RSIS COMMENTARY

27 August 2025

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www.rsis.edu.sg No. 181 – 27 August 2025



# Protecting Minors from Online Radicalisation in Indonesia

*By Noor Huda Ismail and Putri Kusuma Amanda*

## SYNOPSIS

*The rise of JAD Nusantara, an ISIS-linked online network drawing in large numbers of minors, exposes serious gaps in Indonesia's child protection systems. Vulnerable adolescents, often grappling with bullying, isolation, or absent parents, are being recruited without showing clear outward signs of radicalisation. In line with UN child rights standards, Indonesia must adopt an approach that prioritises rehabilitative, child-centred responses, safeguarding children's rights while tackling the vulnerabilities and special needs that extremists exploit.*

## COMMENTARY

The case of a 12-year-old boy in Pemalang, Central Java, who joined the terrorist group JAD Nusantara, underscores a worrisome trend: radicalisation is increasingly happening entirely online, beyond parental or authority awareness.

Social media platforms and messaging apps serve as conduits, enabling extremist content to reach vulnerable youth undetected. Research analyses show that extremism thrives on platforms that offer anonymity, rapid dissemination, and emotional appeal – qualities that make virtual spaces ideal for radical recruitment.

Detecting online-driven radicalisation through traditional community surveillance is extremely difficult. Therefore, child protection systems need to adopt digital literacy and monitoring capabilities so that educators and social workers, not just security personnel, can recognise warning signs and intervene early.

A comprehensive society-wide strategy is needed – one that identifies young people at risk and engages them through pastoral, not punitive, channels.

## Risk Factors for Radicalisation Among the Young

International research links bullying with increased risk of psychological problems ranging from anxiety and depression to internet addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A study involving over 95,000 students in China found that those who had experienced severe bullying were significantly more likely to suffer emotional and behavioural problems – up to 11 times higher, depending on the severity.

Findings about the JAD Nusantara showed that many of its members had experienced bullying in school, felt socially excluded, and were from households where fathers were frequently absent due to the nature of their maritime employment. Such emotional voids render them vulnerable to online extremist circles. However, framing family instability as a sole reason for childhood adversity would add more pressure on parents who already face limited resources and capacity, especially those from poor and marginalised communities. Meanwhile, the role of the government and its service providers remains underexplored.

Knowing the risk factors is critical in designing child protection interventions that address the root vulnerabilities, rather than criminal behaviour alone. The approaches in protecting children would involve a multi-dimensional perspective and its intersection with other aspects of children's lives, such as health, education, social welfare, and access to justice.

It will also involve stakeholders at various levels: children at the centre, followed by families and caregivers, communities and societies, and then child protection systems. Underlying these is the need to address childhood adversity within the context of humanitarian and development efforts, including issues such as poverty, global politics, and migration.

## The Imperative for a Legal Protection Framework

International law strongly affirms the right of children to be treated with dignity and that their welfare takes priority even in the context of counterterrorism efforts. Article 37 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children deprived of liberty must be separated from adults, have access to prompt legal assistance, and be in family contact to the fullest extent.

UN entities, including the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UN International Crime and Research Institute (UNICRI), offer structured guidance on protecting children in terrorism-related contexts. Their "Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups" advocates a coordinated system-wide approach to prevention, rehabilitation, and societal reintegration.

These frameworks urge authorities to resist securitising children as perpetrators and instead reclaim their roles as children first, deserving empathy, care, and pathways back to normalcy. Many studies have shown that children are more receptive to rehabilitative programmes than adults, which can reduce recidivism and foster positive behaviour changes.

Indonesia's current non-arrest approach in Pemalang aligns laudably with this spirit, but this must be operationalised further through formal child protection mechanisms, and should be treated as an integral part of implementing Indonesia's child protection system.

**From Justice to Protection: Operationalising Child-Focused Response**

In the Pemalang case, Indonesia's counterterrorism squad, Detachment 88, adopted a non-repressive approach towards the young, working with the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPA) rather than pursuing prosecution. This reflects a commendable shift in recognising the young's vulnerability and special needs. At the same time, it underscores the need to strengthen Detachment 88's perspective and training, particularly in identifying children's vulnerabilities and linking them with support services such as those provided by KPPA.

However, KPPA personnel themselves often lack the specialised skills to address extremist indoctrination or the complex psychosocial needs of affected minors. The Pemalang case, therefore, reveals an urgent gap: the absence of a case management system and referral mechanism – especially between the justice sector and the child protection and social welfare systems – when handling cases involving minors.

This operational gap can be bridged by integrating international child protection principles, such as those in the "Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action" (CPMS), a "one-stop shop" for all the latest resources on child protection. These standards outline critical pillars: coordination, trained personnel, case management, and psychosocial support via safe spaces and community-based mechanisms.

Applying these standards would mean incorporating components from the child protection system into the nation's policies:

*Coordinated Assessment:* Bringing together security, education, child protection, and mental health experts – while integrating a cross-cultural approach – to assess the child holistically. This ensures that cultural sensitivities, community norms, and local contexts are considered when evaluating needs and designing interventions.

*Individualised Case Management:* Crafting a tailored support and rehabilitation plan that emphasises emotional healing, family engagement, and reintegration.

*Safe Environments:* Creating child-friendly spaces, physical or digital, where trust, dialogue, and alternative narratives to radical content can flourish.

*Capacity Building:* Training the police, educators, and child welfare personnel in identifying extremist grooming and responding with sensitivity, not fear.

**Prevention Through Empowerment**

Beyond individual interventions, building resilience at scale is crucial. The UN and leading scholars emphasise the need to enhance digital literacy, foster critical thinking, and promote credible alternative narratives. Using an ecological framework, this

involves strengthening protective factors across four levels: policy and systems, culture and society, the community, and family and caregivers.

In Indonesia, initiatives such as PROGRES (a school-based intervention) have demonstrated that prosocial, respectful values and awareness about radicalism can be significantly enhanced among young students. Teacher-led programmes in elementary schools increased prosocial attitudes by over 90 per cent and knowledge about radicalism by nearly the same margin.

Such programmes, combined with broader media literacy campaigns, such as digital misinformation training, are strategic prevention tools that bolster youth resilience against extremist messaging.

**Conclusion: Towards a Child-Centred Counter-Extremism Strategy**

The phenomenon of JAD Nusantara exemplifies a novel challenge: youth radicalised virtually, with no overt offline indicators, often stemming from hurt, exclusion, and isolation. Addressing this threat requires an urgent reframing of policy – from a purely security-centric model to one firmly rooted in child protection and rights.

By aligning with UN standards and mobilising cross-sector expertise – spanning security, education, mental health, and social services – Indonesia can craft responses that protect children, rehabilitate them, and strengthen community resilience against future extremism.

This is more than a policy shift; it is an ethical imperative. Children are not only vulnerable and in need of protection, but they also possess agency. That same agency can steer them toward extremist paths, but it can equally empower them to become active participants in building solutions.

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