Analysis of the Potential Threat of Indonesian Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria to Indonesia

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Abstract

The movement of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in Syria has emerged as a global phenomenon, drawing serious attention from numerous countries due to its significant scale. Indonesia is among the nations contributing to the movement of FTFs in this context. A critical aspect currently under scrutiny is the discourse around their repatriation to Indonesia. Therefore, a key component that must be considered is the potential threat these individuals pose upon returning to Indonesia. To address this, the study employs a qualitative approach, gathering data through literature reviews and interviews with stakeholders directly involved with Indonesian FTFs. The research provides an analysis of the various potential threats posed by these FTFs upon their return to Indonesia, based on a review of literature and factual data regarding the actions previously undertaken by FTFs in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Thread, Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Deportee, Returnee.*

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A. INTRODUCTION

In the quest to foster development, peace and stability are essential. Unstable situations such as conflicts represent a critical barrier to development, not only causing direct human suffering and severe socio-economic disruptions but also significantly hindering the achievement of MDGs and other development objectives (Hong, 2015). Conflict is heavily influenced by political stability and impacts per capita income. Therefore, maintaining stability is crucial to reducing the risk of conflict (Shiva & Molana, 2022).

In efforts to preserve security and stability, elements of national resilience are necessary for sustainable development. National resilience is not limited to a country's capacity to face threats and attacks, but also strongly influences prevention through the support of 'political, military, and societal readiness, making it a less attractive target for adversaries. Understanding national resilience can serve as a foundation for strengthening policy-making. Enhancing national resilience should prioritize the importance of inter-agency collaboration, investment in critical infrastructure, and enhanced capacity to address complex threats (Ablong, 2024). This is a crucial component in facing future challenges.

The threats disrupting national resilience are ever-present. These threats include factors that can endanger national security and the overall well-being of society. The impact of these threats on national security is significant, including disruptions to stability and community security, substantial economic losses, threats to sovereignty and national security, disruptions to critical infrastructure and services, and health and environmental threats. National threats may also include global

contextual issues such as transnational crime. Therefore, it is important for governments and security agencies to identify, prevent, and effectively respond to these threats to protect the security and welfare of the nation and its people (Homeland Security, 2024).

One such threat is terrorism. Both foreign and domestic terrorism remain major threats to nations (Homeland Security, 2024). Currently, transnational terrorism is a primary threat in the context of global security. Transnational terrorism can create instability within societies, disrupt the daily lives of citizens, and damage critical infrastructure. The cumulative effects of these threats can endanger national sovereignty. These threats can disrupt a country's internal stability, threaten the continuity of legitimate government, and undermine national security (Calléja, 2021).

The threat of terrorism is particularly dangerous due to terrorists' continual innovation and introduction of new tactics. Innovation is driven by an enhanced security environment, the need to overcome new obstacles, and the drive to gain advantages. In response to new challenges, terrorist groups innovate in tactics, technology, and strategy to improve effectiveness and adaptability. They also adjust to changes in the security environment, enhancing creativity and flexibility in attack planning, and leveraging social media and propaganda to extend their influence. Through such innovations, terrorists become more unpredictable and effective in planning and executing attacks, thereby increasing the potential damage and impact they can cause (Lubrano, 2023).

One innovation tactic is the use of social media. Social media serves as a propaganda tool used to influence and recruit new members. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) utilizes online platforms to inspire mass violence. Additionally, they produce propaganda content that includes the material, spiritual, and social benefits of joining ISIS. The results show that propaganda highlighting the benefits of joining ISIS enhances online support for the group (Tamar Mitts, Phillips, & Walter, 2021).

The social media propaganda employed by terrorist groups like ISIS is highly effective and innovative. It significantly impacts the recruitment of individuals who feel alienated and are seeking a purpose in their lives. They use visually appealing and emotionally engaging propaganda, such as videos and magazines, that depict a utopian society under their control. ISIS uses themes such as Urgency, Agency, Authenticity, and Victory to attract potential recruits. They are informed that they are impactful, that they are fighting for a legitimate Muslim state, and that their actions will lead to victory. This propaganda has played a key role in influencing individuals from various countries to join ISIS and become Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) (Gerstel, 2022).

The effective use of social media by ISIS has given rise to the phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF). According to data from ICCT, the movement of FTFs initiated by ISIS represents the largest movement of FTFs in history (Schmid, 2015). This is illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. FTF Movement to Syria

Conflict	Number of Foreign Fighters
Afghanistan (1978-1992)	5,000 – 10,000
Bosnia (1992-1995)	1,000 – 3,000
Somalia (1993-2014)	250 – 450
Chechnya (1994-2009)	200 – 700
Afghanistan (2001-2014)	1,000 – 1,500
Iraq (2003-2014)	4,000 – 6,000
Syria (2011-2014)	10,000

Source: ICCT

Subsequently, according to the research presented in the Policy Brief on Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates, the number of recruits joining militant groups, especially the Islamic State (IS), surged significantly from fewer than 1,000 in 2011 to over 25,000 by fall 2015. Indeed, almost 30,000 militants from more than 100 countries have become foreign fighters with IS in Syria and Iraq. This spike in the number of foreign fighters reflects an enormous scale and indicates a significant impact on global security and counter-terrorism efforts. The recruitment from various countries and backgrounds has made the FTF movement in Syria a major focus in the global efforts to address the threat of international terrorism (Schmid, 2015). In Southeast Asia, the phenomenon of FTFs is a primary concern for Indonesia, which has the largest number of FTFs, including some with the highest risk profiles (El-Muhammady, 2020).

The issue intensifies when FTFs need to return to their home countries due to being deported or becoming returnees. The collapse of ISIS power following attacks from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led to the expulsion of FTFs and their repatriation to their countries of origin. These individuals are referred to as returnees (The Habibie Center, 2019). Additionally, there are individuals who are captured and deported while en route before reaching ISIS territories. These are the deportees. Moreover, many FTFs affiliated with terrorist groups in various other countries also need to be repatriated. This necessitates a deeper examination of their arrival back in their home countries, particularly Indonesia.

Returnees and deportees pose potential threats that need to be considered. They return to their homeland after being exposed to radical ideologies and possibly participating in armed conflicts abroad. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the potential threats that may arise from Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and deported individuals. Thus, this research seeks to understand and anticipate the impacts and risks associated with their reintegration into society, particularly in Indonesia. The study examines various threats already discussed in literature and those posed by deportees and returnees who have returned to Indonesia.

B. METHOD

This research aims to analyze the potential threats of Indonesian Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria to Indonesia using a qualitative approach. Data collection

instruments include observation, interviews, and document studies. The research adopts a qualitative design to gain a deep understanding of the potential threats posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to Indonesia. Data analysis is conducted using Miles and Huberman's data triangulation to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. Data collection techniques involve observation, surveys, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis will use Miles and Huberman's Triangulation, gathering data from various sources using diverse data collection techniques, and performed continuously until data saturation is achieved. The results of the study are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the potential threats from Foreign Terrorist Fighters, as well as offer policy recommendations for mitigating these threats.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on data findings from the Directorate of Operation of the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), it was discovered that there were 306 Indonesian FTF combatants who have been deported and become returnees, and those who are still in conflict zones in Syria, the Philippines, and Afghanistan, detailed as follows (Direktorat Penindakan BNPT, 2023):

Table 2. Data on Indonesian Combatants

Status	Number of People
Deported Fighter	1
Fighter Returnees	157
Fighter in Conflict Zone, Syiria	138
Fighter in Conflict Zone, Philippines	7
Fighter in Conflict Zone, Afghanistan	3
Total	306

Source: 2024 Annual Report of the Directorate of Operation, BNPT

The numbers presented are quite significant, especially given the data from combatants which far exceed the numbers of typical Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF). This indicates that Indonesians who join as FTFs are largely resolved to become fighters or combatants actively engaged in conflict zones. This situation poses a serious challenge when considering the potential threats posed by their return from conflict zones to Indonesia.

Additionally, the data also shows that a large number of Indonesians who were FTFs have returned to Indonesia, both as returnees and deportees. During their return, various actions have been taken. According to findings from the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) Enforcement Directorate, there are deportees and returnees who live ordinary lives after returning to Indonesia, but there are also some who rejoin terrorist networks. This suggests that some returnees and deportees are unable to detach from their terrorist network groups and have the potential to rejoin. Although most deportees and returnees successfully reintegrate into society and lead normal lives, threats can also emerge from those who appear to be living normally.

They remain susceptible to the influence of radical ideologies or terrorism, whether through recruitment back into terrorist networks or exposure to extremist narratives. Moreover, some of them may experience psychological stress or trauma, making them vulnerable to manipulation or involvement in covert terrorist activities. Therefore, security and intelligence agencies need to remain vigilant and monitor deportees and returnees, implementing preventative and detection measures to mitigate potential threats from this group.

The researcher explores the potential threats posed by deportees and returnees through literature review and research on groups that directly monitor them at the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT). Through this approach, the researcher gathers various information related to their potential dangers associated with terrorism. By leveraging the knowledge and experience of practitioners involved in direct monitoring of these groups, the researcher can develop a more in-depth and accurate analysis of the potential threats that may arise from them.

Based on the literature, it has been found that returnees rejoining terrorist groups due to confusion and isolation when they return to their home country. Especially if they are rejected by society, which ultimately pushes them back to extremist networks that still accept them (El-Muhammady, 2020). Additionally, returnees who rejoin terrorist groups are more respected and viewed with higher regard. Foreign fighters who return often possess significant "street credibility" (Zuijdewijn, 2014). Their status and experience in the battlefield make them more influential in spreading radical ideologies and recruiting new members (Malet & Hayes, 2020). Their significant influence inspires jihadist activities and awakens sleeper cells that may not yet be activated (See, 2018).

Deportees and returnees who are rejected by society but accepted by terrorist networks with high credibility have the potential to become leaders within the terrorist networks they belong to. This is due to several factors. First, they usually have extensive experience and knowledge about the ideologies, tactics, and strategies used by terrorist networks. Their experience as former members or sympathizers of terrorists gives them legitimacy in the eyes of network members. Second, deportees and returnees are often seen as heroes by terrorist network members who view them as victims of "government injustice." This high moral credibility allows them to lead and influence network members more effectively. Third, they typically have strong relationships and extensive networks among terrorists, both domestically and internationally. This allows them to quickly gain support and loyalty from other network members. Thus, deportees and returnees with high credibility in terrorist networks can easily attain leadership positions and play a significant role in the terrorist activities conducted by the network.

Their combat experience, the networks they build, and the radical ideologies they bring back can strengthen terrorist networks and enhance the operational capabilities of jihadist groups. Some of them involved in terrorist networks in conflict zones become convinced that it is not only important to fight for the oppressed abroad but also to target their home country (Zuijdewijn, 2014). The skills they bring,

including professional propaganda, sophisticated bomb-making, and improvised explosive device construction, as well as drone operation capabilities, can easily be disseminated to other individuals or groups, increasing their capacity to carry out terrorist attacks (El-Muhammady, 2020). On the other hand, the combat experience brought by the returnees can enhance their ability to carry out terrorist attacks and become more dangerous (Zuijdewijn, 2014). Returnees often have extensive combat experience, which not only makes them more effective fighters (El-Muhammady, 2020). Given this, it is necessary to reflect on several attacks that have involved returnees.

Deportees and returnees with combat experience can function as trainers and field commanders for terrorist networks when they return. Their experience on the battlefield gives them deep knowledge of effective tactics, strategies, and combat techniques. They can share this knowledge with local terrorist network members, enhancing their skills in planning and executing attacks. Additionally, as former soldiers, they may have skills in weapon use and combat strategies that can enhance the operational capabilities of terrorist networks. Their expertise in planning military operations and leading troops can also assist terrorist networks in designing and executing more complex and effective attacks. Therefore, the presence of experienced deportees and returnees can significantly enhance the capabilities of terrorist networks and threaten national security.

Thus, the role of returning FTFs in terrorist groups, including propagandists, and as recruiters, trainers, thus strengthening the operational capacity of the group. Therefore, the threat from returning FTFs lies not only in their potential to carry out terrorist attacks but also in their ability to strengthen domestic terrorist networks, encourage recidivism, and spread radical ideologies (See, 2018). In this regard, although they may not be directly involved in terrorist activities, they are considered spiritual guides for future terrorists, thus posing an indirect threat by continuously nurturing local jihadist communities (Zuijdewijn, 2014).

Deportees and returnees who return have great potential to play a role in strengthening ideologies and recruitment in their communities. With the experience and knowledge they gained while joining terrorist networks abroad, they can become strong agents of influence in spreading radical ideologies among the local community. Through lectures, discussions, and personal influence, they can strengthen the ideological beliefs of new and existing members within the terrorist network. Additionally, as individuals with direct experience in militancy, they can provide significant encouragement in recruiting new individuals to join the terrorist network, either directly or through their networks. Their presence can also provide legitimacy and authority to terrorist networks, increasing their appeal to potential new members.

The actions carried out by returning FTFs are a common and frequent phenomenon internationally. The involvement of foreign fighters in carrying out terrorist actions in their home countries raises significant concerns. Based on research, it has been found that about one in four terrorists in the West is a foreign fighter or former foreign fighter. This indicates that they play a significant role in terrorist

activities in their home country after returning from conflicts abroad (Zuijdewijn, 2014).

In addition, returning FTFs often have combat experience, military training, and tactical skills they acquired while on the battlefield. This makes them potential to carry out more lethal and organized attacks. Returning FIFs are more likely to be involved in deadly attacks. Analysis shows that attacks involving returnees are twice as likely to be deadly, based on a sample of 11 deadly attacks over thirty years worldwide in the West (Malet & Hayes, 2020).

The potential threat and concern that they may use the experience and skills acquired during conflicts to carry out terrorist acts are valid. The terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, which involved French and Belgian citizens, some of whom had gone to conflict in Syria for training and then returned to carry out terrorist acts against their home country (Beall, 2019).

The return of deportees and returnees to Indonesia has the potential to significantly impact the amplification of the terrorist network's ability to recruit, train, and carry out attacks. With the experience and skills they possess, they are able to make a substantial contribution to enhancing the resilience and capabilities of the terrorist network. As trainers and field commanders, they can teach the combat tactics and strategies they master to new members, which in turn enhances the operational effectiveness of the terrorist network.

Additionally, their role in strengthening ideologies and recruitment can result in an increase in the number of members who are strongly committed to the ideological goals of the terrorist network. By expanding their network, they can enlarge the base of supporters and sympathizers, which in turn increases leverage and potential to launch attacks. Moreover, the combat experience and knowledge about bomb-making or other attack tactics possessed by deportees and returnees can be used to plan more complex and deadly attacks.

These impacts can lead to an increase in the intensity and frequency of terrorist attacks, as well as increase vulnerability and tension in society. With individuals possessing the ability and motivation to launch attacks, the potential threat of terrorism can increase significantly. Therefore, it is important to anticipate and address the return of deportees and returnees with appropriate strategies, including strengthening intelligence, holistic prevention approaches, and close international cooperation in facing terrorism threats.

In the context of Indonesia, based on data findings from the analysis by the BNPT Enforcement Directorate, there have been several terrorist attacks involving returning FTFs in Indonesia. These attacks include: Thamrin Bombing on January 14, 2016, Mapolresta Surakarta Bombing on July 5, 2016, attack on Mapolda Sumut guards on June 25, 2017, Jolo Church Bombing in the Philippines on January 27, 2019. These actions are major incidents that have had a direct impact on victims and a broader impact on terror. This also shows the great potential of returning FTFs to be involved in deadly terrorist actions.

In general, the involvement of FTFs in terrorist attacks begins from their influence abroad and while in Indonesia. A well-known name in this regard is Bahrun Naim. He orchestrated the Thamrin attack and the attack on Mapolresta Surakarta. In addition, the attack on Mapolda Sumut was carried out by a returnee from Syria. Another surprising attack was carried out by Indonesian FTFs in the Philippines at the Jolo church bombing. Threats by FTFs in Indonesia are not only focused on threats written in existing literature.

The return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) as returnees and deportees poses a very large potential threat. Generally, returning returnees and deportees have the potential to spread radicalism and strengthen groups, and have a great potential to re-engage in terrorist actions. The development of terrorism in the form of the FTF phenomenon shows the potential and spread of jihad has become transnational and needs to be addressed globally. They can fight to carry out jihad in other regions with the encouragement of belief and the spread of radicalization.

The transnational spread of radicalization is also supported by the development and utilization of social media technology. They effectively use social media as a form of information dissemination and member recruitment. The use of social media demonstrates the continuous innovation of terrorism, adapting to the development of the times and new methods to remain relevant. This certainly needs special attention because terrorist groups that are increasingly adept at adapting have the potential to disrupt the security and stability of the state. The development and growth of terrorism must also be accompanied by the development of strategies and policies to respond to it so that national resilience can be maintained and stability and security of the state can be created.

One thing that cannot be forgotten regarding the role of FTFs in the dynamics of terrorism in Indonesia is the establishment of Jemaah Islamiyah (Solahudin, 2006). In the establishment of Jemaah Islamiyah, Abdullah Sungkar, as the first leader of Jemaah Islamiah, made contact with Afghan combatants. This contact was made to pave the way for Darul Islam cadres to receive training in the region. Upon their return from Afghanistan, they established Jemaah Islamiyah, which carried out the largest terror attacks in Indonesia several years later.

D. CONCLUSION

The return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) to Indonesia poses a number of dangerous potential threats. The FTFs who have been and participated in training in conflict zones return with a wealth of radical understanding and experience. The potential threats posed include the spread of radicalism, the strengthening of network groups, and the potential for more deadly attacks. In addition, they can also carry out direct attacks that were previously unimaginable that Indonesians could carry out large-scale attacks in the Philippines. Not only that, Indonesian FTFs who are still in conflict zones are able to orchestrate attacks in Indonesia from such great geographical distances. Lastly, history has also shown that FTFs returning to Indonesia have been able to establish the oldest terror network in Indonesia, which is still active to this day,

namely Jemaah Islamiyah. Such threats are the greatest because they accumulate various individuals with similar ideas to become larger by spreading their ideas through recruiting new members.

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