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Indonesia's Approach to Reintegration: A Compassionate Path to Security

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Indonesia is navigating the complex process of repatriation and reintegration of former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria affiliates, especially women and children, using a strategy that combines security measures, community support, and strategic communication. The government seeks to build public understanding and empathy toward reintegration efforts using nuanced narratives to counteract stigma and public concern. With leadership from the newly elected President Prabowo Subianto, this approach could establish Indonesia as a leader in balancing humanitarian values with counterterrorism objectives.

COMMENTARY

Indonesia faces challenges in the [repatriation and reintegration \(R&R\)](#) of former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) affiliates, especially women and children. Its approach unfolds amid shifting global priorities, requiring a carefully nuanced and compassionate strategy. With the newly elected US administration (taking office in January 2025) prioritising domestic issues, attention on such foreign detainees is likely to diminish. Hence, Indonesia needs to be self-reliant in devising comprehensive reintegration and communication frameworks that honour humanitarian commitments while addressing security concerns.

As Indonesia tackles these complex efforts, it must avoid the “[danger of a single story](#)” by promoting diverse narratives about returnees. Framing them solely as [threats](#) or victims risks misperceptions and stigma. A balanced approach can showcase their varied backgrounds and journeys, fostering public understanding and empathy.

[Crisis communications](#) are vital for managing terrorism-related risks, guiding responses from crisis to recovery. Indonesia can adopt a three-stage approach: share

success stories of reintegrated returnees to build trust, disseminate clear security protocols to reassure the public and foster shared responsibility, and highlight returnees' contributions to showcase the success of reintegration.

Crossroads of Security and Humanity

Recognising the importance of a [whole-of-society approach](#) in addressing the complex issue of repatriating and reintegrating the remaining Indonesians affiliated with ISIS, the Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) collaborated with the author in facilitating a [focus group discussion \(FGD\)](#) held in a community house in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 12 November. The session provided a conducive platform to explore the potential roles of strategic communication throughout the three stages.

The urgency of addressing the challenge became evident during the FGD when recent developments were examined. In August 2024, several Indonesians detained in Malaysia for alleged involvement in the 2017 [siege of Marawi in the Philippines](#) were successfully repatriated. A child whose parents had carried out a [suicide bombing](#) in the Southern Philippines was also repatriated from the Philippines. In another case, a group of deportees, mostly women and children, arrived from Turkey in September and October.

From these examples, the R&R of Indonesians affiliated with ISIS requires a balanced approach that provides support to [women and children](#) coerced into extremism while addressing [these victims' need for justice and security](#). Effective messaging is crucial to building public trust and fostering rehabilitation. The process needs to include the victims' voices. Misconceptions about strategic communication – such as perceived risks and undervalued utility – undermine efforts.

A powerful tool in this effort is the kampung dialogue – a grassroots method that builds upon local values like [musyawarah \(deliberation\) and mufakat \(consensus\)](#). This dialogue allows communities to address reintegration openly, enabling discussions on the returnees' roles in society and offering a more inclusive, humane path toward healing.

Moreover, international examples provide [valuable lessons](#). Countries like [Australia](#) and the [United Kingdom](#), for instance, integrate psychological counselling, education, and vocational training into their reintegration programmes, enabling a pathway for returnees to reconnect with society. These initiatives stress empathy and community support, which are critical components for sustained reintegration.

National Action Plan and Indonesia's Strategic Path

Indonesia's action regarding the returnees is framed by its second National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Extremism (RAN PE). This plan emphasises [human security](#) and the protection of vulnerable groups, particularly children. Its approach resonates with Indonesia's legacy of [child protection efforts](#), as seen in the success of its 2017 repatriation programme documented in the film *Road to Resilience*.

This film follows the story of [Febri Ramdani](#), who spent 300 days in Syria before returning to Indonesia, where he has since reintegrated, becoming a university student

and a “credible voice” for positive change. The film demonstrates the power of reintegration done well, providing Indonesia with a framework for future efforts.

As seen in the [2017 case](#), a committed whole-of-government approach to reintegration combines the support of various state bodies, civil society, and local communities to help returnees reintegrate effectively. The new phase of RAN PE builds on this legacy by prioritising human security and creating pathways for returnees to re-enter society as empowered individuals rather than marginalised outcasts.

Prabowo’s Leadership and Indonesia’s Regional Influence

President Prabowo faces an immediate leadership test in continuing President Jokowi’s commitment to repatriate Indonesian women and children from [Syrian camps](#) – key to broader reintegration efforts. This requires empowering agencies like [BNPT](#) with strong leadership and resources to enhance existing programmes.

From a [monitoring and evaluation](#) perspective, Indonesia’s R&R communication strategy needs improvement, addressing unstructured community engagement, limited officer capacity, inconsistent local responses, and societal stigma. Validating returnees’ citizenship through court rulings is vital for legal certainty, service access, and human rights protection. A monitoring mechanism is essential to balance public safety with rights. Clear [success indicators](#), such as individuals’ social adaptation, behavioural change, community contributions, and access to education or employment, are needed.

Consistency in policy and strategic communication – focusing on public trust, proactive engagement, and balancing compassion with security – will be vital. Success could position Indonesia as a global model for managing ISIS-affiliated returnees. At the same time, failure risks regional security repercussions, as seen in the 2019 [Jolo church bombing](#) involving a deported Indonesian family.

The Role of Strategic Communication

Effective [strategic communication](#) is essential for fostering societal understanding and resilience in reintegration efforts, and [transmedia storytelling](#) provides a dynamic framework to achieve this. Transparent narratives highlighting the complexities of returnees’ experiences and clear information on security protocols and positive community impacts help reduce stigma and build public empathy. Such communication strategies encourage balanced perceptions by presenting national security and humanitarian responsibility as complementary goals.

Transmedia storytelling enhances this approach by leveraging interconnected narratives across multiple platforms to reach diverse audiences. [Documentaries](#) humanise returnees and their struggles, fostering deeper empathy. [Social media campaigns](#) engage younger demographics with accessible, shareable content that counters extremist narratives.

[Interactive workshops](#) provide immersive experiences to cultivate understanding and solidarity, while [books and graphic novels](#) offer nuanced perspectives on reintegration challenges. This multi-platform strategy transforms reintegration from a polarising

issue into a shared societal effort, showcasing success stories and promoting collective responsibility. By involving government, communities, and families in [a cohesive narrative](#), transmedia storytelling strengthens social cohesion and supports long-term security.

Conclusion: Embracing Security and Compassion

Indonesia's approach to repatriating its citizens affiliated with ISIS offers a critical opportunity to demonstrate that security and compassion can coexist. A well-crafted road map for [strategic communication](#) is essential to ensure that the right message is delivered by the right messenger at the right time – echoing the crisis communication mantra that the wrong message can cost lives.

By integrating [global best practices](#) and local cultural wisdom, this framework can guide humane repatriation and reintegration efforts while maintaining national security. With a clear and consistent strategy, Indonesia has the potential to set an international standard for addressing radicalisation and fostering peace.

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