

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Repatriation and Reintegration Dynamics in Indonesia

By Muhammad Makmun Rasyid

SYNOPSIS

Indonesia has continued to make progress in the repatriation and reintegration of individuals formerly affiliated with terrorist organisations, including returnees from overseas conflict zones. What was initially a security-focused approach has evolved into a more comprehensive, humanitarian-based strategy, aligning with principles of justice and human rights.

COMMENTARY

The process of repatriating and reintegrating individuals affiliated with terrorist organisations in Indonesia remains a complex challenge, encompassing security, social, and political dimensions. The shift from a security-oriented approach to a humanitarian-based strategy largely depends on public acceptance and the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. The persistent stigma surrounding returnees from conflict zones, who often continue to be viewed as threats, poses a significant obstacle to their reintegration into society, making strategic communication essential for fostering public understanding.

Jihadist Ideology and Its Radicalising Influence

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 cannot be separated from the long-standing evolution of global jihadist ideology. Abdullah Azzam, who transitioned from an intellectual within the Muslim Brotherhood to a jihadist, developed a framework for jihad that transcended geographical and temporal boundaries. His strategy emphasised radicalisation without direct physical interaction and encouraged independent jihadist action.

These ideas were systematically laid out in his works, including *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah*,

Difâ' 'an Arâdhi Al-Muslimîn, and *Ayâtu al-Rahmân fî Jihâd Al-Afghân*. Azzam's doctrine asserted that war and violence were necessary consequences in the pursuit of establishing *Daulah Islamiyah*, an Islamic state regarded as inevitable.

By the 1990s, these ideological tenets had taken root in segments of Indonesian society, prompting some individuals to travel to Afghanistan to participate in jihad. In the introduction to *Ayâtu al-Rahmân*, Azzam cited *Surah Yusuf* [12:87], emphasising that Afghanistan's victory should serve as a catalyst for global jihad.

Azzam's ideas were later reinforced by [Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri](#), a Syrian considered by many as "the most articulate exponent of the modern jihad and its most sophisticated strategist", who introduced a more flexible jihadist strategy through *Da'wah Al-Muqâwamah*.

Al-Suri promoted three key concepts: [non-centralisation](#) (*al-lâ markaziyyah*), which allows small groups to act independently; leaderless jihad (*al-jihâd bilâ qâ'id*), which enables sporadic attacks by autonomous individuals; and small-cell operations (*al-khalâyâ al-shaghîrah*), which are designed to evade law enforcement detection.

These strategies laid the foundation for independent operations (*'amaliyyah mustaqillah*) or lone-wolf attacks (*adh-dhi'b al-munfarid*), where individuals, though lacking direct organisational backing, remained ideologically linked through digital propaganda.

This approach had a significant influence in Indonesia, particularly on Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), now officially disbanded. Analysing the *Majlis Qiyadah Markaziyah* (1996) documents and the evaluation mechanisms implemented by Para Wijayanto, a former JI leader, especially within the context of *siyasah syar'iyah*, reveals JI's adoption of Al-Suri's doctrine.

Al-Suri criticised rigid jihadist hierarchies for their vulnerability to state repression and advocated for decentralised cells to enhance adaptability and longevity. He also condemned excessive *takfir* (excommunication), warning that it could lead to internal fragmentation and weaken jihadist movements.

In response, JI began shifting from direct confrontation to a more pragmatic and politically aware strategy while maintaining its ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic state.

When ISIS emerged in 2014, the concept of *al-jihâd bilâ qâ'id* (leaderless jihad) was widely adopted across various regions in Indonesia, strengthening theological justifications while also exacerbating social trauma.

The number of individuals affiliated with terrorist networks became increasingly alarming, as recorded by the National Counterterrorism Task Force (BNPT). Between 2014 and 2019, 1,861 Indonesian foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) were identified, 554 Indonesian ISIS affiliates were deported, while 121 individuals returned voluntarily. Meanwhile, 1,078 Indonesian citizens remained in conflict zones, and 108 were confirmed dead.

Controversies Over the Repatriation of Returnees

Amid the rise of terrorist narratives and acts of violence in Indonesia, the repatriation of former ISIS sympathisers has become an intensely debated issue. Fears over potential security threats led to widespread public opposition to their return based on Law No. 6/2011 on Immigration, which allows for the exclusion of Indonesian nationals deemed dangerous to national security.

In 2020, the Indonesian government proposed repatriating ex-ISIS members from Syria, a plan announced by Minister of Religious Affairs Fachrul Razi based on assessments by BNPT. This proposal sparked controversy. Some argued that the state had an obligation to protect all citizens, including former ISIS sympathisers, while others feared their return could increase radicalisation risks. After consultations with stakeholders, the government eventually decided against repatriation, as announced by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, [Mahfud MD](#), who affirmed that Indonesia had no plans to bring back FTFs.

As conditions in Syrian detention camps deteriorated, repatriation efforts gained momentum globally. In 2022, European nations such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain actively repatriated women and children, with France leading the efforts by bringing home 31 women and 75 children. Meanwhile, thousands of Indonesian nationals remain in Syria, while others have died or been deported.

By 2023, growing international pressure for repatriation prompted Indonesia to establish the “Task Force for Handling Indonesian Citizens Abroad Associated with FTFs”, as outlined in Coordinating Ministerial Decree No. 90/2023. However, domestic security concerns persisted. That year, [18 convicted terrorists](#) were re-arrested, with 15 having been released unconditionally or on parole, fuelling public fears of recurring terrorist threats.

These concerns highlight the security risks of repatriation, including re-radicalisation, ideological spread, and terrorist re-recruitment. To mitigate these threats, strict monitoring, deradicalisation initiatives, and structured reintegration programmes are crucial.

A practical example is the case of 15-year-old Jamil, which was handled by the Bureau of the Prevention of Extremism and Terrorism (BPET) at the Central Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). Taken by his father to Marawi, the Philippines, he was repatriated in 2021 following his mother’s request. Through cross-sectoral coordination, temporary placement at Sentra Handayani – a rehabilitation centre for returnees – and structured reintegration in his hometown, public concerns were alleviated. Continuous monitoring ensured that he did not revert to extremist networks, highlighting the need for long-term oversight.

As Noor Huda Ismail argues in *Anak Negeri di Pusaran Konflik Suriah (2025)*, successful reintegration requires a 5R approach: Repatriation, Rehabilitation, Resettlement, Reintegration, and Resilience. This is not just a technical process but a comprehensive social intervention that integrates human resources, cultural adaptation, and community engagement. Each step is crucial in bridging past trauma with future stability, ensuring that repatriation efforts contribute to long-term security

and social cohesion. Recognising these challenges, the Indonesian government has begun to adapt its policies to balance security concerns with humanitarian considerations.

Recognising these trends, the government began considering repatriating adult women and children through the Presidential Directive on July 8, 2024. This directive also formalised the transition of Sentra Handayani to Rindam as the main rehabilitation centre for the returnees.

Shifting Policies on Repatriation

Under President Prabowo Subianto, the government reinforced its commitment by issuing Ministerial Letter No. 5/2025, establishing a renewed task force for repatriation. Since July 2024, the security-focused paradigm has been supplemented with a more humanitarian approach. However, repatriation efforts remain challenging, particularly amid shifting geopolitical landscapes.

The leadership transition in Syria, with Ahmed al-Sharaa, who heads Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), replacing Bashar al-Assad, has significantly impacted regional stability. Indonesia has yet to resume official political communication with Syria, complicating the process of repatriating ex-ISIS members. As an alternative, the government could explore indirect diplomatic channels via third-party countries such as Turkey or international organisations as potential facilitators.

Domestically, rehabilitating over [8,000 Jamaah Islamiyah](#) (JI) members who have pledged allegiance to Indonesia remains a pressing challenge. Given the limited rehabilitation capacity, the government must prioritise women and children for repatriation while strengthening deradicalisation programmes, post-repatriation monitoring, and psychosocial support for returnees and host communities.

Additionally, [16 Indonesian](#) FTFs remain in Syria, most of whom have joined HTS in Damascus. Meanwhile, according to Arif Siswanto, a former JI leadership council member, nine JI members are still in the Philippines. Their continued presence abroad highlights the persistent threat of global jihadist networks. To prevent their infiltration back into Indonesia, the government must enhance border security, intelligence cooperation, and legal measures against those involved in overseas terrorism.

Conclusion

The repatriation of former combatants and ISIS sympathisers requires a delicate balance between national security and humanitarian concerns. Such policies risk public backlash and potential instability if there is no clear prioritisation and [effective public communication](#).

Furthermore, the global jihadist threat remains ever-present, necessitating enhanced surveillance, intelligence coordination, and robust deradicalisation initiatives. The success of repatriation efforts will depend not solely on government policies but also on societal support for reintegration processes.

Muhammad Makmun Rasyid is a member of the Bureau of the Prevention of Extremism and Terrorism (BPET) at the Central Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798