Restoring Ontological Security in the Repatriation of Women and Children from Syrian Camps

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SYNOPSIS

Abandoning women and children in detention camps in Syria and Iraq undermines regional and global security, particularly in Southeast Asia. Addressing the psychological and social dimensions of identity, belonging, and stability, central to ontological security, requires a structured repatriation process. The "5 Rs" framework – Repatriation, Relocation, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Resilience – provides a comprehensive strategy for managing returns and preventing future radicalisation.

COMMENTARY

Following the abrupt shift in US foreign policy under the Trump administration, the precarious situation in Northeast Syria highlights a critical gap in the international counterterrorism framework. The suspension of USAID funding and wavering military support for the Syrian Democratic Forces created an operational vacuum that undermined both humanitarian relief and security containment efforts, particularly in detention facilities such as Al-Hol and Al-Roj. These camps hold thousands of people affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), including women and children from Southeast Asia.

As Richard Barrett, former Director of Global Counterterrorism at Britain's MI6, aptly observed, such instability poses far-reaching consequences beyond the Middle East. The disarray not only jeopardises regional counterterrorism efforts but also calls into question the international community's long-term commitment to the safe and sustainable resolution of the foreign fighter issue. The challenge is not merely logistical or legal – it is ontological.

Ontological Security in Counterterrorism Policy

The concept of *ontological security*, first introduced by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991), refers to the sense of continuity, stability, and order in one's self-identity and social environment. Applied to the context of women and children in the Syrian camps, ontological security extends beyond physical safety to include their psychological and existential need for belonging, coherence, and recognition.

As Mitzen (2006) has argued, individuals deprived of ontological security by war, displacement, or prolonged detention may become particularly susceptible to identity crises and extremist ideologies.

States also experience ontological insecurity. The uncertainty surrounding the return of foreign fighters, coupled with domestic political anxieties, fragmented legal mechanisms, and insufficient regional cooperation, often results in strategic paralysis. Inaction, however, carries consequences – not least of which is the deepening of marginalisation and the perpetuation of the very conditions that foster radicalisation.

Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Interconnected Vulnerabilities

The reverberations of policy decisions in the Middle East are acutely felt in Southeast Asia. The breakdown of camp security in Syria and Iraq risks enabling the resurgence of transnational jihadist networks, many of which maintain historical or ideological ties with Southeast Asian militants.

The region's experience with returning foreign terrorist fighters involved in terrorism ranging from the 2002 Bali bombings to the 2017 Marawi siege demonstrates how even a limited number of ideologically committed individuals can catalyse broader waves of violence and recruitment.

In particular, the plight of children born in IS-held territories and now held in detention camps presents a pressing concern. Their prolonged exposure to insecurity, statelessness, and ideological indoctrination, compounded by rejection from their countries of origin, increases the risk of intergenerational radicalisation.

While the United States and other external powers may periodically recalibrate their engagement, Southeast Asian states must contend with the direct and enduring consequences of inaction. This necessitates a shift from reactive measures to a proactive, rights-based, and contextually sensitive strategy grounded in restoring the ontological security of affected individuals.

From Rejection to Responsibility: Southeast Asia's Policy Dilemma

Estimates suggest that over 500 Southeast Asian nationals remain in detention facilities across Syria and Iraq, including a significant number of women and children. Despite clear international guidelines – including those issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – many regional governments remain hesitant to repatriate their citizens due to domestic political sensitivities and perceived security risks.

However, maintaining a policy of disengagement not only violates international obligations but also undermines long-term security objectives. A sustainable approach requires institutionalising a comprehensive framework encompassing material needs and existential dimensions. The "5 Rs" framework – Repatriation, Relocation, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Resilience – provides a useful operational and normative roadmap in this regard.

Restoring Ontological Security Through the "5 Rs" Framework

Repatriation: Affirming Legal Identity and State Responsibility

Repatriation constitutes the foundational step toward recovery. It re-establishes legal identity and affirms the state's obligation under international human rights law. The UN Global Programme on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (PRR) and its accompanying handbook on the children of foreign fighters emphasise repatriation, particularly of minors, as an essential element of counterterrorism policy.

In practice, between 2014 and 2019, as recorded by the Indonesian National Counterterrorism Task Force (BNPT), 1,861 Indonesian foreign terrorist fighters 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.

Malaysia has returned entire families under supervised repatriation, coordinated by its Special Branch. In the Philippines, a multi-agency approach led by the Anti-Terrorism Council uses individual risk, rehabilitation needs, and reintegration capacity to guide repatriation, with support from security forces and civil society, especially in high-risk areas like Mindanao. Singapore employs a strict, risk-based screening process led by the Internal Security Department (ISD), reflecting a balanced strategy between national security, rehabilitation, and community engagement.

Relocation: Facilitating Transitional Stabilisation

Relocation to transitional safe zones allows returnees to stabilise before full reintegration with society. The ASEAN Handbook on Promising Practices identifies such environments as critical in mitigating stigma and reducing the likelihood of ideological relapse.

Indonesia has implemented relocation programmes in collaboration with BNPT, Detachment 88, and civil society organisations. Malaysia and the Philippines have similarly explored temporary shelters and observation facilities, though implementation remains uneven due to capacity constraints.

Rehabilitation: Addressing Psychological, Theological, and Social Dimensions

Rehabilitation efforts must extend beyond religious re-education. Trauma-informed care, individualised psychological support, and identity reconstruction are essential components of an effective programme. Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) offers a widely cited model that integrates theological counselling with psychosocial interventions.

Indonesia has piloted initiatives in East Java incorporating art-based therapy and narrative reframing, while Malaysia combines vocational training with religious mentoring. The Philippines emphasises culturally grounded practices, such as interfaith dialogue and local rituals of reconciliation.

Reintegration: Building Social Trust and Agency

Reintegration remains the most complex and sensitive stage. It requires sustained community engagement, narrative transformation, and mechanisms for economic inclusion and social participation. The UN PRR framework emphasises the need for locally grounded approaches informed by community-specific dynamics.

In Indonesia, initiatives like Ruangobrol use transmedia storytelling to humanise returnees and facilitate empathy. Malaysia's use of community policing and employer engagement has shown promise, while Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) manages structured reintegration pathways through civic institutions and inter-agency collaboration.

Resilience: Strengthening Communities to Prevent Recidivism

Resilience, the "5 Rs" final component, focuses on the broader social environment. Building community capacity to withstand extremist narratives involves education, media literacy, and interfaith collaboration. Regional policy instruments such as the ASEAN Plan of Action to Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism call for whole-of-society approaches.

In Indonesia, working with civil society, BNPT convenes townhalls and youth campaigns through book discussions and the screening of documentary films to foster dialogue. Malaysia has initiated multi-stakeholder programmes between religious authorities and civil society.

In the Philippines, trauma recovery programmes in conflict-affected regions are linked to peace education efforts, while Singapore continues to promote inter-communal trust through initiatives such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs).

Conclusion: Towards a Regional Commitment to Ontological Security

The "5 Rs" framework offers Southeast Asia a comprehensive, contextually adaptable, and normatively grounded approach to managing the return of foreign fighters and their families. It aligns with global standards articulated by the United Nations and complements regional mechanisms under ASEAN's security architecture.

Yet, the principal challenge is not conceptual but political. Sustained implementation requires political will, institutional capacity, and inter-sectoral coordination. Most crucially, it demands a shift in perspective – from seeing returnees as liabilities to recognising their potential for transformation, reconciliation, and societal reintegration.

The fallout from the US withdrawal from Syria reveals the dangers of abandoning multilateral responsibility. Security vacuums, particularly in conflict zones, are not contained by geography. They ripple across borders, institutions, and generations.

This is a timely reminder for Southeast Asia that the region must not outsource its security to external actors.

Restoring ontological security is not a theoretical luxury. It is a strategic imperative. Without it, the cycle of alienation and radicalisation will persist. A managed return, grounded in dignity, legality, and community engagement, offers the best prospect for sustainable peace and regional resilience.

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