contemporary media and Western countries often depict them as the peaceful antithesis to Salafi radicalism.²⁰ Yet historical evidence suggests that Sufis could resort to militant tactics when under threat. In Indonesia, the traditionalist NU partook in the 1965 communist purge in what they described as a “kill or be killed” situation.²¹ However, NU’s forceful move against the Indonesian Communist Party then would not have been possible without the prior convergence of accommodationist and militant anti-communist factions within the group, indicating the importance of internal dynamics in determining threat perception and response.²²

In Libya and Algeria, Sufi orders mounted an anti-colonial struggle not only to challenge imperial tyranny, but also because the “jihad helped resolve matters of leadership and legitimacy” within the movement.²³ Hence, it can be argued that, more than theological doctrines or external oppression, organisational dynamics and characteristics provide a better explanation for radicalisation (or a lack thereof).

HTI’s Strategic Withdrawal

Founded in Palestine in 1953, Hizb ut-Tahrir is a transnational movement aimed at “bringing the Muslims back to living an Islamic way of life...which is the Khilafah state”.²⁴ It was introduced in

Indonesia in 1980 by a Lebanese-Australian preacher and spread through university *dakwah* (Islamic proselytisation) circles.²⁵ The country's democratic transition in 1998 created space for underground *dakwah* groups such as HTI to surface. Having registered as a mass organisation in 2004, HTI gained prominence after organising the 2007 International Caliphate Conference in Jakarta, which it claimed attracted 100,000 participants. The group has a knack for mobilising orderly protests and played an active role in the 2016 anti-Ahok mobilisation, which ultimately triggered its revocation by the authorities.²⁶

This section argues that HTI's strategic withdrawal comprises three elements: minimising mass mobilisation; resorting to "seamless *dakwah*" through front organisations; and mounting intellectual – instead of reactionary – opposition.²⁷

In May 2017, around the same time as Ahok's blasphemy conviction, the government revoked HTI's legal status on account of violating Pancasila, the pluralist state ideology.²⁸ Accompanying its dissolution was institutional stigmatisation, which saw HTI sympathisers being sacked from or intimidated by state universities, schools and government institutions. At first, HTI heeded the state policy, closing its offices and freezing all activities and media publications for a few months. However, HTI later challenged the proscription through judicial mechanisms – to no avail. To increase pressure on the government during the trial, HTI orchestrated small demonstrations by utilising different names, such as the Palembang Student Alliance for National Care and Tangerang Muslim Alliance.²⁹

By 2018, HTI had halted its flagship Black Flag Parade commemorating the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate. Its public activities are now limited to the celebration of Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, and even then, they no longer display the HTI logo and have substituted the term "khilafah" with "Islam Kaffah" (comprehensive Islam). For politically-themed mobilisation, HTI has carefully operated through cover outfits, notably the Alliance for Muslim Mass Organisations (AOMI) and Pelita Umat Legal Aid.³⁰

Apart from camouflaged protests, HTI has also exercised seamless *dakwah* to win over Muslim society by downplaying its organisational identity while appropriating the culture of existing Islamic streams in Indonesia. Before its forced disbandment, HTI had a Special Committee for Ulama to influence and recruit popular Muslim preachers (*ustaz*). While forming affiliate groups was not new to HTI, the banning made them even more expansive. HTI figures have founded new associations and educational institutions to suit major segments of Indonesian Muslim society. For instance, to infiltrate NU's traditionalist base, in 2019 HTI founded Multaqa Ulama Aswaja, headed by a descendant of the venerated Madurese saint Kyai Kholil Bangkalan.³¹

The pandemic did not affect the Multaqa's productivity, as they held over 100 conferences livestreamed through their YouTube channel and website.³² Former HTI chairman Hafidz Abdurrahman currently runs an Islamic boarding school, Ma'had Syaraful Haramain, whose name and curriculum bear a resemblance to Salafi schools.³³ The urban youth types in HTI have also formed their own outfits, such as the Islamic Literacy Community (KLI), which produced *Historical Traces of the Caliphate in the Archipelago (Jejak Khilafah di Nusantara)*, a propaganda movie masked as a historical documentary.³⁴

The rationale for seamless *dakwah* and camouflaged opposition lies in the long-term mission and characteristics of the organisation. In the author's interviews with HTI members and leaders, they tended to emphasise HTI's uniqueness compared to other Islamist movements, namely, seeking a systemic change through politico-intellectual struggle by closely following the Prophet Muhammad's political method.³⁵ When asked why HTI did not mount a confrontational resistance, one grassroots activist said:

We're different from FPI, which likes to use vulgar language in their demonstrations [and] very crude methods... That's just not us. In HT, we conduct political *dakwah* with intellectual

arguments and [in a] wise manner... *Dakwah* must go on, regardless of state pressure. However, we believe that when *dakwah* is not yet backed by political power, we must follow the Prophet's method during the Mecca Phase. Muslims [then] were severely oppressed, but he didn't fight back because they [were] still weak. It was different after they established power in Medina. Our situation now is like the Mecca Phase, if we fight back, we'd die in vain.³⁶

A former HTI leader in Central Java described HTI's response as "hidden resistance", stating that it is more suitable to its mission than reactionary dissent. He also said that a systemic change requires patience, since it takes time to make people understand and accept HTI's comprehensive concepts.³⁷ A HTI spokesperson further elucidated that hidden resistance is carried out through a web of "informal networks" such as schools, media and think tanks, which may not bear HTI's name but quietly penetrate society.³⁸ This is in line with HT's goal, as outlined by al-Nabhani, of "assuming power by taking control of and leading society".³⁹

To win the society over to its ideas, HT has relied on two methods: dialogues to entice influential members of society; and mass media to propagate messages "attacking relations between the ruling elites and the people".⁴⁰ From its perspective, once the ideational foundations of democracy and capitalism are shattered, the society can then be induced to support a caliphate state. In accordance with the movement's long-term goals and characteristics, HTI's *Al-Wa'ie* journal outlined the following ways to resist regime repression:

Instilling political awareness in the *ummah*... uncovering the evil plots of the regime [by] waging an intellectual and political resistance [and] reminding [the rulers] about the errors in their action.⁴¹

HTI has been able to enforce its policies through stringent oversight and disciplinary measures, thus lowering the risk of radical elements. Some prominent figures such as Muhammad al-Khaththath were expelled when the protests they led turned violent.⁴² Ordinary members reported that if they went against the organisation's policies, they would receive a warning letter and be suspended from weekly meetings.⁴³ To date, very few ex-HTI individuals have engaged in terrorism, and those who have only did so when rival groups that provided more convincing caliphate alternatives emerged. This was the case with Bahrun Naim and a handful of HTI youth, who joined the Islamic State (IS) after its caliphate declaration in 2014 because they considered it more successful than HT. In other words, radicalisation within HTI can be attributed more to political opportunities than curtailment. And even then, HTI swiftly mitigated against further radicalisation by publicising an official ruling by its Lebanon headquarters, which discouraged international HT members from joining armed resistance in Syria.⁴⁴

FPI: Between Open resistance and Violence

Established in 1998, FPI has a lot in common with NU in terms of theology and ritualistic practices.⁴⁵ However, whilst NU has cultivated a moderate image, FPI has proudly performed 'symbolic violence' to pursue its mission of "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*)".⁴⁶ FPI and HTI both claimed credit for the anti-Ahok mobilisation and indeed, compared to other Islamists, they received the toughest treatment from the government. However, no HTI leader could match the charisma of Habib Rizieq Shihab, FPI's leader, who is revered as "Grand Imam" by Islamist activists both within and outside FPI.

Consequently, the state not only dissolved and stigmatised FPI, but also went after its charismatic leader, setting off a chain of severe measures: legal harassment that drove Rizieq into exile in 2017; weaponisation of the COVID-19 pandemic to justify his arrest; and police pursuit of Rizieq which led to the extrajudicial killing of his bodyguards in late 2020.⁴⁷ FPI, as its new leader stated, primarily responded through "open resistance within the legal parameters" i.e., eschewing violent methods.⁴⁸

However, as will be explained below, the leadership has not always been effective in controlling the behaviour of its followers, especially when their supreme Imam was persecuted.

On December 30, 2020, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Mahfud MD announced a Joint Ministerial Decree which declared FPI a “prohibited organisation”, stating that the group had conducted illegal anti-vice raids and that 35 of its former members had been involved in terrorism.⁴⁹ FPI’s secretary Munarman was subsequently arrested for alleged links to IS. Experts contend that while FPI was indeed guilty of vigilantism, Munarman’s terrorism charge was unfounded.⁵⁰ On January 1, 2021, FPI formed a new organisation with a slightly different name – from the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) to the Islamic Brotherhood Front (also FPI). As of early 2023, FPI is headed by Rizieq’s son-in-law, who has expanded its structures across 17 provinces.⁵¹

This ‘resistance through formation’ has also become a preferred tactic of opposition groups in Iran, whereby activists show defiance by simply existing as aboveground movements despite official restrictions.⁵² One FPI figurehead said that, even during the height of repression, such as when the police shot dead six FPI guards who had been protecting Rizieq from arrest, they never considered laying low because it ran against their nature.⁵³ As he put it:

We don’t want to become an underground movement; we’d rather choose the straight path. Ironically, HTI, the so-called “radical” group, has proven more obedient to the government. When the government disbanded them, they took their logos off and closed [their office]. But we resurfaced instantaneously. Because you’ve got to be visible to perform “enjoining the good and forbidding the evil”. Because forbidding the evil (*nahi munkar*) is what sets us apart from other Islamic movements... As long as the government is unjust, we [will] fight them.⁵⁴

Although FPI has been weakened by disbandment, freezing of assets and arrests of leaders, the group has carried on with its public activities, including demonstrations. Since 2021, FPI and its affiliate group, the Brotherhood of 212 Alumni (an organisation founded by former anti-Ahok activists), have organised dozens of demonstrations against government policies and statements, in addition to several protests directed at foreign embassies. During the annual anniversary of the anti-Ahok mobilisation on November 4, 2022, FPI organised a rally near the National Monument with the tagline: “Jokowi Step Down!”⁵⁵

FPI’s social media narratives are also filled with vocal criticisms of Jokowi and state security forces, highlighting the victimisation and ‘martyrdom’ of FPI guards at the hands of the police. One Telegram post even remarked that the police deserved *qisas* (Islamic retributive justice) for the shootings,⁵⁶ though FPI media was quick to add that they did not advocate physical revenge, but simply through prayer. The Telegram channel clarified:

One of the infidel policemen who executed six FPI martyrs unexpectedly died. God-willing...the rest of those responsible will follow suit! Let’s recite *Surah Yaseen* 41 times to beg for God’s retribution, may Allah destroy them to pieces and make them die in disdain.⁵⁷

The arrest of Rizieq right after the shooting incident in December 2020 further enraged his followers. Some FPI members in Jakarta admitted that the night Rizieq was apprehended, they stayed up waiting for orders to attack police officers with magical “spiked bamboo that’s been filled with prayers”.⁵⁸ They were disappointed that FPI leadership did not give them the green light to do so. Some of them subsequently joined a radical cell led by Habib Husein Hasni of Condet, East Jakarta. Hasni had previously been expelled from FPI, but continued to venerate Rizieq and therefore still commanded respect among FPI’s rank and file.⁵⁹ The caution of FPI’s formal leadership only emboldened the Condet cell, because they believed that only they could save their Imam. In early 2021, they plotted terror attacks targeting the police and Chinese-owned businesses, all of which were foiled by Indonesia’s counter terrorism police. To be sure, FPI did not condone the Condet plot, but neither did

it take the radicalisation problem seriously. Instead of acknowledging and mitigating the risk of radicalisation, an FPI spokesperson dismissed the entire Condet cell as “intelligence lackeys” bent on infiltrating and framing FPI.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The variation in Islamists’ responses to state repression is best understood as a function of their internal characteristics, particularly the degree of strategic thinking imbued in their sense of self, organisational structure and leadership. Strategic restraint has been preferable to HTI as it serves their broader mission of cultivating public opinion in favour of a caliphate and aligns with their identity as a non-violent intellectual movement. The alternative, in their view, would lead to even more severe crackdowns. On the other hand, FPI has shown unyielding resolve because anything short of overt mobilisation would betray their very identity as an evil-combating force. Whilst some pundits have raised the threat of HTI’s radicalisation, the evidence indicates that very few HTI members have crossed over to terrorism.

The risk is even lower now with IS’ defeat and the lack of viable global caliphate projects. As for FPI, Rizieq’s early release in 2022 seems to have appeased his followers, although technically he is under house arrest until 2024. Reactionary violence may occur if Rizieq is re-arrested or harmed. The lack of technical skills and access to weaponry means that any reactionary violence by FPI individuals would likely employ simple tactics such as arson and Molotov cocktails in potential attack plots.

Before the repressive turn, Rizieq and FPI had been keen to negotiate with the police, whom FPI had considered a useful ally in combating social ills such as gambling. During the anti-Ahok mobilisation, the police was known to have engaged Islamists in a series of dialogues, such that they agreed to allow Islamists to organise a rally if Rizieq could guarantee its peaceful conduct. Now that Rizieq has served his sentence, maintaining a communication line with him would not only allow the authorities to keep a tab on him, but also enable him to help the police by holding off some of his followers’ zealous impulses.

In the lead up to the 2024 elections, Indonesian authorities are understandably worried about the security impact of identity politics, especially Islamists’ electoral mobilisation in favour of certain candidates. However, the fact that FPI and other Islamist groups are still enthusiastic about being involved in the election arguably means that they have a stake in the democratic system, broadly speaking. Therefore, Islamists’ participation in the upcoming elections should be encouraged rather than restricted – that is, as long as they adhere to the democratic rules of the game.

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¹⁷ FPI, like NU, belongs to the traditionalist stream which adheres to the Shafi'i jurisprudential school of thought and the Ash'arite theological school. Unlike puritan Salafis, traditionalists endorse such rituals as visiting graves and celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday. FPI itself is not a Sufi order, but some of its religious leaders and members follow certain orders such as *Tariqat Alawiyya* and *Qadiriyya wa Naqshabandiyya*.

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- ³⁴ Also popular among urban youth are HTI-affiliated 'pop preachers' such as Felix Siau and Fatih Karim, whose YouTube channels have amassed a combined total of 165 million views. In addition to resuming its official publications (*Media Umat* and *Al-Wa'ie*), in 2019, HTI also created several new websites with ostensibly generic names, for example, tintasiyasi.com, lensamedianews.com and topswara.com.
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- ³⁸ Author's interview with an HTI spokesman, Jakarta, November 25, 2022. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, HT does not concentrate on social services because their priority is to change people's minds. In fact, al-Nabhani criticised MB's preoccupation with charity as a distraction from true political struggle.
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parties". That said, HT did not prohibit its members from performing defensive jihad "as an individual obligation" if their country was attacked. Yusanto's statement implied that Indonesian members had no business performing defensive jihad outside their homeland. In practice, HTI surveils the behaviour of its members and does not hesitate from expelling those who flout administrative rules, let alone breach the official ruling of HT headquarters. "Jihad, Antara Kewajiban dan Metode Perubahan," *Visi Muslim News*, July 11, 2013, <https://news.visimuslim.org/2013/07/jihad-antara-kewajiban-dan-metode.html>; "Media Lakukan Penyesatan Opini Terkait Jihad Suriah," *Visi Muslim News*, January 17, 2014, <https://news.visimuslim.org/2014/01/media-lakukan-penyesanan-opini-terkait.html>. See also Ahmad al-Qasas, "Q&A on the Stance of Hizb ut-Tahrir with Regard to Armed Action in Syria's Revolution," May 17, 2013.

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JI's Infiltration of State Institutions in Change of Tactics

Amy Chew

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked militant group behind the devastating 2002 Bali bombings which killed 202 people, is changing tactics in its efforts to turn democratic Indonesia into a puritan Islamic State based on shariah. Where JI once saw armed attacks as part of its struggle, they now see the 'infiltration' of state institutions, political organisations, the military and the police to spread their ideology as a less 'costly' way to achieve their goal.

Introduction

In 2019, little was heard of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the Southeast Asian affiliate of the international terror network Al-Qaeda. The once fearsome group had been severely weakened by continuous raids and arrests by Indonesia's special counter terrorism police, Detachment 88 (Densus 88).¹

While JI was responsible for some of Indonesia's deadliest terror attacks from 1999-2009 – including the devastating 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 202 people in the biggest terror attack in the country to date – the group kept a low profile from 2010 onwards. JI staged its last attack in 2011, when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device at a mosque attended by police officers in Cirebon, West Java. The blast killed the bomber himself and injured some 28 people, most of them from the police force.²

With the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, counter terrorism police turned their focus towards countering threats from pro-IS militants, and little was heard from JI. That was until June 29, 2019, when Indonesian police captured JI's leader Para Wijayanto, then aged 54, who had been on the run since 2003. Para was detained in a hotel in Bekasi, West Java, along with his wife, also an active JI member, and three of his associates.³

Para, known as the "crown prince of JI", was named the militant group's *emir*, or leader, in 2008, owing largely to his good organisational skills, though his knowledge of Islam was limited.⁴ An engineering graduate of Diponegoro University in Semarang, Central Java, Para underwent paramilitary training on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao in early 2000.

Former JI leader Nasir Abas, who had taught Para while serving as an instructor in Mindanao, southern Philippines from 1994-2001, described the latter in an interview with this author, as a bright student and a fast learner who was good with weapons and could also assemble bombs.⁵ Para was involved in the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings across Indonesia as well as the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta.⁶ He is also believed to have been actively involved in terror activities in the eastern city of Poso, Central Sulawesi, from 2005-2007.⁷ Under Para's leadership, over the next decade JI transformed from a radical group living off donations and robberies, to a budding business enterprise with interests in palm oil plantations on the islands of Sumatera and Kalimantan.⁸ JI also actively recruited members and built up a clandestine paramilitary wing in an effort to regenerate and consolidate itself.⁹

In this regard, Para recruited and sent members for combat training in Syria between 2013 and 2018.¹⁰ It is estimated some 100 men – in six waves – were sent between 2012 and 2018 to train with a variety of militias in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and IS, before returning to Indonesia. While about a dozen have since been arrested, an estimated 40 remain at large.

Perhaps most significantly, since taking over JI's leadership in 2008, Para has charted a strategy to infiltrate state institutions in a bid to turn Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country and officially a secular democracy, into an Islamic state. This transformation has marked JI's recovery from near destruction in 2007, when an armed clash with police in Poso led to the arrest of more than 40 JI members, including its top leaders.¹¹

JI's Attempts to Infiltrate State Institutions

From 2008-2009, former JI leader Para set about expanding the group's reach from underground operations to aboveground activities. JI today seeks to influence policies in Indonesia's political, social and religious spheres to support its agenda to implement its version of *shariah* and establish an Islamic state. To that end, since 2010, JI has tried to infiltrate political parties, the military, the police, state-owned enterprises, and the civil service.¹² It has also set up its own political party.

Under JI's "*tamkin* strategy", the group's cadres are sent to infiltrate political parties, mass organisations and government agencies to win the hearts and minds of Muslims, as part of its planned process to take control of regions in Indonesia. One of JI's long-held beliefs is that the country's democratically elected government is "haram", or forbidden, and must be replaced with an Islamic state. JI views the democratic system of governance as a product of the West and based on man-made laws.

According to Para Wijayanto himself, as revealed during police questioning following his detention, the group has "about 6,000 to 7,000 members" spread across government institutions and civil and religious organisations.¹³ Between 2010 and April 2023, a total of 45 civil servants and police and military personnel were arrested for alleged links to militant organisations – mostly from JI – according to data provided by Densus 88.¹⁴ Of the 45, five were from the military, nine from the police force, and 31 from the civil service and state-owned enterprises.

Targeting the Military and Police

Indonesia's military and police force have been targeted for infiltration by JI as both institutions have access to weapons, according to a two-star military general in a recent interview with this author. JI also seeks to influence and radicalise military and police personnel by spreading propaganda that justice in Indonesia can only be upheld via the establishment of a caliphate. The general was of the view that such attempts are a means to gain control of the military's leadership, and that JI is copying the tactics of Indonesia's Communist Party (PKI) back in the 1960s.

If left unchecked, opined the general, it would be a danger to the country. However, he added that to date no JI member has tried to join the military. He also expressed confidence that JI members would not be able to enter the military as fresh recruits owing to the robust and strict vetting processes involved.

The recent arrest of two Indonesian policemen with links to JI is a case in point. On November 15, 2022, Densus 88 arrested two mobile brigade (Brimob) police personnel in Lampung, Sumatra, for alleged links to JI.¹⁵ The two policemen were accused of selling ammunition to a JI member in Lampung. The JI member in question had befriended the two cops while hunting, a hobby shared by all three. Unbeknownst to the policemen, their "hunting comrade" was actually a JI member. And when he asked for ammunition, one of the policemen sold it to him.¹⁶

State-Owned Enterprises

Another institution eyed by JI for infiltration are Indonesia's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), primarily as a potential source of funds. SOEs play an outsized role in a range of critical industries in the country, including electricity, pharmaceuticals, air navigation services, food distribution and logistics, among others. Together, Indonesia's SOEs have US\$600 billion in assets, equivalent to more than half of the country's annual gross domestic product.¹⁷

To date, JI is known to have recruited personnel from SOEs, with at least one individual having been involved in fund-raising for the group. In September 2021, Densus 88 arrested a terror suspect with the initial "S." An officer with one of Indonesia's largest state-owned pharmaceutical companies, Kimia Farma,¹⁸ S was reportedly a fund-raiser for JI's advocacy wing, Perisai Nusantara Esa, which he had joined in 2018. He was subsequently sacked from his job following his arrest.

In November 2019, a supervisor at the giant state-owned PT Krakatau Steel in Banten, West Java, was arrested along with three other men for suspected links to terrorism.¹⁹ The name of the terror group was not disclosed.

Political Parties

JI's political strategy was brought to the fore in November 2021, when Indonesian police arrested Farid Ahmad Okbah, the founder of the Indonesian People's Dakwah Party (Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia, or PDR I), and a suspected member of JI's consultative council.²⁰ His arrest indicated that the group had opened up a political front as part of the operationalisation of its *tamkin* strategy.²¹

Also arrested that same month was Ahmad Zain An-Najah, a member of the *Fatwa* Commission of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesia Ulema Council, or MUI), the nation's top Islamic clerical body.²² Farid and Ahmad Zain, along with a third man arrested, were accused of raising funds for JI.

Farid Okbah

Farid is known to have spread his ideology via social media and seminars. He had briefly trained in Afghanistan and was very close to the *ulamas* in JI's *dakwah* wing. He was also Indonesia's foremost anti-Shia ideologue.²³ In December 2022, a Jakarta court sentenced Farid to three years' jail for terrorism activities.

Ahmad Zain An-Najah

Ahmad Zain, along with two associates, was alleged to have set up a charitable organisation that diverted money to JI. The charity was created to obtain funding ostensibly for social and educational purposes, and part of the funds collected were used to mobilise JI.

JI's Foray into Politics

According to a former JI recruiter interviewed by this author, the group's foray into politics actually began around 2007, with the realisation that it could not "win" the fight to spread its ideology through violent means.²⁴ However, JI encountered difficulties in fielding a strong candidate who could gain popularity and public approval. As such, JI instead embraced segments of the government with whom it deemed it could establish a close rapport.

JI realised it would never win its fight against the government by using violence, as evinced by the 2002 Bali bombings, which were deemed a failure that resulted in the arrests of many of its members, according to the former JI recruiter interviewed. With this new strategy, however, JI now believes it stands a better chance of getting the support of the country's populace without needing to resort to costly terror attacks.²⁵

This strategy was tested in 2016 when JI members joined the mass rallies against the then governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, over remarks on the Quran that were deemed blasphemous by hardline Muslims. JI considered the mass rallies a relative success, as it added to the pressure that subsequently saw Ahok charged and jailed on blasphemy charges.

JI and the 2024 Elections

As Indonesia gears up for the 2024 legislative and presidential elections, there are signs JI is not sitting idly by. On March 13, 2023, the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) found indications that a new political party, which failed the administrative verification process overseen by the General Elections Commission (KPU), was affiliated with a terrorist group, revealed BNPT chief Boy Rafli Amar.²⁶

BNPT's Boy declined to name the party, but said it was linked to a banned organisation that had changed its strategy from "bullets to ballot". Given that JI was banned by the Indonesian authorities in 2008, it is likely that the organisation he referred to is JI.

However, BNPT also assured that, to date, only one out of several that underwent the KPU's verification process showed signs of links to terror organisations.²⁷ Overall, there are 24 newly registered political parties and they are largely free from terror links.

Conclusion

JI is playing the long game. Its well-educated and committed members and well-thought-out, well-executed strategies make it arguably the biggest security threat to democratic Indonesia.

As Indonesia moves closer to the 2024 presidential and legislative elections, JI can be expected to try to approach or cultivate ties with, directly or indirectly, political parties, individuals or politicians who could potentially be elected as leaders.²⁸ JI views these individuals, political parties, politicians, and organisations as entities expedient to the fight for their ideology.

At present, JI still has many supporters and sympathisers whom it could direct to vote for whichever party or candidate who could guarantee its continued survival post-2024 elections. The discovery of political party with links to a terror organisation, that failed the Indonesian election commission's verification process, is a sign of militant groups' attempted forays into politics in Indonesia.

BNPT is continuing its efforts to monitor the movements and activities of individuals connected with the unnamed party in order to prevent it from evolving into a threat to Indonesia and the country's secular national ideology, Pancasila.

A similar approach is needed to monitor and counter extremist propaganda online. In 2022, BNPT's director of deradicalisation, Ahmad Nurwahid, described the spread of radical propaganda on the internet as significant. He estimated some 67 percent of Indonesian content online was filled with intolerant religious teachings. Social media will continue to be weaponised by militant groups to undermine the government and the democratic system of governance, and to spread extremist views and propaganda.

There is also a need to enhance the general public's digital literacy to guard against fake news and extremist propaganda, especially with regard to the older generations, who have been known to share content without verifying its provenance and authenticity. Digital literacy is thus crucial in ensuring future governments are elected based on sound government policies and performance, and not because of extremist propaganda wars waged in cyber space.

About the Author

Amy Chew is a former senior correspondent for Channel News Asia, Reuters Jakarta and other regional publications. She currently writes for Nikkei Asia and Al Jazeera, covering news in Asia and parts of the Middle East, including terrorism, the impact of Russia-Ukraine war on the region and Southeast Asia's transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a green economy.

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Online Radicalisation of the Indonesian Diaspora

Noor Huda Ismail

This article assesses instances of online radicalisation among a fringe of Indonesia's diaspora community. Although not a new phenomenon, the problem has been exacerbated in recent years alongside the proliferation of social media. First, the role of online narratives in radicalising segments of Indonesia's diaspora to partake in terror-related activities is examined. Some potential steps the Indonesian government can take to tackle this issue are then discussed. Mainly, it is argued there is a need to develop a systematic preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) campaign that amplifies positive narratives and credible voices in order to challenge the narratives of radical groups. This should be complemented by efforts to strengthen diplomatic engagement with various host countries of vulnerable Indonesian diaspora communities, so as to build better capabilities to degrade, detect and respond to terror threats.

Background

Social media has greatly diminished the barriers to joining violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS). Since 2014, in tandem with the rise of IS, the global threat landscape has witnessed a shift from "collective action" towards "connective action". The former is characterised by formal organisational control and a stronger collective identity.¹

In such instances, an individual typically first joins an extremist group and is then directed by the group to commit an act of terror. By contrast, the latter, spurred by mediating technologies, tends towards self-organised digital networks with a fluid ideological identity onto which diverse individuals can project themselves.² An individual may join a terror group based on a connection forged over social media, but may never meet a member of said group in real life.

Connective action is especially relevant today given IS has recalibrated its online strategy to promote a decentralised virtual caliphate. Advances in information and communication technology have also amplified the proliferation of extremist ideas online, and exacerbated the funding, movement and recruitment activities of IS and other extremist networks.³

In this regard, radicalisation among vulnerable segments of migrant and refugee communities in parts of the world by IS has come under the spotlight in recent years. While most venture overseas in search of a better life, some migrants can be radicalised owing to a failure to integrate into the host country as well as social, economic and cultural discrimination or marginalisation. In the hands of IS and other terror groups, the internet and social media have become effective tools in the radicalisation process.⁴

Indonesia's diaspora population is estimated at more than 10 million people.⁵ Many Indonesians have ventured abroad for educational advancement, but a significant portion has also taken up jobs as nurses, caregivers, plantation workers, domestic workers, professional workers and more, mainly in parts of Asia, the Middle East and the West. A fringe group of this diaspora has been involved in violent extremism.

While official estimates are scarce, Indonesia's Financial Transaction Report and Analysis Centre, locally known as PPATK, has observed that one of the threats spawned by online radicalisation among the Indonesian diaspora is in relation to terrorism financing activities. The PPATK cited that terrorism financial flows involving the diaspora from overseas into Indonesia are prevalent in the United States (US), Malaysia, Philippines, Australia and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the flow of funds

for terror-related activities from Indonesia overseas has been observed in Malaysia, Philippines, Australia, the US and Singapore.⁶

Indonesia's National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has also estimated that between 2013 and 2017, more than 2,150 Indonesians travelled to the Syria-Iraq theatre to join IS.⁷ As of 2021, there were 115 Indonesians still held in the al-Hol, al-Roj and Ain Issa camps in northeast Syria,⁸ although the actual number could be higher due to the difficulty of verifying identities and nationalities of people in the camps.

This paper identifies two groups in the Indonesian diaspora for whom the virtual space plays a significant role in their experiences of extremism, albeit in different ways. The first, Indonesian domestic migrant workers, can be described as *vulnerable targets* of online radicalisation, in that their experiences abroad make them especially vulnerable to extremist propaganda online. The second, Indonesian nationals in Syrian displaced persons camps, are *resilient producers* of pro-IS online propaganda – in spite of organisational setbacks, counter terrorism efforts, social media takedowns etc., they continue to create, spread and recycle propaganda online – which has security implications beyond Indonesia.

1. Indonesian Domestic Migrant Workers

Radicalisation among segments of Indonesian domestic migrant workers is often a complex, multi-dimensional process. A useful starting point may be to consider the potential link between radicalisation and social marginalisation/alienation.

Individuals who have experienced personal trauma (e.g., abuse, divorce, culture shock) and/or perceived maltreatment by society, can in some instances experience a loss of significance or self-worth. As such, they may be attracted by opportunities to restore their sense of self-significance. This could make them vulnerable to the persuasive rhetoric of extremist groups like IS, which promise honour and eternal martyrdom through (their version of) jihad.

The desire to belong can lead vulnerable individuals, including migrant workers feeling an acute sense of alienation, to join extremist groups. Domestic workers are especially vulnerable as they experience 'dual alienation' – a lack of integration and/or acceptance into the mainstream society of their host country as well as disassociation with their home country and family.

Recent case studies involving Indonesian migrant workers also illustrate how certain vulnerabilities to radicalisation can be rooted in upbringing and family dysfunction. The story of Indonesian domestic migrant worker Ika Puspitasari is a case in point. As the eldest of six from a broken home – her father left the family for another woman and her mother was mentally ill – Ika felt responsible for her family's survival and future, which led her to move overseas to work as a domestic helper in Malaysia and Hong Kong.

With a rural background and limited formal education, Ika experienced "a culture shock" when she arrived in Hong Kong. She turned to alcohol, drugs and romantic relationships to "escape" from her "life problems". However, she later felt great remorse over her "many sins" and went on social media to try to learn more about Islam.⁹ There, she was gradually exposed to the narratives of IS, which seemed to offer her an instant solution to absolution and redemption.¹⁰

In 2014, when former IS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the Caliph and the group controlled swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, Ika felt attracted to the idea of living in a caliphate governed under *shariah*. To demonstrate her support of IS, she changed her clothing style and friendship circle. She also uncritically consumed IS narratives almost every day.

In mid-2016, she decided to plan and conduct a terror attack, aided by her online IS group and husband, whom she had met online and subsequently married. They created a dedicated group on Telegram and appointed a member named Azzam, to fulfil the suicide mission. However, this

plan was disrupted by the Indonesian police and Azzam was placed on a 'wanted list'. Having already invested (financially and psychologically) in the operation, Ika volunteered to replace Azzam as the suicide bomber.

The plan was foiled again when her husband and other members of the online IS group were arrested in mid-2016. Ika was later deported from Hong Kong in October 2016. Back in Indonesia, she planned for another suicide bombing in Bali on New Year's Eve, but was arrested by the Indonesian authorities in December 2016 before she could realise the attack.

Ika's radicalisation process took place solely within the online space – she "never met any of the people from the *Daulah* (the name for IS supporters in Indonesia)".¹¹ But Ika's case is not exceptional.

An earlier 2017 report by the Institute for the Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) identified at least 50 Indonesian domestic workers who had taken part in online extremist discussion groups – 43 in Hong Kong, four in Singapore and three in Taiwan.¹² Many had embarked on the pathway of radicalisation to violent extremism via jihadi social media (with the war in Syria a particular lodestone). They were then drawn further into pro-IS networks through personal relationships with militants online, some of whom later became their boyfriends and husbands.¹³ Over time, these women were groomed into propagandists, liaisons, financiers and would-be suicide bombers.¹⁴

By mid-2017, of these 50 domestic workers, four had travelled to Syria to join IS, 16 had returned to Indonesia, and eight were deported from the abovementioned host countries or from Turkey while en route to Syria.¹⁵

Although small in number, the cases above illustrate the correlation between exposure to marginalisation (which migrant workers often face) and vulnerability to the radical rhetoric promulgated by extremist groups online. At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that offline dynamics still persist and remain influential in many instances, including participation by vulnerable individuals in offline Islamic study groups with members of pro-IS networks.

2. Indonesian Nationals in Syrian Refugee Camps

The Indonesian government presently has no repatriation policy for pro-IS Indonesian nationals in displaced persons camps in Syria, although it has debated repatriating children under 10 years of age on a case-by-case basis. This has stirred concerns over (the lack of) preparedness at the national and local government levels in safely and effectively managing such deportees.¹⁶ Meanwhile, a number of Indonesian nationals based in the Syrian camps are still actively spreading pro-IS content online, even as the overall volume of such content declines.¹⁷

Broadly speaking, three types of narratives can be observed from their social media:

- a. Ideological narratives including *Al-Wala' wal-Bara'* (loyalty and disavowal); the prohibition of democracy; caliphate ideals; *taghut/taghout* (any focus of worship other than Allah) and more.
- b. Informative narratives such as news on the victories of IS over its enemies or how many people were martyred in attacks.
- c. Narrative content that promotes life in Syria under IS leadership, such as the ample provision of daily necessities; Islamic healthcare; *taaruf* etc.

Narratives that encourage individuals to assist IS through militant acts, fund-raising and donations, among others, have also been detected online. An Indonesian national held in one of the Syrian camps said in an interview that "demonstrating support for [the] IS cause on social media [would] help them to get donations from IS supporters not only [in] Indonesia but also [in] Turkey, France, Germany and the UK". One of the methods commonly used to move such funds is cryptocurrency, she added.¹⁸

Additionally, detailed guidelines on how to make firearms and bombs can be found on IS-linked Telegram groups and on websites created by Bahrun Naim, a senior Indonesian IS militant who was killed in Syria in 2016. Other narratives cover topics on Islamic healthcare and lifestyle. Taken together, they aim to strengthen IS followers' confidence in pro-IS groups in Indonesia as well as nationals based in the Syrian camps.

Based on anecdotal accounts, two Indonesian *ummahat* (literally "mothers", but in this context used to denote female IS sympathisers), Winda Permatasari and Ummu Azzam Hurayroh, who currently reside in the al-Hol camp, are very prominent among some pro-IS circles. By sharing their personal experiences of *hijrah* and updates on activities in the camp on Facebook, they panegyricise life under IS and encourage fellow pro-IS supporters to wage jihad and perform *hijrah* to the land of Syam (Syria).

Winda Permatasari has had her account taken down at least three times over the past two years but she persists in creating new accounts, which are then promoted by other *ummahat* once she appears online again.¹⁹ Ummu Azzam Hurayroh often posts calls for jihad, declaring that the "ISISer" (a term for IS supporters in Indonesia) should work individually and collectively to carry out lone-wolf attacks and to seize weapons from the police and military.²⁰ For example, in a Facebook post dated December 29, 2021, she provided advice to scared *mujahideen*,²¹ stating that there are many ways to conduct jihad even if one does not emigrate to Syria, including by spreading terror amongst the *taghut* people in one's home country. Her Facebook post received 108 reactions (likes and comments).

Two more Indonesian women in an unidentified refugee camp also run pro-IS Facebook accounts under the names Umm Maryam Asy Syami and Ruang Rindu.²² Both have a relatively extensive reach, with a single posting able to generate up to 100 comments and almost 300 likes.²³ While Ruang Rindu's postings highlight daily life in Syria,²⁴ Umm Maryam Asy Syami uses her platform to provoke strong emotions in her audience and thus galvanise their commitment to the IS cause.²⁵

These *ummahat* have also become a medium for Indonesian pro-IS supporters to voice their complaints. Their willingness to actively engage pro-IS supporters in cyberspace and their persistence in producing and disseminating pro-IS content on social media help to perpetuate the hold that IS and its narratives exert over the vulnerable.

However, Indonesian pro-IS supporters in displaced persons camps have not limited their activities to social media alone. In 2022, five Indonesian nationals – Dwi Dahlia Susanti, Rudi Heryadi, Ari Kardian, Muhammad Dandi Adhiguna and Dini Ramadhani²⁷ – were sanctioned by the United States for their role in facilitating extremist activities in Syria and elsewhere. Susanti, Heryadi and Kardian live in the al-Hol camp in Syria, while Adhiguna and Ramadhani are believed to reside in Kayseri, Turkey. The network allegedly helped pro-IS supporters in Indonesia to travel to Syria and other IS-dominated areas;²⁶ and facilitated money transfers between Indonesia, Turkey and Syria that were used to, inter alia, purchase weapons²⁷ and smuggle children out of the camps to IS recruiters in other Syrian governorates.²⁸

Policy Recommendations

The involvement in terror-related activities of segments of the Indonesian diaspora, such as domestic migrant workers and displaced persons in refugee camps, illustrates the enduring role of ideology in terrorist recruitment. There is an observable connection between factors linked to personal problems, including the 'need' to restore self-worth or find a sense of belonging, and vulnerability to radical narratives. This is because the narratives actively propagated online by violent extremist groups like IS appear to provide solutions to the perceived needs of vulnerable individuals, promising personal empowerment, honour in the community, rewards in the afterlife etc. through the conduct of jihad.

These diasporic cases illustrate the importance of exposing the community to more positive Islamic narratives, which can act as better models of beliefs and behaviours for the vulnerable segments

of the Indonesian diaspora. In this regard, moderate Islamic groups like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which are widespread and highly respected in Indonesia, can be better leveraged by the authorities, who need to mitigate the persistence of radical narratives both in the country and elsewhere. Unlike IS and other Islamist extremist groups, Muhammadiyah and NU are mindful of the importance of contextual understanding when it comes to teaching about jihad. The government should therefore further their work with religious associations and civil society organisations to promote the teachings of moderate Islam in order to counter extremist narratives.

Indeed, the Indonesian government, particularly the BNPT and the National Police's Detachment 88, have attempted to amplify 'credible voices' in order to counter terrorist messaging. To that end, they have tapped former militants (who have since been rehabilitated) to share stories about their journeys into and out of extremist networks. Adopting a peer-to-peer approach by using such credible voices can be an effective means to deter and disengage extremist sympathisers online. However, where this P/CVE strategy falls short is its lack of context – and gender-specific responses – to the individual causes of radicalisation, including among the diaspora. It is thus critical to develop a P/CVE policy which acknowledges and addresses the distinct processes of and drivers towards violent extremism experienced by different genders and different individuals.

Additionally, there is a need to comprehensively profile the Indonesian diaspora in conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and southern Philippines to identify potential vulnerable groups and develop appropriate strategies for early intervention. Non-governmental organisations that provide humanitarian aid in conflict zones should also be closely monitored to ensure that they are not misused by terrorists for money laundering, terrorism financing and other nefarious purposes. Finally, the Indonesian government should strengthen ties with countries hosting significant Indonesian diaspora communities to improve the integration of migrant workers within mainstream society and address issues of marginalisation and alienation.

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²⁵ For example, in a posting from February 1, 2023, Umm Maryam Asy Syami wrote about a recent incident where 23 women and children in her camp were shot by guards as they tried to escape, accusing male pro-IS supporters (who comprise the majority of her Facebook friends) of neglecting jihad and failing to "protect [their] sisters". Many of her Facebook friends commented on the post, saying they felt guilty and apologising for not being able to help her, although there was no mention of carrying out retaliatory attacks or performing *hijrah* to Syria. Based on ICPVTR's research.

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Terrorism and Counter Terrorism in Malaysia in a Post-Pandemic Environment

Rueben Dass and Thomas Koruth Samuel

Malaysia has experienced a drop in terrorism-related incidents since the COVID-19 pandemic. While the country still remains a possible target for terrorist groups, the security services believe that threat groups possess limited capabilities to stage an attack. This is due to the combined factors of the killing of influential Malaysian terrorist leaders, the dismantling of terrorist cells and the effects of the pandemic that has hampered terrorist movement. Nevertheless, Malaysian authorities have remained vigilant and proactive in counter terrorism and preventive actions in the event of heightened terrorist activity in times to come.

Introduction

Malaysia has experienced a drop in terrorism-related activities in recent years since 2019. This decline can be attributed to two possible factors: the physical degradation of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) in conflict theatres such as the Middle East and southern Philippines; and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At any rate, the Malaysian authorities, in particular the Malaysian Special Branch (MSB) of the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), have remained vigilant throughout. As the effect of the pandemic has eased, the potential for terrorist activities to pick up again in the region remains ever present. This study provides an analysis of the current terrorist landscape in the country and the efforts that have been taken by the RMP to mitigate the threat in a post-pandemic environment. An overview of new rehabilitation and reintegration efforts is also highlighted.

Threat Level in Malaysia

History of Jihadist Threat in Malaysia

The history of jihadist militancy in Malaysia can be broadly divided into two spheres: pro-AQ-related and pro-IS-related activities. With respect to the former, Malaysia was believed to have been the birthplace of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a pro-AQ group that remains active, primarily in Indonesia. Malaysia functioned as a recruitment point, financing hub and safe haven for JI.¹

JI was indirectly associated with Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), a local violent Islamist group that operated in the mid-1990s.² KMM allegedly masterminded a number of terrorist plots, including the bombing of a Hindu temple in Kuala Lumpur in October 2000 and the targeting of US Navy personnel in the country. Notable KMM leaders include Lotfi Ariffin, Zainuri Kamaruddin, Murad Halimuddin and Marwan.³

Following the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war in the early 2010s, several former members of KMM, under the leadership of Lotfi Ariffin, were part of the first wave of Malaysians who travelled to Syria to fight alongside the Syrian rebel group Afnan al-Sham (AAS).⁴ After the death of Lotfi in September 2014, most of the fighters in Syria who remained alive joined IS.⁵

The second wave of Malaysian jihadists who travelled to Syria to join IS comprised the 'new guard': those seemingly younger in age, with little to no prior militant connections or hardline Islamist

education, and who were primarily influenced by social media.⁶ This group comprised notable Malaysian militants such as Akel Zainal, Fudhail Omar and Muhammad Wanndy Mohd Jedi.⁷

Unlike Indonesia and the Philippines, Malaysia has never had an official IS-affiliated group.⁸ The former two countries had well-established militant networks (JI, Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf Group, among others). Different factions of these militant groups later evolved into local IS cells, while active conflict theatres such as Mindanao (southern Philippines) and Poso and Ambon (Indonesia) served as breeding grounds for militant activity. Due to the absence of both established groups/networks and conflict theatres, Malaysian fighter networks have remained largely decentralised and grouped around influential leaders after the dismantling of KMM, which may be a reason for the absence of a local IS group. However, the authorities have in the past detected smaller, decentralised cells influenced by IS, namely, Kumpulan Briged Khalid al-Walid (KBKW), Daulah Islam Malizia (DIM), Kumpulan Gagak Hitam and Kumpulan Fisabilillah (KF).⁹

In this regard, the terrorist landscape in Malaysia has primarily been a personality-driven phenomenon. Jihadist recruitment in Malaysia has generally revolved around charismatic leaders, who have acted as key nodal points or ‘network hubs’ attracting and influencing a wide range of people.¹⁰ Examples of these leaders include Lotfi Ariffin, Akel Zainal and Muhammad Wanndy. With the death of such individuals as of 2019, the threat landscape in the country has eased temporarily.

Data on Militant Arrests in Malaysia

The most recent data¹¹ indicates that between 2013 and January 2023, as many as 562 individuals were arrested in Malaysia for terrorism offences. The high number of arrests between 2014 and 2019 coincides with the height of IS activity in the Middle East. Arrest numbers waned post-2019 as IS in the Middle East was defeated and weakened by counter terrorism operations.

Table1: Arrested Individuals in Malaysia since 2013¹²

Year	Total
2013	4
2014	59
2015	95
2016	126
2017	109
2018	86
2019	73
2020	7
2021	1
2022	2
2023	0
Total	562

Slightly older data (May 2022) reveals that, since 2013, a total of 559 individuals were arrested for terrorism.¹³ Out of these numbers, 506 (90.52 percent) were males and 53 (9.48 percent) were females.¹⁴ Within the Malaysian context, when considering the number of arrests, males clearly played a more active and dominant role. With regards to IS, Malaysian females were mostly involved in supportive roles (many through marriages with IS fighters in the Middle East) such as facilitation and fund-raising, except for one woman believed to be a lone actor who had planned to carry out attacks during the 2018 General Election in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁵ While the number of arrested women has been significantly smaller when compared to men, the direct involvement of women in terrorism in Malaysia is something that needs further research, as the drivers and triggers for their participation has been relatively under-studied and under-appreciated.

Table 2: Arrested Individuals in Malaysia Since 2013¹⁶

Year	Male	Female	Total
2013	2	2	4
2014	45	14	59
2015	85	10	95
2016	116	10	126
2017	104	5	109
2018	79	7	86
2019	68	4	72
2020	7	0	7
2021	0	1	1
2022	0	0	0
Total	506	53	559

Since 2013, out of the 559 individuals arrested for terrorism, around 362 (64.76%) were Malaysians and 197 (35.24%) were non-Malaysians.¹⁷ The majority of the non-Malaysians arrested in Malaysia were not focusing on conducting acts of terrorism in Malaysia, but were rather using Malaysia as a transit point.

Table 3: Arrested Malaysians and Non-Malaysians for Terrorism Since 2013¹⁸

Year	Malaysian	Non-Malaysian	Total
2013	4	0	4
2014	47	12	59
2015	78	17	95
2016	106	20	126
2017	53	56	109
2018	41	45	86
2019	26	46	72
2020	6	1	7
2021	1	0	1
2022	0	0	0
Total	362	197	559

The RMP has highlighted that since 2013, 256 individuals were charged for terrorism in Malaysia and out of this number, 231 were convicted.¹⁹

Table 4: Charged and Convicted Individuals for Terrorism-Related Issues Since 2013²⁰

Year	Charged	Convicted
2013	3	2
2014	21	21
2015	36	33
2016	70	64
2017	48	47
2018	28	28
2019	46	32
2020	4	4
2021	0	0
2022	0	0
Total	256	231

As for the Malaysians who had left for Syria and Iraq in an attempt to join IS between 2013 and 2018, the RMP estimates that around 54 Malaysians remain there.²¹

Table 5: Estimated Malaysians Linked to Terrorism Remaining in Syria and Iraq²²

Category	Number
Male	19
Female	11
Children (below 12 years old)	22
Adolescence (13 – 21 years old)	2
Total	54

Most of these Malaysians transited in a few countries before reaching Syria via Istanbul, Turkey. Approximately 90 percent of these Malaysian jihadists joined IS, while the remaining radicals joined other groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and AAS.²³ The Malaysian security services revealed that 17 Malaysians linked to terrorism have since returned from Syria and Iraq to Malaysia.²⁴

Table 6: Estimated Malaysian Returnees Linked to Terrorism in Syria and Iraq²⁵

Category	Number
Male	10
Female	3
Children (below 12 years old)	4
Adolescence (13 – 21 years old)	0
Total	17

The factors that led to the Malaysians returning home include: (i) the perception that they were unfairly treated; (ii) the feeling that they were only given menial work such as domestic and sentry duties; (iii) the aim of achieving martyrdom, or *syahid*, was no longer achievable; (iv) family issues and problems; and (v) injury or health problems.²⁶

It is significant to note that several Malaysian Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) returning from conflict areas may have engaged in violence and thus have experience in and knowledge of various aspects of combat. Hence, there is the possibility of them playing a role in the violent extremist landscape in areas such as: (i) using their status and credibility to radicalise and recruit new fighters both within the prisons and in the community; (ii) reinforcing and strengthening current terrorist organisations in Malaysia or neighbouring countries; (iii) creating new terrorist groups or splinter organisations; (iv) planning and directing terrorist attacks; and (v) conducting terrorist attacks.²⁷ In July 2022, Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) noted the possibility of a Malaysian IS fighter acting as a deputy to an Indonesian IS fighter, Saifullah, based in Afghanistan.²⁸ The purported Afghanistan-based cell led by Saifullah threatened attacks against a number of Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.²⁹

The RMP noted that between 2013 and May 2022, a total of 493 individuals linked to IS were arrested in Malaysia.³⁰ Out of the total arrested individuals, 445 individuals (90.26 percent) were males, while the remaining individuals (9.74 percent) were females. While the number of Malaysian women being radicalised remains relatively small and their involvement in extremism has been largely due to familial ties, there have been cases of Malaysian women playing an active and distinct role in the online sphere, as in the case of Sham, a Malaysian female who had been active on social media propagating IS content and who had travelled to Syria on her own.³¹

Table 7: Arrested Individuals in Malaysia Linked to IS Since 2013³²

Year	Male	Female	Total
2013	2	2	4
2014	45	14	59
2015	74	8	82

2016	109	10	119
2017	101	5	106
2018	78	7	85
2019	29	1	30
2020	7	0	7
2021	0	1	1
2022	0	0	0
Total	445	48	493

Out of the 493 individuals arrested, 342 (69.37 percent) were Malaysians, while the remaining individuals (30.63 percent) were non-Malaysians.³³ Furthermore, 226 individuals were charged for IS-related activities, out of which 213 individuals (94.25 percent) were convicted.³⁴

Table 8: Malaysian and Non-Malaysian Individuals Linked to IS and Subsequently Arrested Since 2013³⁵

Year	Malaysian	Non-Malaysian	Total
2013	4	0	4
2014	47	12	59
2015	73	9	82
2016	106	13	119
2017	53	53	106
2018	41	44	85
2019	11	19	30
2020	6	1	7
2021	1	0	1
2022	0	0	0
Total	342	151	493

Table 9: Charged and Convicted Individuals for Terrorism-Related Issues Linked to IS in Malaysia Since 2013³⁶

Year	Charged	Convicted
2013	3	2
2014	21	21
2015	30	27
2016	70	64
2017	48	47
2018	28	28
2019	22	20
2020	4	4
2021	0	0
2022	0	0
Total	226	213

To date, the RMP has successfully foiled 25 attempts by IS elements to conduct attacks in Malaysia between 2013 and 2019.³⁷ The success of the Malaysian authorities can be attributed to efficient intelligence gathering and proactive interventions on the part of the MSB on the one hand, and a lack of experience and training on the part of the cells on the other, as most were homegrown cells without much battlefield experience. Most of the attacks were planned to take place in the Klang Valley and were directed by Malaysian IS leaders both within Malaysia and in Syria. In total, 12 IS cells were dismantled and taken into custody. The only successful IS-related attack to have taken place was the Movida Club attack in Puchong, Selangor, on June 28, 2016.³⁸

East Malaysia – Sabah

On the eastern front, the terrorist threat landscape remains dormant. This is largely because pro-IS groups in Mindanao, southern Philippines, have been degraded in terms of capability and territorial control, and have suffered from substantial surrenders.³⁹ Kidnapping-for-ransom activities that were previously carried out by the pro-IS Dawlah Islamiyah – Sulu (DI – Sulu) faction, led formerly by Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, have largely ceased as the group has suffered from personnel surrenders.⁴⁰

Still, Sabah remains a strategic transit point and a possible safe haven for militants from both Indonesia and the Mindanao region. For example, in September 2022, an Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) cell that had been operating in Beaufort for more than 10 years was dismantled by security forces.⁴¹ Likewise, remnants of the Amin Baco-linked Darul Islam Sabah group and pro-IS DI groups remain operational in the region. Meanwhile militant activity in Sabah seems to be shifting from the coastal areas in the East such as Tawau, Kunak and Sandakan, to the interior and western regions such as Keningau and Beaufort, where militants are believed to be reorganising their networks.⁴²

Current Threat Picture

Both AQ and IS in the Middle East have been continuously affected by Western counter terrorism efforts targeted at their leadership. This has weakened the external reach of the groups, including in Southeast Asia. In addition, the pandemic and the accompanying global lockdowns had affected the movement of individuals into and out of Malaysia, thus hampering terrorist activity temporarily.

The RMP assesses the threat level to be ‘possible’, i.e., while the country remains a possible target of terrorists, there is limited capability by groups to conduct an attack.⁴³ This assessment is due to three factors: (i) strong intentions by terrorist actors; (ii) exploitation of ideology; and (iii) easy access to materials enabling radicalisation.⁴⁴

The biggest threat that Malaysia continues to face is attacks perpetrated by self-radicalised lone actors or decentralised cells, who are inspired as opposed to directed. In this regard, online pro-IS activity remains a cause for concern. In addition, the threat from returning FTFs from Syria and Iraq with militant capabilities as well as recidivists cannot be discounted.

Implications of External Developments

An external event that has garnered much interest in the security domain is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and its implications for Southeast Asia. While there has been no conclusive evidence of Malaysians attempting to travel to Afghanistan to fight or engage in training since the Taliban’s takeover, vigilance in this respect is still necessary. Travel into Afghanistan is not as easy as it used to be during the early 1980s, as both the Taliban and Pakistani security services have increased border control measures at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, blocking most of the illegal entry points into Afghanistan.

Recent trends have shown that the epicentre of jihadi terrorism has somewhat shifted from the Middle East to Africa. Current data shows that 45 percent (913 out of 2026) of the total attacks claimed by IS in 2022 were in Africa,⁴⁵ with the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) based in north-eastern Nigeria being the most active IS affiliate. In June 2022, ISWAP released a 39-minute propaganda video calling for Muslims around the world to undertake *hijrah* (migration) to Africa and join IS there.⁴⁶ The video was subsequently released in Bahasa Indonesia in an attempt to reach out to a wider audience.⁴⁷ Despite the call, however, there has been no known indication of interest among Malaysian radicals to travel to Africa to join IS. This may be due to the challenges associated with travelling to the region, unfamiliarity with the language and conditions there.

Nevertheless, in September 2021, reports emerged of the arrest of a Malaysian named Ahmad Mustakim Abdul Hamid in Somalia for assisting the Somali-based Al-Qaeda affiliate group, Al-

Shabaab.⁴⁸ Mustakim was alleged to have travelled to Somalia to join the group in 2009 before attempting to desert the group in 2015.⁴⁹ Although caution has to be exercised in drawing conclusions from one case, with the increase of jihadist activity in Africa, this is certainly something to monitor in the future.

Rehabilitation, Repatriation, Reintegration and Monitoring

Besides actively engaging in the traditional aspect of countering terrorism, the MSB has ‘tweaked’ its operations to include a bigger role in the ‘prevention’ component of counter terrorism. While the emphasis from 2013 to 2019 was on counter terrorism, the MSB has now evolved to also focus on developing its ‘soft power’ to prevent cases from reaching the stage of violent extremism. Hence, in cases where an individual is at the very early stage of a possible radicalisation pathway, the MSB, upon detection of such cases, takes the proactive step of assessing, intervening, providing informal rehabilitation and reintegrating the said individual back into mainstream society. A case in point was in 2021, when MSB officers detected a youth in Sabah who was curious about violent extremist groups and was posting messages on Twitter that indicated support for such causes.⁵⁰ MSB officers both engaged and counselled the youth in question, who subsequently changed his views and behaviour.⁵¹

Apart from rehabilitation, the Malaysian government remains actively engaged in the repatriation of its citizens who had travelled to Syria to join IS. The repatriation process is a multi-agency one involving the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and officials from the intelligence agencies. It is divided into five phases: investigation, assessment, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration.⁵² It is predicated on the results of assessments in three areas, namely, psychological, ideological and security evaluations.⁵³ The rehabilitation programme is tailored to the individual, and comprises modules on personal development, patriotism, religious knowledge, critical thinking and personal skills.⁵⁴ It emphasises the ‘soft’ approach and seeks to better understand the radicalisation pathway, drivers and triggers to violent extremism, personal and family background, as well as ideological and psychological motivation and exploitation.⁵⁵

The challenges in rehabilitating Malaysian FTFs who have returned from Syria and Iraq are two-fold. First is the difficulty in detaching extremist and radical ideology from the hearts and minds of FTFs, as many of them are firm in their extremist beliefs.⁵⁶ Second, the foreign detainees are fully aware that after serving their sentence in prison, they will eventually be deported to their countries of origin.⁵⁷ Hence, there is little incentive for them to participate in the programme and cooperate with the government.

The RMP revealed that 226 Malaysians linked to IS and similar groups had undergone the deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme as of 2022.⁵⁸

Table 10: Deradicalisation and Rehabilitation Programme for Malaysians Linked to IS and Similar Groups⁵⁹

Category	Malaysian
Male	200
Female	20
Children (below 12 years old)	0
Adolescence (13 – 21 years old)	6
Total	226 ⁶⁰

The RMP also reported that since 2013, 14 non-Malaysians linked to IS and other similar groups had undergone the deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme.⁶¹

Table 11: Deradicalisation and Rehabilitation Programme for Non-Malaysians Linked to IS and Similar Groups⁶²

Category	Non-Malaysian
Male	14
Female	0
Children (below 12 years old)	0
Adolescence (13 – 21 years old)	0
Total	14

Reintegration of former violent extremists into society remains a challenge in Malaysia due to the stigma that surrounds them, their families and especially their children. To mitigate this, the MOHA, the Welfare department, the Prisons Department and the MSB have been striving to assist former detainees. For example, the Welfare department has been providing limited financial assistance to the families, while the Prisons Department, through its community outreach programme and its work with local civil society organisations (CSOs), has been providing training and financial support to former detainees to start small-scale businesses.⁶³ These businesses include agricultural and sewing ventures.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Despite the lull in terrorist activity in Malaysia and the wider region, the threat of an attack remains and the need for vigilance is crucial. The global jihadist threat has become even more decentralised in nature compared to the early 1990s. The terrorism threat in Malaysia remains present, with the biggest threat coming from self-radicalised lone actors or cells that are inspired by a particular violent extremist ideology as opposed to centrally directed attacks. The Malaysian security services have evolved in their approach to focus not only on ‘countering terrorism’, but also on ‘preventing terrorism’. The prisons department and the police have also remained proactive in deradicalisation and rehabilitation efforts during this period. ‘Softer’, long-term measures are essential to complement ‘harder’, short-term measures in the battle against terrorism that remains ever-present and ever-evolving.

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- ⁷ Akel Zainal, who was formerly a musician and a member of a local Malaysian rock band, was hugely popular with young men and women, owing to his perceived image as a rock star turned jihadist. He was a key recruiter among Malaysians. Meanwhile, Fudhail Omar was one of the younger Malaysians who went to Syria and joined IS. He was involved in teaching Quranic recitation to the children of members of the Malaysian and Indonesian IS brigade known as Katibah Nusantara, and was a key propagandist, recruiter and user of social media. Muhammad Wannady would become one of the most high-profile Malaysian IS leaders operating out of Iraq and Syria, and the alleged mastermind of the 2016 Movida Club bombing in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysian police noted that at least a third of the 250 people arrested in Malaysia from 2013-2016 for IS-related activities were linked to Wannady. For a more detailed analysis of Malaysian foreign fighters, see Dass and Singh, "Pathways to the Caliphate."
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- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Communications with the Malaysian Special Branch, Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) in May 2022.
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Reintegrating Former Terrorist Combatants in Mindanao

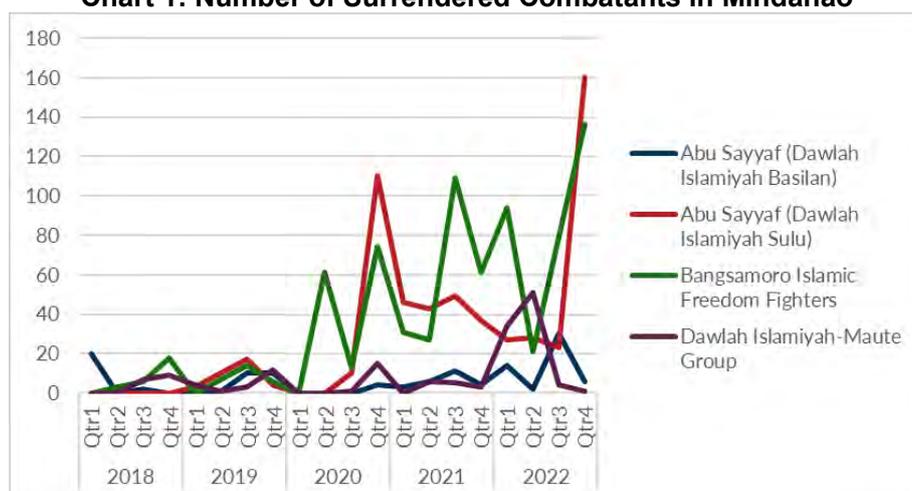
Nurhati Tangging and Kenneth Yeo

This study examines the combatant surrender programme in the Philippines and its impact on reducing terrorism in the country. The Philippines' government initiated the combatant surrender programme in 2018, and from 2020 to 2022, there were high rates of terrorist surrenders. As of May 2023, more than 1,600 IS-linked combatants have surrendered to the government. Against this backdrop, this paper explores the motivations of terrorists in the Philippines, many of whom are not ideologically radicalised, but rather born into violence or coerced into insurgency. Additionally, the paper analyses the terminologies used for surrendered combatants and the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts by local civil society organisations (CSOs). The paper also highlights the fiscal sustainability concerns of the combatant surrender programme, and potential alternatives to sustain the programme if the government is unable to continue funding it. The research concludes by emphasising the effectiveness of the programme in reducing terrorism in the Philippines and the importance of continued government support for the programme's fiscal sustainability.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 period (2020-2022), violent terrorist activities in Mindanao, southern Philippines reduced significantly. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have taken out notable terrorist leaders, overrun terrorist sanctuaries, and implemented effective resource control operations to prevent terrorist groups from obtaining essential resources. Consequently, it has been observed that a large number of combatants were offered livelihood support in exchange for surrender. The charts below display the number of combatants who surrendered to the government over time, based on public information collated in the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas.¹ In 2022, a total of 1,614 combatants, primarily from the Dawlah Islamiyah Sulu and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), surrendered to the AFP (see *Chart 1*).

Chart 1: Number of Surrendered Combatants in Mindanao



Given the changing nature of Mindanao's threat landscape, local governments in various municipalities have enhanced their support in rehabilitating and reintegrating former militant combatants. The Philippines government has recently begun consultation for their National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAP PCVE) to institutionalise the

mechanisms for reintegrating former combatants into society. This paper outlines the potential reasons for combatant surrender, explains the whole-of-society approach adopted by the Philippines government, and the challenges of the reintegration programmes.

Why do Combatants Surrender?

The Philippines government launched the programme to encourage combatants to surrender in 2018. Based on the authors' discussions in Mindanao, the local government has played a key role in encouraging combatants to return to their communities. The AFP have worked closely with local elected officials to reach out to combatants through the combatants' families to surrender.

There is an assumption that rank-and-file members naturally intend to surrender. There are three mechanisms that explain this phenomenon, namely, pocketbook maximisation, aging-out and socialisation. These three mechanisms are consistent with the recent study published by the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP).²

The pocketbook maximisation hypothesis claims that insurgents are rational actors and would evaluate the costs and benefits of staying in the group vis-à-vis leaving the insurgency. This hypothesis would account for factors like battle fatigue, starvation, fear of being arrested and any benefits accorded to the combatants after they lay down their arms. Physical safety is another factor to consider, because insurgent groups are not forgiving towards 'traitors' in their organisation.

Another aspect of the pocketbook maximisation hypothesis relates to whether the insurgents were given a real opportunity to lay down their arms, and if they did so in a dignified manner. Hence, former combatants are not referred to as "surrenderees" in the halfway houses and communities. In Sulu, Basilan and Lanao, former combatants are referred to as "returnees", as they have returned to their communities. In Pagadian, former NPA combatants are referred to as "friends rescued", indicating that the military has rescued the combatants from their trials and tribulations.³ It is precisely because the term "surrender" is not used that some contest the authenticity of surrendered combatants.

It is important to highlight that the practice of not referring to the surrendered as surrenderees is common. Ramakrishna maintains that militants must be accorded dignity for their successful surrender.⁴ Hence, former combatants in any conflict theatre have never confessed that they have surrendered. Despite the absence of a confession, the act of forgoing armed struggle, accepting rehabilitation and receiving governmental aid is a good enough indicator that the combatants have psychologically lost the will to continue fighting.

The second hypothesis relates to combatants aging-out of insurgencies. This hypothesis draws heavily from the theory of desistance from gang membership and has three components. First, individuals age-out of violence with psychosocial maturity. This theory is consistent with the "youth bulge" hypothesis, which states that young unemployed males are likelier to participate in violent movements.⁵ The psychosocial maturity hypothesis explains that this phenomenon is the result of the underdeveloped cognitive functions of younger persons.⁶ Hence, people who join violent organisations probably have yet to develop cognitive functions to control impulses and express consideration for others.⁷ Thus, as their cognitive functions develop, they would leave violent organisations if they were given the opportunity to. Second, individuals may undergo identity transformation and thereby have a different outlook and goals in life.⁸ Proponents of this hypothesis claim that criminals tend to blame their circumstances and lack agency. Desistance would only happen if they took ownership of their lives and made practical steps towards change. This process could be motivated by identifying a possible future and a fear of relapsing. Finally, individuals may be disillusioned with their intended cause and drop out of the movement.⁹

The final hypothesis claims that insurgents socialise out of insurgencies and involves the substitution of the individuals' anti-social networks with pro-social groups.¹⁰ Anti-social networks refer to negative peer influences that are associated with activities that disrupt society or contribute

to social fragmentation. Pro-social groups, on the other hand, are groups that foster positive influence in the community. These groups create a supportive environment and help mould an alternative identity for the participants in the group. Fundamentally, exposure to pro-social groups allows individuals to leave violent social movements. Therefore, elements like improved family support and exposure to social networks beyond the insurgency have been cited as important pathways out of the insurgent movement. In the Mindanao insurgency, the AFP report cited the approachability of the AFP as a trust-building mechanism to encourage combatants to surrender.¹¹ There is also the social contagion effect, claiming that people leave organisations when their peers do.¹² This is consistent with observations in Mindanao, as combatants rarely surrender alone.

Roles of the Local Government and Civil Society

The local government and civil society play a tremendous role in reintegrating combatants into society. For instance, the Preventing Against Violent Extremism (PAVE) programme – which was first conceptualised and implemented in Basilan, and then replicated in Sulu¹³ – aims to reintegrate former combatants into society through a holistic approach that encompasses the efficient delivery of public goods, community engagement and financial assistance. The AFP have complemented PAVE with their own Broad Reforms in Addressing Violent Extremism (BRAVE) programme to promote psychological resilience and provide intervention for returnees and their victims.¹⁴ These programmes are further strengthened by Basilan’s award-winning initiative, Advancing and Sustaining the Gains of Good Governance (AS2G CARE), which provides returnees with psychosocial intervention and skills training.¹⁵

Through these programmes, returnees return to their families but are strictly monitored through mandatory regular psychosocial deradicalisation programmes and vocational education. These programmes ensure that former combatants are self-sufficient before they are reintroduced into the community, and would thus not be financially coerced into terrorism and insurgency.¹⁶

Based on the authors’ ground observations, one of the problems former combatants face is psychological trauma and emotional management. Due to the constant stress of battle and avoiding the authorities, former combatants develop a “survivor’s mentality” that requires the individual to be self-sufficient.¹⁷ Moreover, it appears common for former combatants to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and to have problems with emotional regulation and social etiquette, because they have been living in the jungles of Mindanao and do not have much experience in socialising with society.

Balay Mindanaw, a CSO operating in Basilan, runs a host of programmes to enrich life beyond combat. In the case of Abu Sayyaf combatants, literacy is an issue as many returnees do not know how to read or write. Balay Mindanaw provides elementary education to returning combatants in Basilan before giving them scholarships to pursue high school diplomas. Psychosocial rehabilitation is also provided to returnees to address their trauma and trust issues. Finally, Balay Mindanaw brings former combatants to cities like Manila to show them that “there is more to life than fighting the government”.

Another CSO-led initiative introduces former combatants to the potential of leading a “good life”.¹⁸ Launched in Pagadian, southwest Mindanao, the holistic Good Life Programme is co-organised by the governor of Zamboanga and the 53rd Infantry Battalion, and seeks to rehabilitate former combatants from the trauma of combat and equip them with vocational skills to be farmers and electricians. Former NPA combatants are also tried for their involvement in terrorism, and kept at a halfway house within a military compound for rehabilitative purposes during the period of their incarceration. This ensures that former combatants do not abscond from justice, while providing them with the opportunity to rehabilitate and preparing them to reintegrate into society.

Challenges

Community Pushback

Despite efforts by local governments and CSOs to reintegrate former combatants, there remain concerns within the larger community. One of the major challenges faced by local governments and CSOs is preparing the community to accept rehabilitated combatants into society.

The local community may be unfamiliar with rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, and could potentially misrepresent the efforts of local governments and CSOs. This unfamiliarity with reintegration programmes may cause them to feel that their personal safety is at risk.

There are also concerns among the victims and survivors of violence perpetrated by terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf. The families of fallen victims have not reconciled the loss of their kin with the acceptance of former combatants into their community. Understandably, they have mildly protested the local government's decision to reintegrate former combatants back into the community.

It is therefore essential for local governments and CSOs to engage in relationship-building with local communities to ensure they understand the intent of the reintegration initiatives as well as their execution and efficacy.

Fiscal Sustainability

The Philippines has made substantial efforts to encourage combatants to return to their communities through the implementation of comprehensive support packages for former combatants. However, ensuring the fiscal sustainability of these initiatives is crucial to maintain their effectiveness and reach in the long run.

The Philippine government has shown its commitment to addressing violent extremism by providing former combatants with incentives to surrender and reintegrate into society. The support packages include financial assistance, basic literacy education, vocational training and housing support in some cases.¹⁹

However, as the number of beneficiaries grows, so does the financial burden on the government. The cost of providing these wide-ranging support packages is substantial, raising concerns about their fiscal sustainability.²⁰ Given the economic health of the Philippines, it is crucial to assess the government's capacity to fund these programmes in the long term, without compromising other essential services and development projects.

In this regard, maintaining political will and securing support from various stakeholders is crucial for the success and fiscal sustainability of these programmes. Hence, it is critical for the government to address fiscal sustainability concerns. Beyond support from the federal government, local stakeholders must develop innovative funding strategies and secure long-term financial support for these programmes. Potential solutions could include public-private partnerships, international aid and grants, and community-based funding mechanisms. By diversifying funding sources and collaborating with various stakeholders, the financial future of these vital programmes can be safeguarded.

Conclusion

The combatant surrender programme in the Philippines has been a significant step towards reducing terrorism in the country. Since its initiation in 2018, the programme has seen high rates of terrorist surrenders, with a total of 1,614 IS-linked combatants having surrendered to the government to date.

The rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants have been the focus of local CSOs in the Philippines, who share a cultural closeness with the ex-combatants. Additionally, a whole-of-government approach has been adopted to rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-combatants, which is a positive step towards their successful reintegration into society.

While the combatant surrender programme has been successful in reducing terrorism in the Philippines, lingering community concerns about the ex-combatants' re-entry into society and concerns about fiscal sustainability must be consciously addressed.

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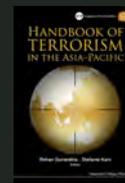
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