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Indonesia's Dilemma: What To Do With the Children of Its ISIS Fighters

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Stranded in camps in Syria, the children of Indonesia's ISIS fighters are viewed with suspicion back home. Reintegrating them into society is not easy, but it is the only way forward.

COMMENTARY

In the dusty, overcrowded confines of camps like Al-Hol and Ar Roj in Syria, hundreds of Indonesian children – born under the black flag of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – wait. They are the forgotten casualties of a war their parents waged, trapped in a limbo between radicalisation and rehabilitation.

As the world shifts its attention back to the war in Syria following the collapse of the Bashar Assad regime at the hands of the rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the smouldering embers of an earlier chapter of violence remain unresolved: what to do with the thousands of family members of foreign fighters who headed to the Middle East to join the ranks of ISIS a decade ago. Most of the wives and children were detained in early 2019 when ISIS' self-styled "caliphate" was defeated.

In the years since, over 30 countries have repatriated their nationals, but thousands remain in the two camps, where conditions are harsh, and the shadow of extremist ideology lingers – reinforcing fears that they are incubators of a new ISIS generation. It did not help that in its heyday, ISIS would display child fighters, Indonesians included, as part of its propaganda drive. For Jakarta, this concern presents a dilemma. In 2020, the Joko Widodo administration decided against the return of Indonesians who chose to join ISIS in the Middle East. But what about the children who had no say in their parents' decisions?

These children are more than mere victims of extremism; they are potential threats if left abandoned. For Indonesia, the task is clear yet daunting: how to bring them home amid the new convulsions in Syria and ensure they don't carry the shadows of war into the future. The answer lies in a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses their psychological trauma, provides education and fosters community acceptance. Only then can it hope to transform them from the "lost generation" into a generation of peacebuilders.

Children of Extremism

One is well advised to keep an eye on one's enemies. But what if your "enemy" is a child? A child who didn't choose this life but was born into a world of violence, indoctrination and displacement? In Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, this philosophical question is no longer theoretical. It is a lived reality, especially in Indonesia, where the return of children from ISIS territories raises both moral and security dilemmas.

Consider the case of a 43-year-old Indonesian mother from West Java. In September 2024, she and her three children – ages 18, 16 and 11 – were deported by Turkish authorities to Indonesia after escaping Syria's notorious Al-Hol camp. Their escape was orchestrated by a smuggler, highlighting the complex web of diplomacy, security and human desperation surrounding these returnees.

Their story is not unique. Over 500 Indonesians, mostly women and children, remain trapped in similar camps. Many of these children, especially those born between 2014 and 2017, have known nothing but war. For them, violence is the norm, and indoctrination runs deep. If left unattended, they risk becoming the next generation of extremists.

Indonesia now faces a critical question: Should these children be viewed solely as security threats, or can they be seen as victims deserving of a second chance?

History provides lessons on how nations can navigate such complex challenges. In the 1950s and 1960s, Indonesia faced the fallout of the Darul Islam (DI) rebellion, a radical movement that sought to establish an Islamic state. After the rebellion was suppressed, the government faced a similar dilemma: what to do with the children of DI leaders?

Instead of ostracising them, Indonesia chose inclusion. Many of these children were offered educational opportunities, some even studying at prestigious institutions like Al-Azhar University in Egypt. One such child went on to co-found a democratic Islamic political party. This approach highlights a vital lesson: With the right support, children born into extremist environments can become productive, even transformative, members of society.

However, Indonesia's current challenge is more complex. Between 2015 and 2018, 11 Indonesian teenagers aged 15 to 17 were implicated in terrorism-related cases. Their roles included scouting targets, building bombs, and even carrying out attacks. All had pledged allegiance to ISIS.

This underscores the dual nature of these children: They are both victims and potential perpetrators. The challenge is to tip the scale in favour of rehabilitation and reintegration.

A Multi-Stage Challenge

Repatriating these children is not a simple matter of booking a flight home. It is a multi-stage process requiring careful planning, resources, and collaboration across various sectors.

The first step is psychological screening. Many of these children have witnessed horrific acts – public executions, bombings and the violent loss of loved ones. Their trauma runs deep, and without proper psychological intervention, they risk remaining trapped in cycles of fear, anger and distrust.

Yet, Indonesia's psychological services are ill-prepared for this challenge. Psychologists working in rehabilitation programmes often lack the specialised knowledge needed to address the complexities of radicalisation. Assessments conducted by agencies like BNPT (National Counterterrorism Agency) and Densus 88 (Indonesia's counterterrorism unit) are often fragmented, leading to repetitive evaluations that overwhelm the children and fail to uncover deeper issues.

Healing trauma is also not a one-time process – it requires sustained, long-term intervention. Counselling sessions must go beyond surface-level discussions to address the root causes of fear and anger. Moreover, the counselling needs to be culturally sensitive and tailored to the child's individual experiences.

Psychologists must be trained to understand the nuances of radicalisation and how it affects children differently than adults. Without this expertise, interventions risk being ineffective or, worse, counterproductive.

The next step is education, which is more than a tool for academic development. It is a lifeline for children from conflict zones. It provides a sense of normalcy, routine and stability in a world that has been anything but stable. Education also offers a path forward, away from the ideology of extremism.

UNESCO's 2021 report emphasises the role of education in fostering social cohesion and resilience against radical ideologies. For Indonesia, this means not only providing access to schools but also training teachers to address the unique psychological and social needs of these children.

Teachers must be equipped to recognise signs of trauma and radicalisation and provide both academic and emotional support. Schools should become safe spaces where children can learn, heal and rebuild their lives.

The Final Hurdle: Community Acceptance

Even the best rehabilitation programmes will fail if society is unwilling to accept these children back. The stigma surrounding returnees is significant. They are often viewed with suspicion and fear, seen as potential threats rather than victims of circumstance.

This is where community engagement becomes critical. Public education campaigns are needed to shift perceptions. Communities must be prepared to see these children as individuals who deserve a second chance, not as ticking time bombs.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in this process. Their grassroots networks and established trust within local communities make them indispensable partners in fostering acceptance and empathy. CSOs can serve as mediators between returnees and society, easing tensions and building bridges.

However, the government cannot outsource this responsibility entirely. It must work hand in hand with CSOs, providing them with the resources and support needed to carry out their mission effectively.

The reintegration of children from ISIS-controlled territories is a shared responsibility that requires collaboration between government agencies, civil society, educators, psychologists and local communities.

These children represent a dual reality: They are both a challenge and an opportunity. If left abandoned, they risk becoming the next wave of extremists. But with the right support, they can become agents of peace, resilience and even leadership.

Indonesia stands at a crossroads. The decisions made today will shape the future not only of these children but also of the nation's long-term stability and security.

As one returnee's mother poignantly said: "We want a chance to start over." The question is: Will Indonesia offer them that chance?

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