

# Assessing the Threat of Indonesian ISIS Returnees: An Analysis of Ideological Mindsets and Operational Capabilities

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## Abstract

The return of Indonesian citizens formerly associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) presents a complex challenge to national security. This research analyzes the threat posed by these returnees by focusing on their ideological radicalization and operational capacity. This study utilizes a qualitative methodology, drawing data from semi-structured interviews with returnees, counter-terrorism practitioners from BNPT, Densus 88, and BIN, and academic experts. The analysis is framed by two specific theories: Randy Borum's "The Terrorist Mindset" to assess the stages of ideological development, and Kevin Riehle's threat formula (Threat = Intent x Capability x Opportunity) to evaluate operational risk. The findings reveal a significant polarization in threat profiles. First, the "Combatant Profile" (including combat veterans and frustrated travelers) possesses high operational capabilities and knowledge and maintains latent ideological intent, driven by eschatological beliefs and network connections, posing a high-level, active threat. Second, the "Non-Combatant Profile" (including "civil society" members and dependents) demonstrates a near-total erosion of intent, driven by profound disillusionment with the reality of ISIS and traumatic experiences. While their ideological threat is low, they face significant socio-economic vulnerabilities. The study concludes that the threat from ISIS returnees is not monolithic and requires a bifurcated security response: prioritizing disengagement and surveillance for the high-risk combatant profile, while focusing on socio-economic integration for the low-risk, non-combatant profile to mitigate vulnerabilities.

## 1. Introduction

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) marked a new era in global terrorism, successfully attracting an estimated 40,000 Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) from 110 countries between 2011 and 2016 (Foggett, 2019; IEP, 2015; UNODC, 2019). Indonesia was a significant country of origin, with government data identifying 2,377 citizens affiliated with ISIS as of 2019. Following the territorial collapse of the ISIS caliphate, Indonesia now faces the complex security challenge of managing these individuals. Data indicates that 575 deportees and 220 returnees have already re-entered the country, with hundreds more still detained in Syria (Susanti, 2025) and a government pilot project for further repatriation underway.

The return of these individuals poses a direct threat to Indonesia's national security. Returnees often bring back military training, combat experience, and deeply internalized radical ideologies. Even among those who express disillusionment, research shows that remnants of the khilafah ideology often remain strong (Putra, 2023). This ideology, centered on establishing a caliphate and promoting takfirism (the

excommunication of other Muslims), is fundamentally incompatible with Indonesia's state ideology of Pancasila and its democratic principles (Widya, 2020). Returnees who are not comprehensively managed risk becoming agents for anti-NKRI and anti-Pancasila narratives (Anns & Syauqillah, 2023).

This threat is not theoretical. The 2017 attack on the North Sumatra Police Headquarters was carried out by Syawaludin Pakpahan, an ISIS returnee who had been in Syria for six months. This case, along with others, exemplifies how returnees can leverage their experience to conduct independent attacks. This pattern aligns with findings that combat experience abroad significantly increases the operational capacity and danger level of domestic extremists (Ilyas & Athwal, 2021; Byman, 2016).

While previous studies have examined the legal frameworks for repatriation or social reintegration programs, a granular analysis of the specific threat level posed by different types of returnees is required. The challenge is that these individuals are not a homogenous group; their motivations, experiences, and current ideological states vary drastically. A failure to differentiate this threat risks misallocating resources, applying ineffective counter-measures, and overlooking latent dangers. Therefore, this research addresses the primary research question: How is the threat posed by the presence of Indonesian ex-FTF ISIS analyzed from a national security perspective?

To answer this, the study moves beyond a general assessment and applies a specific, two-part theoretical framework. First, it utilizes Randy Borum's (2003) "The Terrorist Mindset" theory to analyze the process of radicalization and the persistence of ideological commitment among returnees. Second, it employs Kevin Riehle's (2013) "Threat Theory"—which defines threat as a product of Intent, Capability, and Opportunity—to structurally assess the operational risk each returnee profile presents to Indonesia's national security. This paper will first outline these theoretical frameworks, followed by a summary of the qualitative methodology. It will then present the core findings, detailing the polarization of returnees into two distinct threat profiles—Combatant and Non-Combatant—before concluding with the implications of this bifurcated threat for Indonesia's counter-terrorism strategy.

## **2. Literature Review**

This research builds its analytical framework on three core concepts: the definition of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF), a model for ideological analysis based on Borum's (2003) "terrorist mindset," and a model for operational threat assessment from Riehle (2013).

### **2.1. Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)**

The central subjects of this study are Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and "returnees." The UN Security Council defines an FTF as an individual who travels to a state other than their state of residence or nationality for the purpose of perpetrating, planning, preparing, or participating in terrorist acts (De Guttry et al., 2016). These individuals are often motivated by ideology, religion, or kinship to join armed conflicts abroad (De Guttry et al., 2016). "Returnees," a subset of FTFs, are individuals who, after joining conflicts in regions like Syria and Iraq, subsequently return to their country of origin. It is critical to note that returnees are not a homogenous group. The RAND Corporation identifies three primary classifications: "disillusioned" individuals, "disengaged" individuals who may retain sympathies, and "operational returnees" who intend to continue terrorist activities (Clarke, 2017).

### **2.2. The Terrorist Mindset**

To analyze the ideological component of the threat, this study uses Randy Borum's (2003) four-stage model of the "terrorist mindset." This model describes the psychological process by which an individual adopts an extremist ideology. The process occurs in sequential stages: 1. Context (It's Not Right): The individual perceives a condition as unjust; 2. Comparison (It's Not Fair): The condition is framed as a systemic injustice compared to others; 3. Attribution (It's Your Fault): The injustice is blamed on a specific external enemy; and 4. Reaction (You're Evil): The enemy is dehumanized, legitimizing violence against them (Borum, 2003). This framework is applied to assess how far returnees progressed in this mindset and whether this ideological framework persists post-repatriation.

## **2.3. Threat Analysis**

To analyze the operational threat, this study adopts the intelligence analysis model developed by Kevin Riehle (2013). Riehle defines a tangible threat as the product of three essential, co-existing factors: Threat = Intent x Capability x Opportunity. Intent refers to the actor's desire to cause harm, linked to their ideological commitment (Riehle, 2013). Capability encompasses the actor's skills, knowledge, and resources (Riehle, 2013). Opportunity represents the external conditions and systemic vulnerabilities that allow the intent and capability to be actualized (Riehle, 2013). Riehle's (2013) model argues that if any one of these three factors is zero, the overall threat is neutralized. This study uses this formula to structure the analysis of the returnee profiles.

## **3. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to capture the complex, subjective, and socially constructed nature of the FTF returnee threat. Primary data was collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected informants. Secondary data was gathered from a comprehensive literature review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data was analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the findings was ensured through a data triangulation strategy, cross-checking information across the different informant categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The analysis of interview data reveals that the threat posed by Indonesian ISIS returnees is not monolithic. Instead, it is highly polarized, falling into two distinct profiles: a high-risk "Combatant Profile" and a low-risk "Non-Combatant Profile." This section analyzes this polarization through two distinct theoretical lenses: first, an ideological assessment using Borum's (2003) "terrorist mindset," and second, an operational threat assessment using Riehle's (2013) framework.

### **4.1. Ideological Analysis**

The ideological analysis, grounded in Borum's (2003) model of the terrorist mindset, explains the internal process of radicalization and the current ideological state of the returnees. For the Combatant Profile, the journey commenced with a Context of deep-seated grievance against perceived state corruption and injustice. This initial dissatisfaction quickly evolved into a Comparison framing the Indonesian republic as a failed "thaghut" (illegitimate) system, while simultaneously viewing the khilafah as the only just alternative. This progression solidified as Attribution was clearly directed at the state, with police and military personnel identified as "the enemy." The mindset culminated in the final Reaction stage (Borum, 2003), wherein this profile fully embraced takfir (the doctrine of excommunication) and a ghirah (an emotional passion for violence). This final stage represents the completion of the extremist mindset, effectively dehumanizing their targets and providing a powerful, internal legitimization for extremist actions.

Conversely, the Non-Combatant Profile experienced a complete reversal of this ideological trajectory. While these individuals were also initially drawn by the Context and Comparison stages, having consumed propaganda depicting an ideal Islamic state, their psychological progression was violently halted upon their arrival in the conflict zone. The significant gap between the idealized narrative and the observed reality proved to be a critical turning point, preventing the solidification of the extremist mindset. Specifically, the Attribution and Reaction stages for the non-combatants were inverted. Instead of solidifying their blame against a "thaghut" state, they experienced profound "disappointment and shock" at the internal realities of the caliphate, including witnessing traumatic violence and endemic infighting. This direct, negative experience functioned as a powerful, organic de-radicalization mechanism. The extremist mindset was replaced not with continued hostility, but with deep-seated regret for their past decisions—describing them as "stupidity"—and a subsequent desire to "repay their debt to the state."

### **4.2. The Bifurcated Threat**

Applying Riehle's (2013) framework (Threat = Intent x Capability x Opportunity), the Combatant Profile presents a high-level threat. Their Intent remains high, even if dormant. It is sustained by the latent

ideological factors identified by Borum's model, such as ghirah and eschatological beliefs about a future "end times war," which create a persistent desire to act. This is paired with formidable Capability. This profile possesses advanced operational knowledge, including opsec, clandestine financing, secure communication, and direct, "intense" combat experience. Finally, the threat is actualized by Opportunity. This opportunity is created by their continued access to active extremist networks via secure messaging and, critically, by systemic gaps in national security surveillance that allow high-risk individuals to become "lost contact."

In sharp contrast, the Non-Combatant Profile's threat calculation collapses to zero. As established by the ideological analysis, their Intent is non-existent due to profound disillusionment. This is coupled with zero Capability. Informants confirmed they received "no military training" and were confined strictly to domestic life, possessing no operational skills. According to Riehle's (2013) formula, if Intent or Capability is zero, the direct threat is also zero. However, the analysis of the Opportunity factor reveals a different, indirect national security challenge: high socio-economic vulnerability. This profile faces severe social stigma, including being "almost evicted," and faces immense economic hardship, struggling to find formal work. While not an extremist threat, this systemic failure in reintegration creates a pool of vulnerable citizens, representing a significant challenge to social stability.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis reveals a significant bifurcation in the threat landscape, demanding two distinct national security responses. The first group, the Combatant Profile, constitutes a high-level and active security threat. These individuals retain a persistent ideological drive and possess advanced operational capabilities, including clandestine skills and direct combat experience. This threat is amplified by their continued access to extremist networks and, critically, by systemic gaps in national surveillance that allow high-risk individuals to evade monitoring.

Conversely, the Non-Combatant Profile presents an entirely different national security challenge. Their direct threat calculation is effectively zero, as they lack both extremist intent—driven by profound disillusionment—and any form of operational or combat capability. However, this group faces severe socio-economic vulnerability, including immense social stigma and economic hardship. This systemic failure in reintegration, while not an extremist threat, creates a vulnerable and marginalized population, posing a significant, indirect challenge to long-term social stability.

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