Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters *in South-East Asia*

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BNPT	*Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* or the National Counter Terrorism Agency (Indonesia)
FTF	foreign terrorist fighter
IS	Islamic State
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah (Indonesia)
KEMENSOS	*Kementerian Sosial* or the Ministry of Social Affairs (Indonesia)
PVE	preventing violent extremism
UNCCT	United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism
POTA	The Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (Malaysia)
SMATA	The Special Measures Against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act 2015 (Malaysia)

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Reports can be downloaded at
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AT LEAST 800 ≅ 1,400 INDONESIANS ≅ 100 MALAYSIANS ARE KNOWN TO HAVE TRAVELLED TO THE MIDDLE EAST TO JOIN THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) OR OTHER GROUPS.

The Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. @UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jules Ong

South-East Asians who went to fight in Iraq and Syria are beginning to return home. Some 800 to 1,400 Indonesians and 100 Malaysians travelled to the Middle East to join the Islamic State (IS) or other groups and a smattering of others from South-East Asian states went too.

The number of those who will return home is unknown, and not all will pose a threat. Whatever their experience in the Middle East and whatever their intentions in coming home, all who return—whether or not they face judicial proceedings—will require comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration to return to society. South-East Asian governments are concerned that returnees may galvanize violent extremism at home. Coordinated responses calibrated to the level of risk and needs of each returnee are necessary.

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) include not just those involved in active combat but also non-combatants. FTFs include women who went to build the Caliphate declared in 2014 and who may have taken an active role in combat. They include the children who travelled to Syria and Iraq with their parents or those who were born there. Returnees will also include deportees who were detained en route. Many of the highest risk South-East Asian FTFs are being held in Kurdish-controlled camps in northern Syria.

In South-East Asia, the FTF phenomenon is primarily a concern for Indonesia and Malaysia. They have previous experience with deradicalization and disengagement programmes, yet little is known about their effectiveness. Indonesia has the largest number of FTFs, including some of the highest risk FTFs, but it has yet to decide how to deal with them. Policies and programming are emerging but are far from comprehensive.

In Malaysia there is cross-party agreement to repatriate all Malaysian FTFs as long as they submit to mandatory rehabilitation. Where sufficient evidence exists, individuals will be prosecuted. Returnees will participate in Malaysia's longstanding deradicalization programme, which runs in prisons as well as after detention. Those released are subject to supervision orders, counselling and religious education, as well as assistance to facilitate reintegration.

Some reintegration responses, particularly in Indonesia, assume that it is possible to replace extremist beliefs with nationalism and "correct" interpretations of Islam. They pay less attention to the complex drivers that led to an individual's radicalization. This approach is problematic as there is no evidence that "extremist ideas"—perhaps enabled by identity conflicts or group dynamics—by themselves lead people to violence or terrorism. Moreover, government efforts to determine what is legitimate religious belief and practice is fraught with risk.

Prisons and prison conditions are central to radicalization as well as to deradicalization and reintegration. If not managed carefully, prisons may allow violent extremist networks to flourish. Some prisons tend to isolate violent extremists from the general population. This approach may harden beliefs; exposure to the general prison population could help challenge such views and increase prospects of successful rehabilitation.

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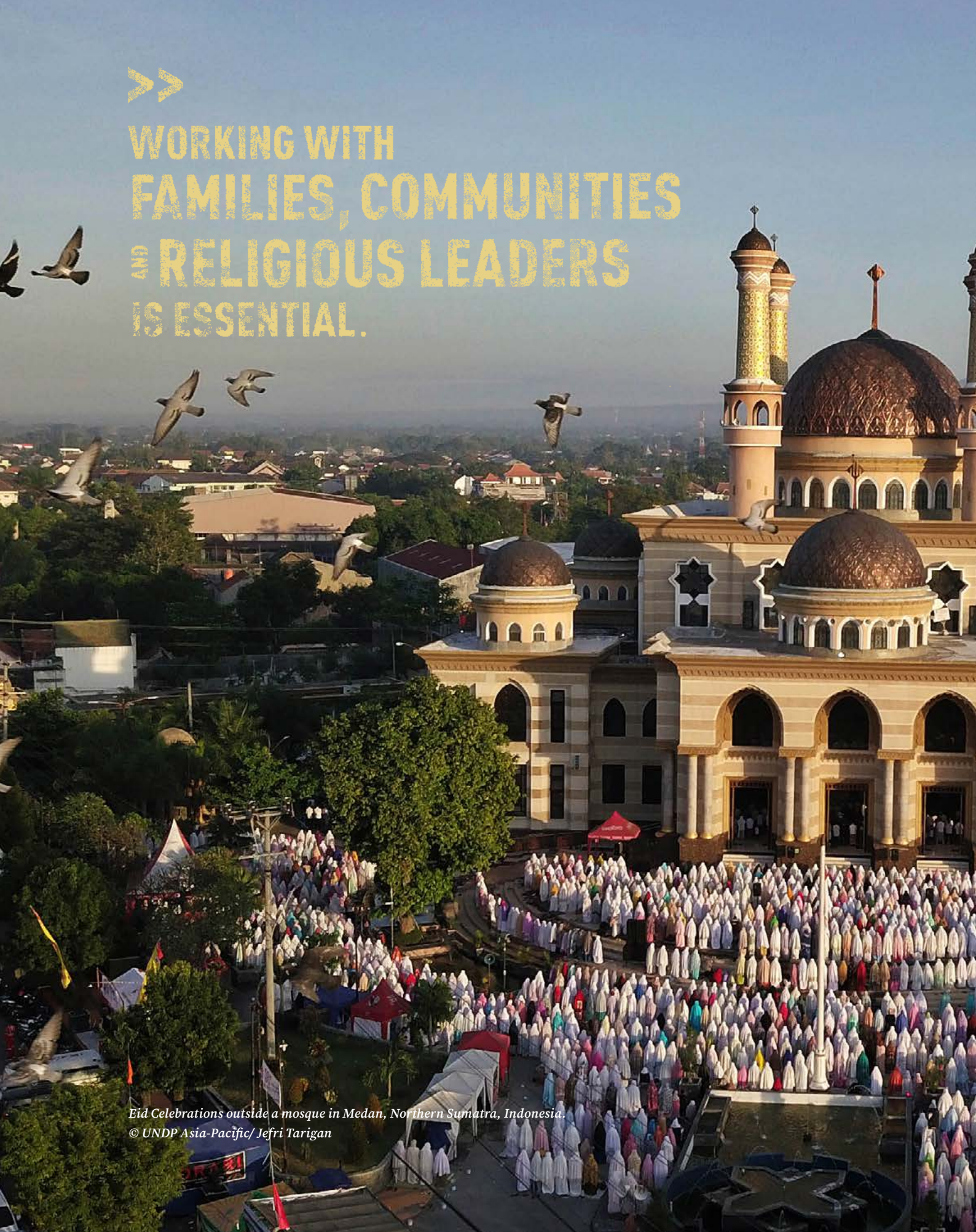
GOVERNMENTS NEED TO DEVELOP MORE DETAILED KNOWLEDGE OF WHY SOME PEOPLE CHOSE TO BECOME AN FTF IN THE FIRST PLACE AND WHY THEY ULTIMATELY DECIDED TO RETURN TO THEIR HOME COUNTRIES.

Governments need to develop more detailed knowledge of why some people chose to become an FTF in the first place and why they ultimately decided to return to their home countries. Governments need to devote resources to training sufficient staff to assess and monitor returning FTFs and their families. Returnees present varying levels of risk that have to be determined with subtlety and nuance. For example, there are social assumptions that women are low risk, when in fact, women both carry out and drive terrorist attacks. Responses need to be grounded in the law, the protection of human rights and evidence.

Many FTFs went to the Middle East to find a like-minded community. They are likely to return to extremist networks if they find themselves isolated or shunned back at home. Many will be wary of them, particularly if they are seen to attract surveillance and intrusion in a community. Working with families, communities and religious leaders is therefore essential. Individuals need to be led away from seeing violence as a solution to their problems and provided with a viable alternative. Policies need to change as situations change, which in itself requires constant and realistic assessments of how well those policies are working.



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WORKING WITH FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS IS ESSENTIAL.

Eid Celebrations outside a mosque in Medan, Northern Sumatra, Indonesia.
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INTRODUCTION

The reach of the Islamic State (IS)[1] is much diminished in the Middle East but as South-East Asians who went to fight in Iraq and Syria return home, governments need an effective response.

Citizens fighting abroad is not new, nor is their eventual return home a surprise. However, the number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria was unprecedented: over 40,000 foreigners from over 80 countries. At least 800 to 1,400 Indonesians and 100 Malaysians are known to have travelled to the Middle East to join the Islamic State or other groups. A smattering of others from South-East Asia went too.[2]

The foreign terrorist fighter (FTF)[3] phenomenon relates not only to those involved in active combat but also to non-combatants who may have provided other forms of support or assistance to proscribed organizations. The phenomenon includes women who travelled to build the Caliphate declared by IS in 2014, some of whom took up active combat roles. It also includes children who travelled to Syria and Iraq with their parents and those who were born there. Whatever their experience, almost all who return, whether or not they face judicial proceedings, will require comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration to return to society without presenting a security threat.

Returnees from the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s were central to the revitalization of violent extremist groups around the world, including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Malaysia and Indonesia.[4] However, FTFs who went to Pakistan and Afghanistan travelled with the specific intention of gaining combat skills to bring home. They trained but few fought in the conflict. This differs from those who have gone to fight in the Middle East since 2014, seeking to become a permanent part of the Caliphate or those who are drawn by apocalyptic prophecies that suggest a final battle will take place there. FTFs took their families with them, signalling that they had no intention of returning.

Many FTFs are battle-hardened and may have skills in professional propaganda, advanced bomb-making and improvised explosive device-building skills, and in operating drones. Many have witnessed or perpetrated acts of terror, war crimes and genocide against the Yazidi people, among others. South-East Asian governments are concerned that returnees may galvanize

extremism at home, and that the networks they have formed in Iraq and Syria may strengthen regional and international terror links. Many of those who tried to fight in the Middle East never made it; they were detained in Turkey or elsewhere and sent home. This group, whose ambitions to join IS were thwarted, may represent a danger in that their ardour for the group has not been tempered by the realities of war and the deadly battles at the end of the Caliphate.

Little is currently known about South-East Asian FTFs. Analysis tends towards highlighting worst case scenarios and amplifying risks, and is often based on poor evidence. Nobody knows how many FTFs will return or how they will behave. The brutal conflict in the Middle East means that many may have been killed. Those who remain in Syrian Kurdish-controlled camps may stay there. The region is so volatile that it is impossible to make predictions; nevertheless, governments have a responsibility to reduce risks to their citizens and should develop policies for returning FTFs.

Febri left Indonesia to be reunited with his family who had joined the Caliphate in Syria.
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LITTLE DATA AND STUDIES ARE AVAILABLE TO RETURNED FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS.

A woman walks through a rice paddy field in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia.
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan

Do FTFs represent a threat?

There is no clear agreement about whether FTFs are a major risk. Little data and studies are available. Research has focused on incarcerated men, the easiest subjects to identify and interview. Their answers may or may not be reliable. People are often poor reporters of their motivations.[5] Those who are considering violence may not be in jail and are unlikely to be open to interviews.[6]

Most research has focused on the return of European fighters.[7] Invariably the datasets are incomplete and inconsistent. One study found that only one in 300 FTFs will engage in a terrorist attack once they return home.[8] Yet another study said that returnees were responsible for half of all attacks in Europe in the two and a half years following January 2014.[9] Research by Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer was widely misrepresented to show that approximately 10 percent of returnees would become domestic terrorists on their return.[10] However, his later research concluded that only 0.002 percent of returnees would be violent.[11] A study focusing on the United States showed that plots involving a returned FTF were less likely to succeed and less likely to cause mass casualties, probably because returnees were known to authorities and therefore plots were foiled.[12]

Public debate about FTFs tends to be emotional, arguably driven by domestic political pressure, and fed by the extreme violence of IS and sensationalist journalism. In Western countries, populist and Islamophobic narratives have claimed that terrorists are disguising themselves as refugees to form IS sleeper cells.[13] While several former FTFs were involved in attacks in Brussels, Paris, Istanbul and London between 2015 and 2017, detailed research on European FTFs concluded that there were no sleeper cells.[14] The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism reported to the UN General Assembly in 2016 that there was “little evidence” that terrorists systematically exploit refugee flows, concluding that such claims were “analytically and statistically unfounded and must change.”[15]

Over time, the risk posed by returnees seems to diminish. Research found that most attacks involving FTFs occurred within one year of return to their home countries with almost none occurring after two years. The study suggested short-term monitoring and found that prison played no role in reducing risk.[16] A comparative historical analysis by the same researcher found that few FTFs returned to join a domestic insurgency.[17] Notably, the study warned that denying repatriation may present serious risks. Arab fighters who were not able to return home from Afghanistan in the 1990s instead joined various conflicts around the world.

International responses to FTFs

Several binding UN Security Council Resolutions, notably 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017), impose a legal obligation on states to bring terrorists to justice and to develop and implement appropriate prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning FTFs.

However, many countries have indicated that they intend to do nothing or will not actively repatriate their citizens, even children.[18] Several states have stripped FTFs of their nationality to prevent their return, at times in violation of international law if such a measure renders an individual stateless.[19] FTFs instead face three options. First, they may die on the battlefield. Second, they may be tried where they have committed their crimes in Iraq and Syria. Fair trials seem unlikely, however, and the difficulty in collecting evidence may lead to FTF release. Third, they may languish in camps across Syria and Iraq, which are holding more than 70,000 prisoners, a majority of whom are the family members of IS fighters. These areas are volatile, not least following the Turkish invasion, and prisoners have already escaped from the camps.

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IGNORING THE PROBLEM OF FTFS IS RISKY. THERE IS EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT *IS* REMAINS A DANGEROUS ORGANIZATION WITH THE CAPACITY TO ADAPT AND REORGANIZE.

Ignoring the problem of FTFs is risky. There is every reason to believe that IS remains a dangerous organization with the capacity to adapt and reorganize. Critics have pointed out that refusing to repatriate, prosecute and reintegrate returnees means a loss of potentially valuable intelligence.[20] High-value FTFs have information about IS operations, structures and planning. Moreover, those who return disillusioned can be credible and powerful voices against the organization.[21]

Radicalization and return: the evidence

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THE REASONS THAT LEAD PEOPLE TO RETURN HOME ARE AS DIVERSE AS THE DECISIONS TO LEAVE AND FIGHT.

Research suggests there is no typical terrorist. Radicalization theories have focused on the individual and ideology at the expense of considering root causes and political mobilization.[22]

As noted by the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action on PVE, radicalization is "highly individual, has no discernible path, is non-linear, has a vast range of 'push' and 'pull' factors, but has no single determining feature."[23] Notably, this conclusion mirrors earlier findings of research on non-Islamist terrorists before 9/11.[24] There are broad patterns, but drivers are very individual.[25]

FTFs who travelled to Iraq and Syria likewise had diverse motives. IS was able to attract those looking to live in the Caliphate under Islamic law. It also drew those with an eschatological bent who wanted to be close to the events of the supposed "end of times." Financial incentives played a role for some.[26] Others were seeking adventure or a chance for personal redemption after a life of crime. About a fifth of those recruited in Europe were converts, and many were involved in crime.[27]

The reasons that lead people to return home are as diverse as the decisions to leave and fight. Even less is known about FTF return than departure. A global survey for the United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT) could only interview 43 FTFs worldwide despite significant Member State backing.[28] The study identified several reasons for return. The most significant factor was disappointment and disillusionment with the armed groups they joined or life under the Caliphate. Some were disgusted over the extreme violence. Social networks, primarily families, were another powerful motivator to return home. However, accounts given by people potentially facing serious criminal charges and long prison sentences need to be treated with a high degree of caution.

Deradicalization and disengagement programmes predate the current phenomenon of FTFs joining IS. Yet the evidence for the success of these programmes is no more compelling. Deradicalization and disengagement are disputed terms but, broadly speaking, the former seeks cognitive change while the latter aims

at behavioural change and works on the assumption that people can continue to hold extremist views without acting on them.[29]

Deradicalization has been used to refer to different interventions: from community-based initiatives aimed at preventing engagement in violent extremism, to policies affecting the demobilization and reintegration of insurgents, to programmes aimed at counter-radicalization. Individuals who have not engaged in violence may also be enrolled in deradicalization programmes.

>>
SUCCESSFUL DISENGAGEMENT OFTEN REQUIRES THAT THE PERSON ESTABLISH A SET OF EQUIVALENT BONDS WITH FRIENDS, MENTORS AND COLLEAGUES OUTSIDE HIS OR HER EXTREMIST COMMUNITY.

Disengagement refers to withdrawal from violence and involvement with violent extremist groups. It does not generally imply a change in fundamental beliefs. Disengagement is a complex, long-term and non-linear process. The bonds formed by those who join in violent acts together are strong. An esprit de corps forms among terrorists, just as it does among members of a military unit. Successful disengagement often requires the establishment of a set of equivalent bonds with friends, mentors and colleagues outside their extremist community.[30]

Since the early part of this century, various countries have established schemes to deradicalize former prisoners and FTFs. While many have simply relied on incarceration, several European and other countries have established programmes that for the most part have evolved away from deradicalization towards disengagement. Recent reviews of these strategies underscore the infancy of the field and the need for further research.[31] However, Bjørgo and Horgan note that governments themselves can hinder learning: "We lack the necessary data to test whether the various programmes are actually effective (and if so, why?) as most governments and organisations running such programmes are only releasing the data they consider convenient to make public."[32]

Improving government responses

Individuals deradicalize or disengage for diverse reasons. To improve prospects of success, however, policies should be fair, transparent, predictable and equitable. El-Said and Barrett note, "Where reintegration programmes are seen by other FTFs as a possible 'off ramp' from terrorism, they can encourage further defections and provide a boost to the broader counter-extremist effort."[33]

>>
THE MOTIVATIONS OF DIFFERENT GROUPS OF FTFS ARE IMPORTANT.

The motivations of various groups of FTFs are important; individual returnees will pose different security risks. Someone radicalized by local conflict will be more likely to disengage if the conflict is resolved but may reconsider should the conflict break out again. An individual tied into violent extremism by family or clan ties is less likely to disengage because of those links. A person who went to Syria because of the violence towards Sunni civilians is unlikely to pose the same risk as someone who was attracted by the extreme violence of IS. Hence, risk assessments of returnees are necessary to triage and prioritize high risk individuals. Treating all returnees as high-risk would be costly and may alienate those who present a low risk of violence. Governments should focus their efforts on monitoring FTFs who are assessed as high risk.

>>
POOR PRISON CONDITIONS APPEAR TO BE AN IMPORTANT DRIVER OF RADICALIZATION.

Criminalization and imprisonment may not be appropriate or legal under existing laws for all returnees, and incarceration could negatively impact rehabilitation and reintegration. In the worst case, poor prison conditions appear to be an important driver of radicalization. For example, in overcrowded, dilapidated prisons or when prisoners experience discrimination based on their faith or origin, recruiters find it easier to attract followers. When prisoners are dealt with humanely rather than neglected, abused and ill-treated, it becomes more challenging to recruit them for violent extremist causes.[34]

FTFs with few economic opportunities and limited skills may struggle to reintegrate. When they return to their communities, they risk being re-exposed to militant ideas. Employment is key to disengagement but any vocational training needs to be tailored to individual interests. All too often these programmes miss their targets by not assessing the needs and preferences of those involved.[35]

Receiving communities also need to be engaged in reintegration initiatives. Families are a significant factor in decisions to join violent extremist groups and are equally important in the success of reintegration: "If the family cannot offer a welcoming and steadying environment for a returnee, and there is no other community structure, the risk of recidivism or of the returnee developing psychological problems increases."[36] Social workers and counsellors can help to rebuild family ties. In many cases, FTFs are estranged from their families while fighting abroad or incarcerated.[37] Civil society is a key partner to successful reintegration of FTFs. However, in many countries counter-terrorism policies have restricted the space and political will for civil society and governments to work together.[38]

The threat in South-East Asia

What risks do South-East Asian returnees pose? IS media campaigns and instructions to returnees to fight in their own countries have created understandable anxieties.

Some FTFs participated in the enslavement and genocide of the Yazidi people and other forms of extreme and performative violence. The French academic Olivier Roy has written of European FTFs: "I believe that the systematic association with death is one of the keys to today's radicalization: the nihilist dimension is central. What fascinates is pure revolt, not the construction of a utopia."

Yet, for most South-East Asian FTFs, violence as an end in itself has not been a core motive. Parallels to other regions and time periods should be treated with caution. Evidence suggests that those who joined IS from the region have a different profile to those who went from Europe and North Africa. Both the motivations and context for those who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s were also very different. Indonesians went with the express purpose of gaining the skills and experience to overthrow the dictatorship of Suharto. They returned to Indonesia at a time when there was some support for violence against a repressive government.

South-East Asian FTFs now are returning to strong, stable states with successful economies and developed security systems. Violent extremist movements have been pushed to the margins. Rivalry between militant groups has prevented cohesive and coordinated attacks. With police surveillance in Indonesia and Malaysia foiling terrorist plots, returnees may try to locate elsewhere. Mindanao in the southern Philippines is a possible hub for violent extremists, but the risk appears over stated. Mindanao does not have the eschatological pull of the Middle East nor the ease of access of open land borders seen in the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. It has concluded a peace agreement after decades of conflict, and the sea route from Malaysia through the Sulu Sea to Mindanao is increasingly well-policed.

>>
IT MAY NOT BE THOSE WHO WENT TO THE MIDDLE EAST BUT RATHER THOSE WHO NEVER MADE IT WHO ARE THE BIGGEST THREAT.

As Sidney Jones notes, it may not be those who went to the Middle East but rather those who never made it who are the biggest threat.[40] As the conflict began to turn against IS, and travel to Syria and Iraq became harder from late 2015, IS asked would-be

jihadists to remain at home and fight if travel to the Caliphate was not possible. South-East Asian countries were repeatedly cited as targets for operations. Operational linkages were unnecessary; IS encouraged "lone wolves" who would be unknown to security services.

Distinguishing among South-East Asian returnees—returning fighters as well as women and children—is critical to threat assessment. Motivations are important in assessing risk. Those who left South-East Asia to build a new life in the Caliphate would appear to be less of a threat than those who left to fight. Social networks of returnees are fundamental to understanding threat; those returning to radical networks would appear to be higher risk. Individuals extradited from camps in Northern Syria and who had no intention of returning would seem to pose the highest risk. Governments need to understand the various profiles and experiences of returnees in order to assess risk and devise appropriate and individualized responses.

Why FTFs left from South-East Asia

South-East Asia has been highly resilient to the draw of IS. The best estimates suggest that between 1,000 and 1,568 people travelled to Syria and Iraq to join IS and other factions.[41] Of these, around 100 were Malaysians and the rest Indonesians.[42] Some 40 percent of Indonesians are believed to be women and children who are less likely to be active fighters.[43] There is no reliable data available on the Philippines or Thailand and there is little evidence that many from these countries went to the Middle East.

Per capita, these numbers are low compared to Europe.[44] The countries that supplied the largest number of FTFs from South-East Asia are Muslim majority. In Malaysia and Indonesia, most Muslims live without discrimination, are educated in the faith, and see few immediate threats to their religion which is a marked difference from European FTFs.

Malaysians and Indonesians initially began leaving for the Middle East in late 2012. The numbers increased with the establishment of the Caliphate in 2014 and ever more sophisticated recruitment

of FTFs as well as civilians by IS to administer and service its territory, incentives included free housing, medical care and education. Some South-East Asians believed that IS was bringing about the prophesied Islamic Armageddon. Many departed for the Caliphate with no plan to return. They took their families. They sold their belongings. Some wished to take part in battles supposedly presaging the "end of times" while others wanted to live in a "true" Islamic State. Others left for economic and social reasons. Some Indonesians claim to have made the trip to assist Islamic humanitarian organizations with delivering aid, and this profile may make up a majority of the returnees.[45]

Ideology may have played a part in why people became FTFs but it may not be the central reason. Much has been written about IS narratives, but the evidence of their impact is limited. Instead, the process and rationale for becoming an extremist in South-East Asia seems strongly linked to a need for social belonging as well as family and schooling links.[46]

>>
THE PROCESS AND RATIONALE FOR BECOMING AN EXTREMIST IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA SEEMS STRONGLY LINKED TO A NEED FOR SOCIAL BELONGING AS WELL AS FAMILY AND SCHOOLING LINKS.

The majority of research in the region focuses on Indonesian FTFs. Such research highlights the importance of factors such as exclusion, kinship networks, group rivalries, or other financial and practical interests. Some Indonesian FTFs were drawn from existing violent extremist groups in Indonesia. They often joined groups in Iraq and Syria that had an affiliation with their extremist groups at home. Other FTFs appear to have joined whichever group they happened to connect with first.[47]

There is limited understanding of the motivations of Malaysian FTFs. However, social media appears to have played a more significant role than in Indonesia, with some Malaysian fighters generating large online followings.[48] Many of the popular FTFs do not fight with IS and stress that they are in Syria to protect civilians. Other causes may be related to an extremist drift within ethnic Malay society. It is difficult, for example, to separate growing concerns over extremism from Malaysia's longstanding ethnic divisions exacerbated by systemic discrimination favouring ethnic Malays.

Returning home

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SOME WERE DISILLUSIONED FROM THE MOMENT THEY ARRIVED; THEY WERE THERE TO BUILD THE CALIPHATE AND NOT ALL WANTED TO FIGHT.

South-East Asian FTFs began returning home almost as soon as many started to arrive in the Middle East.[49] Some were disillusioned from the moment they arrived; they were there to build the Caliphate and not all wanted to fight. The harsh regime, the evident corruption and the wide gap between IS propaganda and the realities of life were off-putting for some, as was the extreme violence. Some may have decided to pursue their goals elsewhere; others may have recovered from whatever enthusiasm took them there in the first place. However, returnee accounts of why they came home should be treated cautiously; Indonesian FTFs, for example, have changed their stories frequently.[50]

According to Malaysian police reports, 11 Malaysians and their families have returned home since 2013.[51] By September 2017, some 84 Indonesians are estimated to have returned independently from the Middle East.[52] By 2019, an estimated 162 Indonesians had returned home.[53] Some may have received training from one of the several militias engaged in the conflicts (including but not limited to IS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). They may also have seen combat. However, most known Indonesian returnees did not enter Syria. For example, in January 2017, the Turkish government deported roughly 75 Indonesian nationals who had tried and failed to reach the Caliphate. Seventy percent of these deportees were women and children.[54] Deportees should be treated differently from returnees as they have distinct experiences in the Middle East.

Indonesians possibly numbering in the hundreds are being detained in Kurdish camps. As of August 2019, some 400 of the most dangerous IS fighters, including five Indonesians, are being held in al-Malikiyah in Syria.[55] It is not known how many South-East Asian FTFs remain at large and are still engaged in combat roles.

South-East Asian government responses

While causes of radicalization in South-East Asia appear to differ from Europe, the reasons and incentives to disengage appear similar: "Relationships, disillusionment, context, and priority shifts are key drivers across individuals, irrespective of group, ideology, or region."[56]

Yet governments have limited scope to influence disengagement and deradicalization. No policy process will challenge a belief in a millenarian second coming or religious redemption. As Sidney Jones, head of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, notes:

> The truth is that most "deradicalisation" programs, Indonesia's included, are oversold. Ex-extremists who choose not to return to violence, and there are many, mostly do so on their own, for personal reasons that have little to do with government intervention.[57]

>> EX-EXTREMISTS WHO CHOOSE NOT TO RETURN TO VIOLENCE, AND THERE ARE MANY, MOSTLY DO SO ON THEIR OWN...

Indonesia has yet to decide how it will deal with its citizens detained in northern Syria.[58] In fact, despite repatriating some FTFs and their families over the past few years, on 11th February 2020, the government announced that citizens who were IS combatants in Syria and Turkey would no longer be repatriated. There is ongoing debate regarding children and women, who make up the majority of returnees. The situation is evolving.[59] Policy debate has been coloured by a moderate resurgence of terrorist attacks in Indonesia principally targeting police officers. Terror attacks continue to be mostly amateurish and low impact, but have received disproportionate media coverage.

Until Indonesia's new counter-terrorism law was passed in June 2018, the police had few legal tools to hold high-risk deportees. Even if someone had clearly intended to join IS, they were not in violation of the 2003 anti-terrorism law because they were caught in Turkey. There was no legal requirement to undergo rehabilitation or deradicalization programmes.

Before very recently, Indonesia's counter-terrorism police unit, Detachment 88, had repatriated some deportees from Turkey to police detention for interrogation. So far, the police have charged a limited number of FTFs with crimes committed before they left

Indonesia. Those who were not prosecuted were then transferred to the Social Affairs Ministry (KEMENSOS) to prepare returnees for reintegration. Parents with children were housed at a youth centre. Single adults were detained at another facility.

For those that have returned, the ministry does not have a systematic or planned reintegration process.[60] NGOs have assisted with capacity-building and favour disengagement strategies based on rehabilitation. The *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* (BNPT, National Counter Terrorism Agency) favours deradicalization that seeks to replace "aberrant" interpretations of Islam with nationalist ideas. This approach includes requiring FTFs to sign a contract to abide by Indonesian law and the national philosophy, *Pancasila*, as a condition for their release. After spending one month in detention and signing this declaration, deportees are sent back to their communities.[61] The evidence for BNPT's approach is hard to discern, as academic Julie Chernov Hwang notes:

> There is no evidence that forcing jihadists to sit through lectures on nationalism successfully facilitates disengagement or reintegration, although someone seeking early release from prison may go through the motions of being rehabilitated back into nationalism. Instead, it can be alienating, as jihadists in attendance feel they are being condescended to, rather than being treated with a measure of respect and understanding.[62]

>>
THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT FORCING JIHADISTS TO SIT THROUGH LECTURES ON NATIONALISM SUCCESSFULLY FACILITATES DISENGAGEMENT OR REINTEGRATION...

Finally, Indonesia also lacks any FTF monitoring mechanism. BNPT has begun to map FTFs but much more needs to be done.[63] Given the government's recent stance on FTFs, there is an urgent need to provide tools and information on successful strategies.

Malaysia however has a clear FTF policy. There is cross-party agreement to repatriate all Malaysian FTFs as long as they submit to a mandatory one-month rehabilitation. Where sufficient evidence exists, individuals are prosecuted.[64]

The previous Malaysian government promulgated a range of new laws including the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA) and the Special Measures Against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act 2015 (SMATA). These are in addition to pre-existing national security laws that date to the communist insurgency. SMATA has special measures to deal with people who commit or support terrorist acts,

involving listed terrorist organizations in a foreign country or any part of a foreign country. Two prisons have been established to house POTA detainees.[65]

Malaysia has had deradicalization programmes running for over 20 years. Established initially to deradicalize communist insurgents, government programmes deploy a combination of deradicalization (again with a focus on correcting aberrant beliefs), outreach efforts and social welfare schemes. Deradicalization continues after detention. Those released are subject to supervision orders, continued counselling and religious education, as well as assistance to facilitate reintegration. This includes training and a job if necessary, while some detainees are given financial assistance to start up small businesses.[66]

The programme claims a 97 per cent success rate.[67] However, the restrictive monitoring and supervision orders would appear to raise questions about its supposed success. The results may be more about the limited opportunities to resume errant behaviour rather than any change of heart. have been successful at monitoring known extremist groups and limiting their scope for violent action. No public evaluation of the programme is available.

>>
MAINSTREAM RESPONSES IN BOTH INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA ... PAY LESS ATTENTION TO THE COMPLEX INDIVIDUAL DRIVERS THAT ARE KNOWN TO LEAD TO RADICALIZATION.

Mainstream responses in both Indonesia and Malaysia have assumed that violent extremists lack sufficient nationalism or hold different interpretations of Islam. They pay less attention to the complex individual drivers that are known to lead to radicalization. There are risks inherent in this approach. First, the underlying assumptions of government programmes infringe on legitimate democratic dissent and religious freedoms. There appears to be no link between holding an Islamist ideology and involvement in terrorism. The notion that "extremist ideas", perhaps enabled by identity conflicts or group dynamics, by themselves turn people into violent radicals does not stand up to scrutiny. Programming should instead focus on specific drivers that would enable an individual's deradicalization.[68]

Government efforts to determine what is legitimate religious belief and practice are dangerous. A state-controlled Islam risks leaving dissenters with nowhere to go but into extremism, while government efforts to police minority faiths leads to intolerance and a hardening of in-group and out-group boundaries. South-East Asia's history of syncretic and tolerant faith has been undermined by some modern religious influences but traditional

faiths are still strong. State attempts to influence matters of faith often produces the opposite effect of what is desired.

The example of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) shows that violent extremist groups choose terror *as a tactic* and they may later decide that the tactic is not working. Having carried out terror attacks in the late 1990s, culminating in the Bali bombings in 2002, by the mid-2000s JI decided violence was largely counterproductive as it cost them support and resulted in mass arrests. It then directed its efforts toward rebuilding membership through religious outreach and education. While some JI members in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore disengaged, others formed violent splinter factions. Islam, like other religions, provides a broad moral framework for thinking about questions of violence; the real question is how Muslims apply this framework to particular situations. Disagreements over the use of violence reflect different analyses of political contexts rather than disagreements over theology.[69]

This point is important in any discussion of counter-terrorism, deradicalization and disengagement policy. Efforts focused on root causes and drivers should be directed at creating the conditions under which the use of terrorism is less rather than more likely. Programming that is not focused on drivers is unlikely to have much effect.

Finally, of critical concern for all South-East Asian nations are their penal systems. Prisons and prison conditions are central for both radicalization as well as reintegration, as underlined by the growing unease over the detention conditions of FTFs in northern Syria. Imprisonment was an important step for many Europeans in their journey to extremist violence. IS emerged from US detention centres in Iraq, where chaotic conditions and abuses were wide-spread. Respect for human rights is central to any strategy both to prevent radicalization and to rehabilitate FTFs on their return.

>>
PRISON ENABLES FACTORS THAT FUEL RADICALIZATION, INCLUDING A STRONG IN-GROUP AND OUT-GROUP MENTALITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF CRIME AS A LEGITIMATE FORM OF POLITICAL PROTEST.

Prison time puts FTFs in contact with radicalized peers with whom they can network and share and develop skills. Prison enables factors that fuel radicalization, including a strong in-group and out-group mentality and the perception of crime as a legitimate form of political protest. Most prisons tend to isolate violent extremists from the general population. Long-term research from the Philippines suggests that this approach

may harden extremist views by reinforcing and strengthening an ideological world view and in-group esprit de corps. Exposure to the general prison population, the research concludes, led to a "challenging of their belief systems, promoted better rehabilitation through access to prison programs and vocational education and did not lead to the spreading of radicalization as had previously been thought."[70] The prospects for successful pre-release deradicalization and disengagement would appear highly dependent on prison conditions.

In South-East Asia, prisons have not been the schools of jihadism that they were in Iraq and Syria. Conditions are not as bad and torture not as widespread. However, there are significant challenges that may yet deepen. New anti-terrorism laws have led to more arrests and heavier sentencing, straining already over-burdened and unprepared justice systems. A surge of FTFs will only add to the pressure.

A roadside market in Medan, Northern Sumatra, Indonesia.
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AROUND THE TIME WE JOINED THE CALIPHATE, WE HAD BEEN AT THE LOWEST POINT OF OUR LIVES.

RAHMA

Rahma
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan

STORIES TOLD BY THOSE
AFFECTED BY VIOLENT EXTREMISM

THIS IS RAHMA'S STORY

My name is Rahma. I am 34 years old. I have three children, two of them with autism. I was also ill when my husband's company went bankrupt, and it seemed like we had no economic solution to support our health care whatsoever.

After I saw the caliphate declaration online, I become hooked. Someone who was already in Syria told me how the health facilities there were incredible: all free of charge and highly professional. My husband and I, we picked up loans, sold our house and everything we had, gathered our family and left.

A total of 26 members of my family, including my mother, flew to Turkey and then in the dead of night, we crossed over the border to Raqqa with the help of a smuggler. I was carrying with me a baby, my one-year-old child.

When we arrived, I was still very sick. A doctor at Raqqa examined me and told me I had to go to a hospital in Mosul, Iraq. It took about eight hours for me to get there by road. I have never in my life seen such a hospital — no one trying to keep clean and there was human waste scattered everywhere in the bathrooms. I was in shock when I saw the reality.

There was another thing that still makes me shudder. My neighbor in Raqqa was a Syrian girl, only 15 years old. Her child was one year old. I asked her: how come you are married at this young age? She said: "My parents wanted me to marry an ISIS fighter, but I want to play and to go to school. I have to take care of my child now."

I was sad hearing that. Women under ISIS are meant to be a 'baby factory'. They go after girls who have only just had their period for first time. They want to make many children and then teach them to be terrorists. There are many women who were passed from fighter to fighter, stuck in a cycle like a rotating trophy. That disgusted me. I came to the conclusion that ISIS was really not Islam.

Driving in Syria.

Farah and Febri - Rahma's mother and brother.

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RESPONSES NEED TO BE CAREFULLY GROUNDED IN THE LAW, PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND EVIDENCE

A mechanic takes a break in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. @UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Mailee Osten-Tan

Turning a blind eye to citizens who went to fight in the Middle East will not improve security in South-East Asia. Such response risks dispersing experienced fighters who have the cachet of having fought for IS. That in itself may lead extremist groups down a path to greater violence. IS may or may not regroup in the Middle East or North Africa but, whatever happens, it has normalized extreme levels of violence and the use of that violence as a way to attract recruits.

South-East Asia experiences relatively low levels of extremist violence. Groups are mostly fragmented and limited in their capacities. They are constrained by mostly effective policing and high state capacities by global standards. Even in the southern Philippines, extremist activity is marginalized and takes place in the periphery. Few areas in South-East Asia are lawless or ungoverned. Yet small but deadly groups can emerge and they could be catalysed by returning FTFs with skills in warfare and the status that comes from having fought in the Middle East. Cautious and effective policies are required to offset a limited risk, but a risk nevertheless.

The most effective response starts with capacity. Governments need to develop more detailed knowledge of why people choose to become a foreign terrorist fighter, and why some return. Governments need to devote the resources to training sufficient staff to assess and monitor returning FTFs and their families. They present varying levels of risk that have to be determined with some subtlety and nuance.

Responses need to be carefully grounded in the law, protection of human rights and evidence. They also need to recognize the political aspects of becoming an FTF. Pushing nationalism to replace a religious, political or personal agenda is unlikely to be successful. Individuals need to be led away from seeing violence as a solution to their problems and provided with alternatives to a life of violence.

Many went to the Middle East to find a like-minded community. They are likely to return to extremist networks if they find themselves isolated or shunned back at home. Many people will be wary of them, particularly if they are seen to attract surveillance and intrusion into a community. Working with families,

communities and religious leaders is essential. Policies need to change as situations shift, which in itself requires constant and realistic assessments of how well policies are working.

The main aim should be to prevent future violence. This requires a pragmatic approach that recognizes it is easier to persuade people to abandon violence than to change their deepest religious or social beliefs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

>> Ground all actions in the rule of law.

- Policies should conform to international human rights and humanitarian law.

>> Analyse risk posed by returnees

- Adopt a differentiated approach to FTFs following comprehensive and individual risk assessments. Recall that motivation, even if based on violent extremist views, must be distinguished from violent action. Assess intent to do harm in determining appropriate responses to individual cases of FTFs.

- Ensure gender sensitivity by designing special programmes for women and children. Consider that gender issues are complex and women may be active as participants in and organizers of violence.

>> Design effective responses

- Ensure transparency regarding policy, trials, sentencing and rehabilitation programmes. Build public support for programmes with clear explanations as to why they reduce the risks.

- Implement prison reform that encompasses deradicalization and violent extremist programmes, not the other way round. Key elements include: good prison management practices;

proper filing and classification systems; quality prison conditions, including infrastructure and living conditions; and rehabilitation programmes.

- Research the needs of FTFs and their families. Tailor support to local conditions—including consideration of the localized nature of violent extremist networks and the assistance necessary for reintegration (e.g. relevant vocational training). Build local capacity to run decentralized programmes.

- Recognize that some communities may reject returning FTFs or their families. For example, women who return as widows with children fathered by IS fighters may be shunned. Work with communities, religious leaders and civil society organizations to build effective communities for FTFs. As part of this, public awareness programmes are needed to build support for programs with clear explanations as to why they reduce the risks to the public.

- Conduct long-term monitoring of programme effectiveness and adopt iterative design approaches that allows for changes in response to results.

- De-emphasize programmes that lack evidence of efficacy approaches such as deradicalization or nationalist education, and focus efforts on integrating FTFs into social groups that will constrain their behaviour.

A woman sits in a narrow alleyway of Medan, Northern Sumatra, Indonesia.
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan

1. This report uses Islamic State (IS) for the group variously known as the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State in Shams (ISIS) or by its Arabic acronym Daesh. No political inference should be read into this; it is used purely as a matter of simplicity and implies no legitimacy. Likewise, we use the term Caliphate for the area under IS control in Iraq and Syria. IS leader al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate on 29 June 2014. Its last bastion fell to Kurdish forces on 22 March 2019. The use of this term likewise does not suggest legitimacy.

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KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT (GLOSSARY)

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): Programs, projects of activities designed to actively counter violent extremism ideas and/or activities.

Counterterrorism (CT): Actions, often implemented by security forces, to actively counter known terrorist groups.

Disengagement: Disengagement is understood to be the process of an individual or group ceasing to use violence, leaving a movement or migrating to a non-violent role to achieve political goals.

Extremism: A belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.

Hate Speech: Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.

Insurgents: Localized armed groups using violence to achieve specific negotiable goals that have their own political infrastructure as well as the control of population and territory.

Majoritarianism: Majoritarian politics promotes the idea that the majority — be it ethnic, racial or religious — is somehow threatened by minorities, even when they are mostly disadvantaged or already restricted in their access to public goods by law.

Preventing Violent Extremism: Programs, projects of activities designed to prevent violent extremism ideology taking route or activities taking off.

Radicalization: The process by which people are converted to radical ideas, such as those held by violent extremisms.

Terrorism: Terrorism, as used in this paper, refers to the use of indiscriminate violence, likely targeting civilians. It refers only to a behaviour or an act; it does not indicate the nature of the group or individuals responsible.

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REPORTS AVAILABLE AT:
www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org

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