

The Deradicalization Paradox: When Former Terrorists Become Perpetrators of Economic Crimes

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Abstract

This study investigates the paradoxical emergence of "zero terrorist attacks" in Indonesia from 2023 to mid-2024, alongside the growing involvement of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiter) in illicit economic activities. While Indonesia's counter-terrorism strategy has been hailed as successful in preventing violent extremism, reports indicate that numerous ex-napiter are actively engaged in illegal enterprises such as subsidized fuel smuggling, unauthorized mining, and unlicensed vehicle leasing. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach and drawing upon Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, this research explores the motivations driving these individuals from ideological militancy to economic criminality. Data were collected through document analysis and field interviews conducted in April 2025 across multiple regions. The findings reveal that unmet economic and psychosocial needs, particularly related to esteem and security, have led many former convicts to seek recognition and income through informal and illegal means. These developments raise critical concerns about the effectiveness of reintegration programs that prioritize ideological transformation over sustainable economic support. The article concludes by recommending an integrated reintegration model grounded in the fulfillment of human needs, community engagement, and localized governance reform. This framework aims to reduce recidivism, prevent radical resurgence, and ensure a lasting peace beyond the absence of physical violence.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has successfully maintained national security against overt terrorist attacks throughout the period from January 2023 to June 2024. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "zero attack" period, is considered a temporary indicator of the success of the country's counter-terrorism and deradicalization strategies (BNPT, 2024). Nevertheless, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has acknowledged that the threat of terrorism has not been eliminated but has instead transformed in form—manifesting through the infiltration of former terrorism convicts into illegal economic activities that remain largely outside the state's regulatory oversight (BNPT, 2024; Sumpter et al., 2019). An incident in Pacitan in May 2024, where a former terrorism convict (ex-napiter) threatened the police over a dispute involving illegal subsidized fuel distribution, signals a shift in the existential mode of former terrorists—from ideological violence to economic criminality. This highlights the risk of reintegration paradoxes emerging from deradicalization efforts that overly emphasize cognitive and ideological pledges without simultaneously strengthening the socio-economic dimensions (Masithoh et al., 2022).

Furthermore, reports by IPAC (2020) and findings from Sumpter et al. (2019) identify that post-release, ex-napiters face significant challenges in accessing employment, financial resources, and social acceptance. Social stigma and economic exclusion have driven many of them to develop illegal enterprises as substitutes for the absence of legitimate systemic support.

Research by Masithoh et al. (2022) shows that the post-release transitional phase is the most vulnerable to both ideological and criminal recidivism, primarily when a conducive social ecosystem does not support it. The Peace Circle Foundation (YLP), a civil society actor, has demonstrated that community-based mentoring, grounded in moral, economic, and spiritual approaches, can effectively mitigate reintegration failure risks. However, such models have yet to become the dominant architecture in national policy. This paradox is further reinforced by the critique of Munandar et al. (2021), who argue that the state has shown weak capacity in harmonizing deradicalization policies across sectors. According to their analysis, deradicalization in Indonesia tends to remain at a formalistic level rather than addressing the substantive needs of ex-napiters, particularly in terms of social recognition, self-actualization, and basic economic fulfillment. This issue is also explained through a psychosocial lens, as proposed by Putra et al. (2018), which suggests that the motivations of former terrorists can be redirected toward prosocial norms if their basic needs are met humanely. Dialogue, empathy, and economic opportunity are considered more effective than one-directional ideological indoctrination.

The theoretical framework used in this study is Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, every individual is driven to fulfill a five-level hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety, social affiliation, esteem, and self-actualization. In the context of ex-napiters, the state's failure to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, economic security, and personal dignity helps explain their engagement in illegal activities as a form of social survival (Maslow, 1943; Ramadhan, 2021). A collaborative study by Firmansyah et al. (2022) proposed the penta-helix model as an ideal approach to synergize the roles of government, academia, communities, businesses, and the media in comprehensive reintegration efforts. Unfortunately, in the case of ex-napiters, no structural mechanism yet exists to consistently and sustainably bridge these elements.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the paradox within the deradicalization process, in which individuals who have ideologically pledged allegiance to the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) reemerge as new threats through involvement in economic crimes, such as illegal mining, smuggling, or the black-market distribution of subsidized fuel. The analytical focus is placed on the structural and psychosocial factors that drive reintegration failure, as examined through the lens of Maslow's theory. Accordingly, the main research question posed in this study is: How does the failure to fulfill the basic needs of former terrorism convicts influence their involvement in illegal economic activities post-release?

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach employing an exploratory case study design. The primary objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of the absence of terrorist attacks in Indonesia during the 2023–2024 period—commonly referred to as the "zero attack" phase—and its correlation with the involvement of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiters) in illicit economic activities such as illegal subsidized fuel trading, unlicensed mining, and unregistered vehicle leasing practices. The case study method was chosen for its ability to capture complex, contextual, and multidimensional social realities that are not extensively explored in academic literature. This approach allows researchers to investigate the interrelation between deradicalization processes, post-incarceration economic structures, and the social identity transition of ex-napiters (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005). The exploratory nature of the design also facilitates the discovery of new patterns within Indonesia's post-terrorism economic landscape.

Furthermore, the study utilizes a descriptive-qualitative model that prioritizes understanding the subjective meanings behind the social actions of informants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The primary aim is to explain the motives, adaptive strategies, and informal network patterns developed by ex-napiters in their illicit economic endeavors. This approach enables the researcher to connect personal motivations, structural conditions (both economic and social), and external pressures as influenced by the success or failure of reintegration programs (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moleong, 2017). The research was conducted across three regions: West Java, East Java, and Central Sulawesi. These locations were selected purposively due to their documented history of ex-napire involvement in illegal activities and their classification as high-risk areas for non-conventional security threats.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Zero Attack Status in Indonesia, 2023-2024

During the 2023 to mid-2024 period, Indonesia recorded significant progress in addressing domestic terrorism. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the country reported zero terrorist attacks in 2023, with no fatalities, marking a 22% decrease in terrorism-related deaths compared to the previous year. This achievement downgraded Indonesia's status from a medium-impact to a low-impact nation in terms of terrorism, reflected by an index score of 3.99 (IEP, 2024).

This success is corroborated by the 2024 World Terrorism Index (WTI), jointly published by ReCURE and the Terrorism Studies Program at the School of Strategic and Global Studies (SKSG), University of Indonesia. Indonesia ranked 51st globally, with a score of 18, and was classified as a low-impact nation. The report highlighted the absence of terrorist attacks for two consecutive years, underscoring the effectiveness of Indonesia's multi-sectoral approach to countering violent extremism (ReCURE & SKSG UI, 2024). Nevertheless, this status does not imply the disappearance of threats. Data from BNPT and RSIS (2024) indicate several foiled terror plots by the police's Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88), including an attempted attack aimed at disrupting the presidential election. A tragic incident in April 2023 claimed the lives of two state officers during the arrest of a foreign terrorist in Jakarta, suggesting that while overt attacks have ceased, latent threats persist (Kompas, 2023).

This positive trend continued into 2024. A report by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) affirmed Indonesia's second consecutive year without terrorist incidents. Three planned attacks were neutralized during the planning stage, showcasing improved early detection and rapid response capabilities (RSIS, 2024). The success in maintaining zero attack status is attributed to a hybrid counter-terrorism strategy that combines hard and soft approaches. Aggressive operations by Densus 88, enhanced intelligence surveillance, and sustained deradicalization and social reintegration programs coordinated by BNPT formed the pillars of this achievement. These efforts go beyond enforcement, encompassing community-based prevention and ideological rehabilitation (BNPT, 2024).

Improved inter-agency coordination, enhanced law enforcement capabilities, and increased civil society participation have contributed to building a more resilient ecosystem against violent ideologies. This holistic model offers a forward-looking counter-terrorism strategy in Southeast Asia centered on long-term stability (Fealy, 2020; Gunaratna & Bajpai, 2021). However, such achievements should not lead to complacency. Terrorist threats are dynamic and adaptive. Radicalization has increasingly moved to digital spaces, while ex-napiters have begun forming illegal economic networks as survival strategies post-incarceration (IPAC, 2022; Subchi & Ahmad, 2021). Thus, the zero attack status should be critically interpreted as a transformation of threats into more complex, non-conventional forms. Consequently, while the past two years represent a successful state response to direct violence, the next challenge lies in formulating policies that address the structural roots of radicalism and prevent the convergence of extremism with economic criminality and potential re-radicalization through digital ideological propagation.

3.2. Involvement of Ex-Napiters in Illicit Economic Activities and Economic Focus

Field findings from in-depth interviews conducted between April 25–27, 2025, reveal a transformation in the roles of several former terrorism convicts (napiters) in Indonesia. These individuals no longer engage in ideological violence but have transitioned into illegal economic activities, including unauthorized C-excavation mining, illegal subsidized fuel trading, unlicensed vehicle leasing, and small-scale illegal gold mining. One operation in East Java reportedly yields profits of up to IDR 50,000 per vehicle, which, multiplied by hundreds of vehicles per day, generates billions of rupiah annually (Field Interviews, 2025). This behavioral shift is triggered by the failure of social reintegration, particularly in terms of access to formal economic opportunities and societal acceptance. Social rejection and the stigma of being a former terrorist make it difficult for ex-napiters to secure decent employment. Under such circumstances, participation in illicit economies becomes a rational survival strategy. Prior studies have noted that informal or shadow economies serve as substitutes for the absence of institutional support (Ali-Fauzi, 2022; Subchi & Ahmad, 2021).

Beyond structural factors, internal solidarity among ex-napiters—known as *Ikhwan*—functions as social capital that facilitates loyalty-based and trust-based business networks. Several informants revealed that their involvement in illegal businesses received implicit tolerance from local law enforcement. There are indications of collusion between ex-napiters and certain corrupt officials (BNPT, 2023; Field Interviews, 2025), suggesting that post-reintegration law violations often occur in systemic contexts rather than being isolated individual initiatives. A notable case occurred at the Pacitan District Police Office in East Java on April 25, 2025. In this incident, an ex-napier used his identity to intimidate officers who had confiscated 3,000 liters of illegal fuel. Although the East Java Regional Police later dismissed rumors of an explosive threat, the event illustrates how the identity of a former terrorist can be weaponized to exert pressure and strategic influence, particularly in economic conflict zones (Kompas, 2025).

Gunaratna and Bajpai (2021) describe this phenomenon as a form of extremism mutation, wherein former violent actors become economic criminals who retain the capacity to mobilize both social and ideological power. These new threats are more difficult to counter due to their operation within informal structures protected by loyalty networks, collusion, and a lack of systemic oversight. In this context, ex-napiters represent not just a threat of re-radicalization, but also local informal economic actors with significant influence.

Therefore, ideologically-centered deradicalization efforts must be critically reassessed and expanded. The state must reformulate reintegration strategies to incorporate economic recovery programs, vocational education, and stronger law enforcement mechanisms targeting illegal activities by ex-napiters. Without substantive policy transformation, ex-napiters will continue to represent potential nodes of emerging threats in more covert and complex formats (Ali-Fauzi, 2022; IPAC, 2022).

3.3. The Relationship with Zero Attack

Although Indonesia recorded a "zero attack" status for two consecutive years (2023–2024), the findings of this study suggest that the absence of terrorist incidents does not equate to the eradication of violent radicalism. On the contrary, there is evidence indicating that a portion of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiters) have transformed from ideological militants into economic actors operating within informal criminal structures. This shift not only impacts the national security landscape but also establishes a complex relationship between the apparent success of formal counter-terrorism efforts and the concealed post-terrorism dynamics embedded in illicit economies. Based on interviews conducted from April 25 to 27, 2025, ex-napiters are actively involved in illegal economic sectors, including unlicensed gold mining, the unlawful distribution of subsidized fuel, and fictitious vehicle leasing operations. These activities reflect more than just economic necessity; they demonstrate a high level of organizational, logistical, and power capacity at the local level. This indicates that while ideological motivations may have weakened, the social structures established by ex-napiters still possess the capacity for mobilization and resistance (Field Interviews, 2025; BNPT, 2023).

Paradoxically, this phenomenon is closely linked to the effectiveness of the national counter-radicalization strategy. As increased pressure is placed on ideological networks through hard approaches—such as arrests, financial disruption, and restrictions on radical preaching—many ex-napiters have redirected their focus toward non-ideological but still illicit economic activities. These ventures provide a haven to maintain their networks, gain financial profit, and rebuild influence within their communities (Ali-Fauzi, 2022; Subchi & Ahmad, 2021).

A hypothesis arising from these findings is that economic focus can act as an "ideological diversion." Illegal economic activities, which demand significant time and resources, effectively draw ex-napiters away from engaging in explicit violence. Some informants even noted that managing an illicit business is "more profitable" and "more stable" than participating in extremist actions, which are high-risk (Field Interviews, 2025). This pragmatic approach illustrates how ex-napiters rationally calculate their survival strategies within a societal system that remains marginal to them. However, this condition should not be misinterpreted as a long-term success. In the short term, there is indeed a decline in ideologically driven threats. Yet in the long term, the financial capacity and social networks gained through illegal enterprise may be remobilized for radical purposes, particularly in response to global triggers such as geopolitical conflict in the Middle East or domestic sociopolitical unrest (Fealy, 2020; Gunaratna & Bajpai, 2021; IPAC, 2022).

Moreover, the presence of ex-napiters in the illicit sector demonstrates their continued ability to construct “social enclaves” that resist state intervention, whether legal or social. Their identities as former combatants, ties with law enforcement, and affiliations with fellow former extremists enable the formation of gray zones of power where formal law is not consistently enforced. In this context, the zero attack status does not symbolize the disappearance of radicalism but rather a tactical transformation in the survival and adaptation strategies of former perpetrators. The relationship between zero attacks and the illegal activities of ex-napiters also reveals deficits in national reintegration policies. The state places excessive emphasis on ideological commitment, such as the pledge of loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), without providing sufficient support to ensure that ex-napiters can live legally and with dignity. The absence of access to employment, housing, and social security forces many of them to seek opportunities outside the system, even if it means breaking the law (Arifianto, 2020; Santoso & Kurniawan, 2023).

Thus, the zero attack phenomenon must be understood in relation to the illicit economic activities carried out by ex-napiters. The absence of attacks is not solely the result of de-ideologization; instead, criminal economies have replaced ideology as the primary driver of ex-napiter behavior and network maintenance. In this situation, the new threat does not stem from direct ideological violence, but from the capacity of ex-napiters to build informal power structures that are resistant to state intervention.

3.4. Zero Attack and Its Connection to Economic Focus

Several field findings and national statistics support the hypothesis that the involvement of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiters) in illicit economic activities has redirected their focus from armed jihad toward economic pragmatism. Interviews with respondents such as T in Aceh and L in Ambon reveal that ex-napiters now prefer managing illegal gold mines or subsidized fuel trading networks, not primarily due to ideological transformation, but because of urgent and rational survival needs (Field Interviews, 2025).

Official statistics show a significant decline in arrests of terrorism suspects by Densus 88: from 370 individuals in 2021 to 148 in 2023 (Kompas, 2024). While this decrease may be interpreted as a result of improved early detection and network mapping, it can also be viewed as a shift in the motives of ex-napiters from ideology to economic activities. Investigative reports by Tempo (2024) reinforce this interpretation, stating that many ex-napiters are now involved in the informal and illicit economy, making the criminal economy a new neutral ground post-radicalization. However, not all experts agree that the zero attack status is due to economic redirection. Some argue that the absence of terrorist attacks is more directly the result of security forces’ success in dismantling ideological structures. For instance, the Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) network was effectively dismantled in 2024 following a series of arrests and logistical cut-offs. Similarly, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) experienced a significant decline in its mobilization capacity due to the collapse of its funding and propaganda infrastructure (IPAC, 2022; RSIS, 2024). Nonetheless, this transformation poses new risks. Illicit business operations grant ex-napiters financial resources, social networks, and logistical capabilities that are no less dangerous than ideological networks. In the event of global conflict, such as in the Middle East, or domestic political tensions, these structures could be swiftly repurposed for extremist agendas (Gunaratna & Bajpai, 2021; Fealy, 2020).

In this framework, the zero attack period should be seen as a transitional phase rather than the end of threats. The illicit economy has become a liminal space that not only distances ex-napiters from overt violent actions but also forms new gray zones of power with the potential to evolve into more systemic threats. Therefore, counter-radicalization policies must seriously integrate economic dimensions—post-release economic development, access to legal employment, and monitoring of potential convergence between the shadow economy and extremist ideology.

3.5. Contributing Factors to Zero Attacks

Indonesia’s achievement in recording zero terrorist attacks for two consecutive years (2023–2024) was not a matter of coincidence, but rather the result of the implementation of various vertically and horizontally integrated counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism strategies. At least five key factors have been identified as the primary drivers of this “zero attack” status.

First, this success was supported by a preventive and preemptive law enforcement approach, primarily carried out by the Special Detachment 88 Anti-Terror Unit (Densus 88). This approach

emphasizes early detection of suspicious activity and identification of radical networks before they can carry out attacks. Data shows that the number of terrorism-related arrests dropped from 396 in 2018 to 147 in 2023 (Kompas, 2024), reflecting a strategic shift from reactive measures to proactive prevention.

Second, the deradicalization programs coordinated by the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) played a vital role. In 2022, 475 terrorism convicts participated in in-prison programs, while 1,192 former terrorism inmates received reintegration guidance outside correctional facilities (BNPT, 2023). These programs include ideological training, entrepreneurship skills development, and facilitation of loyalty pledges to the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). Although the effectiveness of these programs varies by region, they have been a significant component in reducing recidivism, even as they continue to face challenges in addressing social and economic reintegration (Ali-Fauzi, 2022; Subchi & Ahmad, 2021).

Third, Indonesia successfully curbed the digital sphere, which had previously served as a primary arena for radicalization. In 2024 alone, BNPT and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (Kominfo) blocked over 180,954 pieces of extremist content across various online platforms (CNN Indonesia, 2024) through content filtering, public reporting mechanisms, and improved algorithmic surveillance, digital radicalization, once the main conduit for recruitment and ideological dissemination, was significantly suppressed.

Fourth, strengthened international cooperation was another determining factor. Indonesia has actively participated in global forums such as the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) and supported UN initiatives for the protection of children associated with terrorist groups, particularly in conflict zones. Enhanced cross-border intelligence capacity and data sharing with partner countries have expanded the detection scope of transnational threats. Regional collaboration with Southeast Asian nations has also bolstered collective action against transnational terrorist networks (UNODC, 2023).

Fifth, a significant structural factor was the collapse of major jihadist organizations such as Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) and the degradation of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). Following a series of arrests and funding disruptions between 2022 and 2024, JI was declared *de facto* disbanded. Militant training, doctrinal dissemination, and logistical mobilization ceased to operate systematically, severely limiting operational capabilities, even though residual ideology persists in isolated cells and closed communities (RSIS, 2024; IPAC, 2022).

Nonetheless, the zero-attack achievement also presents new challenges and paradoxes. Several studies (Fealy, 2020; Santoso & Kurniawan, 2023) suggest that while violent extremism has declined, many ex-napiters have turned to illicit economic structures in response to failed social reintegration. Thus, the potential for re-radicalization remains—not through direct attacks, but via the transformation of extremist power into organized criminality.

Additionally, while the digital sphere has been quantitatively controlled, radicalization continues to evolve through micro-influencing and closed-group content, which remain difficult to monitor. Encryption technologies and migration to new platforms present a unique challenge, requiring adaptive and collaborative approaches between the state, digital platforms, and civil society.

In conclusion, Indonesia's zero-attack status should not be interpreted as the total elimination of radical threats. Instead, it is the cumulative outcome of an effectively implemented multi-layered strategy. At the same time, it represents a shift in threat forms—from overt violence to covert radicalization and economic infiltration. Sustaining this success depends on the state's ability to balance hard security measures with economic development, social reconciliation, and inclusive, sustainable digital governance.

3.6. Involvement of Former Terrorism Inmates in Illicit Economic Enterprises, 2023–2024

Field findings from in-depth interviews with seven former terrorism convicts—identified here as A, W, Al, Ad, N, T, and S—reveal systematic involvement in various illegal economic activities. The most dominant activities included illegal excavation of type C minerals in Java and Ambon, unlawful trading of subsidized fuel in Sumatra and Ambon, fictitious vehicle credit leasing in Maluku, and illegal gold mining in Aceh. These ventures generate significant financial returns. For example, in East Java, illegal excavation

operations reportedly yield around IDR 50,000 per vehicle. When multiplied by hundreds of trucks per day, daily earnings can reach hundreds of millions of rupiah (Field Interviews, 2025). This indicates that ex-napiters are not merely engaging in subsistence survival, but are building robust parallel economic networks that remain largely untouchable by formal legal systems. These operations are not confined to individual actors but often involve informal organizational structures with strong internal networks. In several cases, actors referred to as “Densus protégés,” such as H—individuals with close ties to law enforcement—serve as intermediaries between illegal economic enterprises and formal institutions. This illustrates the existence of layered and collusive power relations among ex-napiters, local business actors, and elements of the security apparatus.

The case of S is particularly illustrative. He attempted to legalize an illegal excavation operation by lobbying the National Police Headquarters, but was ultimately arrested by the Klaten District Police. This incident raises critical questions about the ambiguous nature of post-reintegration economic status, where the lines between legitimate and illegitimate enterprises blur, especially when former terrorists leverage protection networks (Kompas, 2025). A report by Tempo (2023) noted that the economic activities of ex-napiters often operate in shadow zones that are not immediately identified as threats by authorities. Nevertheless, the continuity of such activities highlights that ex-napiters retain social capacity, loyal networks, and logistical access, which could be remobilized under extreme conditions.

Their participation in illicit economies is not only a response to social injustice but also a representation of the state’s failure to provide legal and viable economic pathways for ex-napiters post-incarceration. Without access to formal employment, legitimate business capital, or equitable social security, many former inmates choose illegal economic routes as their only means of sustaining both social identity and financial stability (Ali-Fauzi, 2022; IPAC, 2022). Furthermore, a report by the Indonesian Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center (PPATK, 2022) revealed suspicious financial flows linked to illegal mining and fuel trading activities associated with ex-napiter groups. Although these funds have not yet been directly linked to terrorism financing, the potential remains open, particularly in the event of geopolitical escalation or internal conflict within Ikhwan networks.

In conclusion, the involvement of ex-napiters in illicit business activities during the 2023–2024 period reflects a new form of radical transformation—namely, the evolution of ideological extremism into organized economic crime. This phenomenon calls for a cross-sectoral response that includes the strengthening of legal economic capacities, the monitoring of suspicious financial transactions, and enhanced law enforcement integrity to ensure that the rule of law is applied without compromise, regardless of an individual’s former status as a terrorism convict.

3.7. Discussion

This study reveals a fundamental paradox in Indonesia’s deradicalization and counter-terrorism strategies. On one hand, the country has achieved a historic milestone of zero terrorist attacks for two consecutive years (2023–2024), as documented by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI, 2024) and the World Terrorism Index (WTI, 2024). On the other hand, this success is accompanied by the emergence of a new form of threat—namely, the transformation of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiters) into actors in illicit economic sectors, which, structurally, socially, and financially, continue to pose destabilizing potential. These findings reinforce the argument that success in preventing violent extremism does not necessarily eliminate radical potential. Rather, radicalism may metamorphose into forms of organized economic criminality (Gunaratna & Bajpai, 2021). In this context, ex-napiters are no longer merely ideological threats. Still, they are evolving into agents within a quasi-economic structure that exploits social networks, access to illicit resources, and loopholes in law enforcement.

One of the key contributions of this research is its affirmation of the close relationship between failed socio-economic reintegration and the behavioral transformation of ex-napiters toward economic criminality. This aligns with IPAC (2022), which notes that deradicalization approaches focusing solely on ideological rehabilitation, without adequate economic and social support, are highly vulnerable to failure. Rejection by society, limited access to formal employment, and persistent stigmatization have led many ex-napiters into social dislocation, prompting them to seek alternatives through illegal economic ventures. This study also corroborates the findings of Sumpter et al. (2019) and Masithoh et al. (2022), who underscore the importance of community-based approaches, moral support, and empowerment rooted in trust to ensure sustainable reintegration. However, field data show that many ex-napiters instead form new

communities based on internal loyalty (Ikhwan), which serve not as bridges to broader society but as closed economic networks resistant to state oversight.

The involvement of ex-napiters in illicit enterprises—as exemplified by the cases of A, N, and S—demonstrates their adaptation to robust informal structures. In some instances, these individuals have even established collusive relationships with elements of the security apparatus, providing them with a shield against legal intervention (Field Interviews, 2025). This supports the warning issued by Munandar et al. (2021), who argue that the problem of deradicalization lies not only with the actors but also within permissive and inconsistent state structures. This transformation also resonates with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), wherein the behavior of ex-napiters can be understood as an effort to fulfill basic needs such as economic security, self-esteem, and self-actualization. When the state fails to fulfill these needs legally, ex-napiters tend to pursue alternative paths which, although illicit, offer psychosocial satisfaction. In this sense, illegal activities—such as gold mining, fuel smuggling, or fictitious vehicle leasing—become arenas for “self-actualization” for former extremists.

Furthermore, this study confirms that the zero attack phenomenon does not signify the disappearance of threats but rather a shift in tactics—from physical violence to economic and social infiltration. This is consistent with RSIS (2024) and IPAC (2022), which emphasize that many ex-napiters now concentrate their efforts on economic foundations rather than armed jihad due to greater safety and profitability. However, if these structures remain unaddressed, they retain the potential for re-mobilization, particularly in the event of political escalation or global geopolitical crises. The theoretical implication of this research is the need for a paradigm shift from ideology-centered deradicalization to reintegration based on social justice and economic empowerment. This approach is essential to avoid a “pragmatism trap,” where ex-napiters lose faith in formal systems and instead build autonomous, latent alternative structures that may harbor future threats.

The practical contribution of this study is its proposal to establish a cross-sectoral policy architecture integrating security, social, economic, and digital elements. The penta-helix model proposed by Firmansyah et al. (2022) merits further development as a collaborative framework involving government, academia, business, civil society, and media. This approach also requires institutional reform within agencies such as BNPT, the National Police, and local authorities to prevent structural negligence and ensure the sustainability of former terrorists’ rehabilitation. The main limitation of this study lies in its relatively small sample size—seven key informants—and its limited geographic scope, which does not yet include the full breadth of Eastern Indonesia. Moreover, the study’s focus is predominantly on economic dimensions and does not systematically address the individual psychological aspects of ex-napiters.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights Indonesia’s success in achieving a zero terrorist attack status during the 2023–2024 period, which quantitatively reflects the effectiveness of the national counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism strategy. However, this achievement conceals a strategic paradox: the absence of terrorist attacks does not imply the absence of threats but indicates a transformation from overt ideological violence to organized economic criminality among former terrorism offenders.

The key findings reveal that several ex-napiters in Indonesia have shifted from physical violence to illicit economic activities such as illegal mining, illegal fuel distribution, and fictitious vehicle leasing. This transformation is driven by failed socio-economic reintegration, weak state support post-release, and the persistent social stigma that limits access to legal economic opportunities. These findings support the hypothesis that the fulfillment of basic needs and self-esteem, as described by Maslow (1943), plays a crucial role in shaping individuals’ post-terrorism trajectories.

The research asserts that the absence of attacks should not solely measure the success of deradicalization but must also account for the development of an inclusive socio-economic ecosystem for former terrorists. If this dimension is neglected, ex-napiters may construct parallel systems based on informal power, collusion, and group loyalty—eventually consolidating into new centers of influence with the potential for re-radicalization. Therefore, a reformulation of the national deradicalization strategy is necessary—one that emphasizes cross-sector collaboration through the penta-helix model, regulatory reinforcement against illicit economies, and reintegration grounded in economic justice and social trust. Public policy must evolve beyond ideological rehabilitation to guarantee the right to live with dignity for

former offenders, thereby preventing their reemergence as covert actors of resistance. Further research is recommended to:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies on the individual psychological dynamics of ex-napiters to understand motivational changes over time.
2. Expand geographical coverage to Eastern Indonesia and border regions to capture variations in reintegration patterns and re-radicalization risks.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of community-based reintegration programs in preventing ex-napiters from becoming actors in the illegal economy.
4. Develop microeconomic studies on the business networks of ex-napiters as a new form of shadow terrorism economy.
5. Investigate the role of gender in post-terrorism transformation, particularly the involvement of female ex-napiters in the informal economy.

In sum, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of a more holistic and resilient reintegration model for former terrorists, designed to withstand the evolving landscape of re-radicalization.

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