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Issue Brief

The Silhouette of Indonesia's Foreign Returned Terrorist Fighters

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S*ummary*

Terrorism continues to be a pertinent threat to Indonesia's national security. Although the country has robust deradicalisation and counterterrorism plans, concerns relating to the Foreign Returned Terrorist Fighters (FRTF) who earlier joined the ISIS in Syria as combatants, remain. These returnees received training, combat experience, and inculcated extremist ideologies while fighting abroad. They have also carried out attacks in Indonesia's neighbourhood. Indonesia needs a robust policy response vis-à-vis FRTFs in terms of their integration, dismantling of networks, and regular monitoring of their activities.

Indonesian Islam has exhibited a highly syncretic culture due to its cultural affiliations with Hinduism and Buddhism. This is often visible in symbols of the Indonesian state and the cultural practices of the people. Despite living in such a syncretic culture, about 3.5 per cent of individuals who travelled to Syria to join ISIS during the Syrian Civil War to establish the ‘Islamic Caliphate’ came from Indonesia.¹ These individuals are known as ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ or FTFs. By definition, FTFs are non-citizens who do not reside in a conflict-affected state but join insurgencies.² These combatants typically don’t belong to a recognised military institution and have no links with the side they choose to fight for.³

Indonesia has been taking strict precautions in dealing with these returnees, who are also termed as foreign returning/returned terrorist fighters or FRTFs, through its deradicalisation and counterterrorism measures. However, these FRTFs have often proved detrimental to state’s security.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Ideas and Motivations

ISIS succeeded in attracting a significant number of volunteers from various nations across the globe to fight on its behalf and reside under its governance. A staggering 40,000 foreign nationals from 110 countries went to Iraq and Syria.⁴ Though a majority of the fighters originated from West Asia, a significant number of recruits also came from Southeast Asia. This included around 1,400 Indonesians who joined the ranks of ISIS, *al-Nusra*, and other violent non-state actors.⁵

ISIS's recruitment approach is multidimensional, as evidenced by the intricate interplay of numerous ideological and religious variables. The effectiveness of ISIS's recruitment strategy can be attributed to its astute manipulation of Islamic eschatology, which postulates that the final battle will transpire in *Sham*, or Greater Syria, comprising Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Syria.⁶ The link between Syria and Islamic prophecy appears to have increased the group's appeal to FTFs. This may be the reason why the FTF wave surged in 2015, at approximately 2,000 personnel per month, after ISIS proclaimed its caliphate in 2014.⁷ Additionally, its anti-Western rhetoric and pledge to uphold Islamic law in the area turned out to be potent recruiting tools.

¹ **“Foreign Terrorist Fighters Knowledge Hub”**, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 31 January 2023.

² David Malet, *Foreign Fighters Transnational: Identity in Civic Conflicts*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013.

³ Thomas Hegghammer, **“The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”**, *International Security*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, Winter 2010/11, pp. 53–94.

⁴ **“UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases”**, United Nations, 28 November 2017.

⁵ **“Foreign Terrorist Fighters Knowledge Hub”**, no. 1.

⁶ **“Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict”**, IPAC, 30 January 2014.

⁷ **“Foreign Terrorist Fighters Manual for Judicial Training Institutes Middle East and North Africa”**, UNODC, 2021.

Altruism or sentiments of solidarity with certain groups also served as motivations for some people. Besides, a variety of other personal situations and goals also influenced individual’s decision to participate in a 'foreign fight'. For instance, several members from Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a terrorist organisation, went to Syria not only because of their extremist beliefs but also for humanitarian reasons, that is, to take care of injured or orphans.⁸

Apart from these, the ideological devotion to Jihadist beliefs is a crucial component that encouraged a number of individuals to become FTFs. Jihad, commonly viewed as a ‘holy war’, has been ardently promoted throughout history by various notable Salafi individuals, with origins dating back to the scholar Ibn Taiyyimiyah in the 13th century. According to Ibn Taiyyimiyah, engaging in offensive warfare is deemed necessary to fulfill the Quranic obligation of “enjoining the right and prohibiting the wrong”.⁹

Radicalised Salafist Islamists regard Jihad as an imperative for religious duty, which, in turn, pushes them to become FTFs. This ideology was the critical factor that influenced majority of individuals to join ISIS. Socio-economic factors such as belongingness, respect, and opportunities offered by ISIS through its propaganda materials, employment, and other promised material benefits emerged as other important drivers in the recruitment of FTFs.¹⁰ Reportedly, certain Indonesian recruits viewed joining ISIS as an opportunity to obtain complimentary lodging, higher income, access to healthcare and education, and safeguarding for their families if they perished during combat.¹¹

Indonesian FTFs

The participation of Indonesian nationals as FTFs is not a novel phenomenon. Indonesia's vexation with extremism and radicalisation is a chronic issue. Several Indonesians travelled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to join the *Mujahideen* in fighting the Soviets. Many of these individuals later formed extremist groups in Indonesia, including the JI. Indonesians went to Afghanistan to receive training in order to engage in jihad within their own nation, as they viewed the Suharto administration's secular policies as hampering their attempts to impose *Sharia* in the nation.¹²

⁸ “**Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia**”, Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering and Global Center on Cooperative Security, November 2021.

⁹ David Aaron, *In Their Own Words Voices of Jihad*, RAND Corporation, California, 2008.

¹⁰ Greg Fealy and John Funston, “**Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State**”, USAID, 18 September 2015.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Solahudin, Translated by Dave McRae, *The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia: From Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah*, NUS Press, Singapore, 2013.

Following their training, many returned home and were involved in planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in the region, including the infamous 2002 Bali nightclub bombings and the Christmas Eve church bombings that occurred throughout Indonesia. Some fighters from Indonesia also travelled to Bosnia to join Bosnian Muslims during the war in the Balkans. In addition, Indonesian citizens have been involved in the Moro insurgency in the Philippines, fighting alongside militant groups such as the *Abu Sayyaf* group and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

FRTFs Involvement in Terrorism in Indonesia

The threat posed by roughly 700 FRTFs continues to raise significant concerns. The fact that FRTFs have recently been linked to a variety of terrorist acts only emphasises how vital it is to confront and reduce the risks posed by them. FRTF-perpetrated terrorist acts in Indonesia have moderately increased, with the majority of them targeting police personnel.¹³ An Indonesian couple executed a bombing attack on a church on the Jolo islands in Philippines in 2019.¹⁴ According to a report, this couple left for Turkey in March 2016 with the goal of crossing the border into Syria to join ISIS. After being deported to Indonesia in 2017 by Turkish authorities, the couple undertook a one-month deradicalisation programme in Indonesia.¹⁵ The pair was ultimately persuaded to travel to the Philippines to carry out the attack, which was facilitated by *Abu Sayyaf* group.

In a different reported case, a person joined the Free Syrian Army which is a rebel group. After completing a 12-day military training course there, he actively participated in battle until July 2013.¹⁶ He was later repatriated to Indonesia. Later, in the Indonesian province of Medan, this person organised an attack on a local police command in June 2018 with the intention of stealing firearms.¹⁷ According to a claim, the majority of *al-Nusra* recruits who entered through JI did so with the intention of developing their abilities to help the group's long-term objective of establishing *Sharia* state in the region.¹⁸

¹³ Ahmad El-Muhammady and Ben Schonveld, “**Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in South-East Asia**”, UNDP, 2020.

¹⁴ Jason Gutierrez, “**Philippines Cathedral Bombing Kills 20**”, *The New York Times*, 27 January 2019.

¹⁵ “**Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia**”, no. 8.

¹⁶ “**The Ongoing Problem of Pro-ISIS Cells in Indonesia**”, IPAC, 29 April 2019.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “**Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia**”, no. 8.

FRTFs have demonstrated involvement in the procurement of finances, either through fundraising efforts or self-funding, to assist the activities of ISIS in addition to their other goals. Notably, few FRTFs have been linked to funding operations aimed at making it easier for youths to join the violent Islamic State organisation with the objective of fighting in Syria and other conflict areas. These activities underscore the need to address the funding networks and processes that support extremist organisations and show the variety of roles and duties that FRTFs take on, extending beyond direct involvement in acts of violence.

In a documented incident, in order to facilitate financial transactions for ISIS, a suspected Indonesian FRTF connected to ISIS entered Thailand between 2016 and 2017 by evading the Indonesian authorities.¹⁹ In another incident, a deported Indonesian national who was apprehended in 2015 while attempting to enter Syria to join ISIS collected money from acquaintances to buy airline tickets and housing for himself to return Syria in 2017.²⁰ In such cases, interpersonal connections played an important role. Thus, these incidents highlight the intricate and varied strategies used by FRTFs to carry out their operations and get around security measures, and the need for all-encompassing strategies to stop the financial networks that support terrorist organisations.

Indonesia's Efforts to Combat FRTFs

Indonesia has robust counter-terrorism policies. As a co-sponsor of UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014), Indonesia supports the call for nations to take appropriate measures to tackle the issue of FRTFs. This includes preventing the recruitment of new FRTF members and their departure, implementing border surveillance, sharing information, and establishing programs for reintegration and rehabilitation. Additionally, Indonesia has organised several international conferences and provincial workshops with the participation of various nations for reciprocating information to improve global collaboration in resolving FRTF challenges.

Indonesia's elite Densus 88 has effectively taken down several terrorist networks, and the government has continued to improve the capacity of the police's counter-terrorism section. In 2021, the Indonesian government came up with a three-pronged action plan known as ‘Presidential Regulation Number 7 of 2021 governing the 2020–2024 National Action Plan for Preventing and Overcoming Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism’ which is based on three pillars—prevention; law enforcement; and international partnership and cooperation.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “**Foreign Terrorist Fighters Knowledge Hub**”, no. 1.

India and Possible FRTFs Threat

The threat from FRTFs in Southeast Asia is a pressing concern for India’s national security owing to the opening up after COVID-19, withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan and increase in the use of technology for purposes of recruiting terrorists and fomenting interreligious tensions. To be sure, participation of Indians as FTFs in Syria or, for instance, in Afghanistan has been relatively low as compared to Indonesia despite a large Muslim population. India did not see a strong wave of radicalisation associated with the rise of ISIS and thus its influence and its recruiting propaganda was minimal. A handful of women who went to live in Afghanistan with their husbands believed that the prophesied ‘Islamic Caliphate’ has been established by the IS.²² Others expressed their wish to reside in a *Sharia* governed territory. Some people expressed that they did not want or anticipate being forced into violent activities.²³ They were swayed by the ideal character of the caliphate as depicted in the Islamic State's propaganda.

The total count of ISIS cases investigated or under investigation by law enforcement agencies in India is slightly over 100.²⁴ This low volume of participation is largely due to government interception using cyber tools, the resistance from family members that often act as an effective deterrence to people engaging in jihadi activities, the ideological resistance from Indian Muslim clerics, racism faced by Indians travelling abroad, logistical difficulties of travelling as well as the degree of assimilation of Indian Muslims into Indian society, which is higher than that of Muslims in other countries.²⁵

Though India has largely been successful in keeping the issue of FRTF at bay, the IS may still continue to draw FRTFs to sustain its operations among other activities at places such as Afghanistan or the Line of Control.²⁶ In August 2019, an Indonesian national who had previously been employed as an instructor at an Islamic seminary was deported to Indonesia as he planned to travel to New Delhi for joining an ISIS group operating in Jammu and Kashmir.²⁷ There are also concerns about the extremist individuals who are part of networks connecting criminal and terrorist organisations which also constitute FRTFs. They have the potential of radicalising young people in the subcontinent, especially India. These extremists have links to social media platforms and criminal environments. A woman from the Philippines

²² **“Khorasan Files: The Journey of Indian 'Islamic State' Widows”**, *Strat News Global* on YouTube, 15 March 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mohammed Sinan Siyech, “India’s Foreign Fighter Puzzle”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 5 February 202, pp. 89–106.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ **“Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia”**, no. 8.

²⁷ Ibid.

made an effort to radicalise people in India by disseminating ISIS propaganda via Telegram, WhatsApp, and Facebook and further enticed them to volunteer for ISIS.²⁸

The terror outfits that operate in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia or the Philippines and ones that operate in South Asian countries like Pakistan do not exist in isolation. These terror outfits are intricately linked to each other either through ideology, modus operandi or the means through which they seek to achieve desired ends. The link between Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) of Indonesia and Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) along with Al-Qaida, the presence of several transnational terrorist groups in Bangladesh in alliance with the various fundamentalist organisations in the country, transfer of money and weapons among these groups along with imparting of training at several instances are just a few of the issues that have already been of particular concern for counter-terrorism efforts of South Asian countries in general and India in particular.

The establishment of various factions of the Islamic State, such as ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province), ISBP (Islamic State Bangladesh Province), ISPP (Islamic State Pakistan Province), and ISHP (Islamic State Hind Province) in its backyard, exacerbates the concern over FRTFs for India, as all these organisations tend to facilitate the recruitment and movement of FRTFs. Thus India needs to be vigilant, and have proper monitoring mechanisms in place to check the flow of transnational FRTFs who might infiltrate India under the pretext of other activities. Exorbitant funds that enter India in the name of charity also need constant monitoring in terms of their sources, means, and ends, as there have been cases of it being facilitated by FRTFs.

Conclusion

Both India and Indonesia have been concerned about the spread of extremist ideologies, as they have experienced acts of terrorism. The threat from foreign terrorist fighters is no different. Although Indonesia's response to terrorism has largely been effective, it still needs a robust policy response vis-à-vis returning FTFs in terms of their integration, dismantling of their networks, and regular monitoring of their activities. History suggests that these FRTFs are well-versed when planning terrorist activities. A concerted effort is required not only from Indonesia and India but also other nations to deal with this menace. Against the backdrop of COVID-19, Ukraine conflict, and the intensification of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region, the issue of terrorism and its related facets should not be relegated to the background.

²⁸ Raul Dancel, “[Philippines Arrests Top Female ISIS Recruiter](#)”, *The Strait Times*, 18 October 2017.

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