

# **EXTRICATING INDONESIAN CHILDREN FROM ISIS INFLUENCE ABROAD**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

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Indonesia urgently needs to revisit the possibility of repatriating the neediest of its young citizens stranded abroad, whose families had earlier joined ISIS. Most of these children are in camps in northern Syria but there are also small numbers in the Philippines, Afghanistan and Iraq. The government does not need to have every detail of rehabilitation programs in place before it starts extricating children from situations that are growing worse by the day. It can start by bringing back the most vulnerable children three or four at a time and then modify programs as adjustment problems and other difficulties become clear. If the government waits too long, not only will the children face lack of adequate food and medical care, but they also will be subjected to steady indoctrination in extremist ideology.

In February 2020, President Joko Widodo decided not to return pro-ISIS Indonesians in the Syrian camps but said that the repatriation of children under ten would be considered on a case-by-case basis. The ten-year age limit seems to have chosen arbitrarily, following the practice of other countries that had repatriated children. Intelligence agencies, immigration and police began trying to verify Indonesian nationals on a master list of camp residents that the U.S. government had commissioned, but it was slow work. The COVID-19 pandemic presented new obstacles and ended any prospect, dim to start with, of on-site assessment in 2020 or early 2021. Meanwhile health and safety conditions in the camps – particularly in the largest, al-Hol – continued to deteriorate.

No one should underestimate the challenges that any government faces in bringing back children of ISIS families. These include the difficulty of verifying nationality, assessing the physical and mental toll of exposure to conflict, assessing risk, and finding relatives or others willing to provide care once the children are returned. Indonesia has several good models of conflict resolution, including in Aceh, but few models for working with unaccompanied, orphaned or traumatised children. Preparation of programs that address these needs could begin immediately to accommodate a small number of repatriated children. Necessary improvements can be made along the way.

This report is based on analysis of data of Indonesians in SDF-run prisons and camps in northeast Syria, collected in March-June 2019 and made available to IPAC in February 2021. In addition, the analysis draws on interviews with Indonesian government officials and humanitarian workers as well as various open-source reports.

## II. BACKGROUND: CHILDREN OF EXTREMISTS OVERSEAS

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ISIS was the first Islamist extremist organisation to actively recruit families, including children, after the declaration of an Islamic State in June 2014. By 2019, after the last ISIS stronghold in Syria fell, as many as 350 Indonesian children had become stranded in camps in northeastern Syria. More than half were minors under ten, many of them born there, including to fathers or mothers who married non-Indonesian spouses.

The presence of children highlighted the difference between ISIS and earlier international jihadist movements. Indonesians had gone overseas before to train and fight (Afghanistan, Mindanao, Pakistani Kashmir), but only men had gone, almost always as individuals, unaccompanied by families. A few members of Jemaah Islamiyah married local women in Mindanao and decided to stay, but their intent on leaving Indonesia was not to settle abroad.

From the moment ISIS declared the new caliphate, however, Indonesians went with their families with the purpose of living in a pure, Islamic state and had no intention of coming back. This was partly due to ISIS propaganda showing a normal, functioning state where shops were full, all services were provided, and everyone enjoyed social justice under Islamic law. It was also partly due to belief in Islamic prophecies that the end of the world was near and the final battle before Judgment Day would take place in greater Syria. Many families sold everything they

had to emigrate (*hijra*), only to find themselves prevented from leaving at Indonesian airports; stranded in Turkey, unable to cross over and eventually deported; or living in Syria or Iraq but not in the conditions they had envisioned. No one imagined being trapped for years in refugee camps without access to basic facilities.

The issue of repatriating vulnerable children arose in 2020, after the squalid condition of the camps became public. However, it soon became clear that no one had a clear idea of the numbers involved.

### A. *The Question of Numbers*

In late 2020, different officials in the Jokowi government suggested that over 600 pro-ISIS Indonesians were still in Syria and neighbouring countries. Their figures varied, but Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister of Legal, Political, and Security Affairs said all were derived from a U.S. list compiled in 2019, with some additional information from humanitarian organisations and Indonesian intelligence.<sup>1</sup> IPAC was able to examine a list of Indonesians held in Syrian Democratic Front (SDF)-run camps. This showed 555 Indonesians in SDF custody as of June 2019, but it did not include Indonesians in non-SDF camps or in the custody of the Turkish government.<sup>2</sup> It also did not include the small numbers in Afghanistan, Philippines and possibly Yemen. Those additional clusters could bring the total to the 600-plus range. At the time, Indonesia was still suggesting that just over 100 Indonesians had been killed in Syria, even though the 2019 list showed 130 Indonesian widows, suggesting the actual number of those killed was higher.

The government began verifying these names, a slow, laborious process involving immigration, the Ministry of Home Affairs, police and the state intelligence agency BIN. Many in the camps had no identity documents. Many had burned their passports in rituals of showing their loyalty to Islamic State. Verification was complicated by the fact that when a census was conducted in the camps, the names were initially taken down phonetically in Arabic script and then transliterated, so the spellings bore no relation to Indonesian names. Many Indonesians had adopted new names on arrival or used a *kunya*, the practice of calling oneself “Father of” or “Mother of” followed by the name of one’s firstborn child. All of this produced duplication and confusion. By February 2020, 228 individuals on the U.S. list had been verified as Indonesian nationals.<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, the head of BNPT said that 272 Indonesians were unaccounted for, suggesting they had been killed or had gone to other pockets of ISIS-influenced territory outside Syria.<sup>4</sup> Most of these, however, are likely to be women and children with misspelled names whom the Indonesian agencies simply cannot track.<sup>5</sup> He also said about 115 women and children were in the SDF camps, although it was clear from different sources, including humanitarian agencies, that the actual number was higher.

1 On 13 February 2020, Mahfud MD said “CIA gave 846 [names], we matched it with our data, about 157 were redundant. It was double [entries], so the real total number was 689. There were another 185 from ICRC, but they did not give us names as it against their ethical code of conduct [to share it around], so the total number was 689”. See “Data Jumlah Eks ISIS Asal Indonesia Berdasarkan Info Dari CIA”, *tribunnews.com*, 14 February 2020.

2 The June 2019 list stated there were 510 women and children in the camps. However, IPAC found one double entry and decided to count them as one person. This made the total number of those in the camps short to 509.

3 “Nama WNI Eks ISIS Didapat dari CIA, Jumlahnya 689 Orang”, *kumparan*, 12 February 2020.

4 The numbers outside Syria are believed to be small. Some 23 pro-ISIS Indonesians are known to be in Afghanistan, eleven of them in prison; the number in Mindanao is uncertain but likely under 30, including those in prison. They include the daughter of the Makassar couple involved in the January 2019 suicide bombing of Jolo cathedral.

5 “BNPT: 135 WNI Eks ISIS Berada di Perbatasan Turki dan Suriah”, *pikiran-rakyat.com*, 23 March 2021.

Officials have further confused numbers by using different figures for Indonesians who had left the country to try and join ISIS. The Minister of Law and Human Rights, for example, said in February 2020 that 1,276 Indonesians had left the country to join ISIS. In the past, any figure over 1,000 has included deportees from Turkey, those who were caught before they could cross the border into Syria. But the Minister said specifically that the revised figure represented new information: “There have been developments in the data that initially showed 689 persons, so that the latest figure from BNPT and Densus is 1,276, of whom 297 have been verified to have Indonesian passports,” the Minister told a parliamentary hearing.<sup>6</sup>

In May 2021, BNPT head Boy Rafli said some 1,500 had left Indonesia as would-be terrorists, and that this included 800 “still in the conflict area”, 100 dead, 550 deportees and 50 returnees.<sup>7</sup> The deportees were generally arrested before ever setting foot in Syria; the returnees are those who spent time in Syria and then returned voluntarily. In fact, there has been little change from the 2019 data, and the working estimate of numbers in the Syrian camps and prisons is still around 555, with the remainder detained elsewhere in the region or at large.

### B. Indonesians in SDF Custody

By far the largest camp run by SDF is al-Hol, sometimes written al-Hawl. The vast majority of its residents had poured in following the fall of Baghouz, the last ISIS stronghold in Syria, in March 2019. Almost overnight, the population of the camp went from 10,000 to more than 73,000. As of late March 2021, it stood at about 62,000 after many Syrians had been released or escaped, and some foreign nationals repatriated.<sup>8</sup> The arrival of so many ISIS loyalists changed the security landscape of the camp and forced administrators to divide the camp into the main section for Syrian-Iraqi nationals and another “annex” for foreigners, who constitute nearly 15 per cent of the population as of February 2021.<sup>9</sup> The “annex” was run by militant women considered to be “the ruling class of ISIS”.<sup>10</sup>

The smaller camp of al-Roj near the Iraqi border, which as of October 2020 was home to about 2,300 people, had 38 Indonesians according to the June 2019 list.<sup>11</sup> Its smaller size made it easier for the SDF to manage and it was known to be less restrictive than al-Hol, with less intervention from the ISIS disciplinary unit. In 2020, SDF officials began transferring some of the foreign women considered less radical to al-Roj for reeducation and rehabilitation, easing tensions in the al-Hol “annex”.<sup>12</sup> By September 2020, 76 out of a planned 395 families had been transferred, but IPAC is not aware of any additional Indonesians having been moved there as part of this program.<sup>13</sup>

6 “Yasonna Sebut Ada 1.276 WNI Eks ISIS di Suriah, Hanya 297 Pegang Paspor”, nasional.kompas.com, 25 February 2020.

7 “Kepala BNPT: 1.500 WNI Jadi Teroris Lintas Batas, 800 Orang Belum Pulang,” nasional.okezone.com, 27 May 2021.

8 “UNICEF alarmed by spike in children’s deaths in Syria’s al-Hol camp,” voanews.com, 25 March 2021. See also IPAC report no 59 “Indonesia: Urgent need for a policy on repatriation of pro ISIS nationals from Syria, 27 August 2019.

9 Rojava Information Center, <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1358361351840800770>, 7 February 2021.

10 Christian Vianna Ide Azevedo, “ISIS Resurgence in Al Hawl Camp and Human Smuggling Enterprises in Syria”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, August 2020, pp. 43-63.

11 Camp Profile: ROJ (October 2020), available at [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH\\_SYR\\_Factsheet\\_NES\\_CampProfile\\_Roj\\_November-2020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SYR_Factsheet_NES_CampProfile_Roj_November-2020.pdf).

12 Rojava Information Center, “Hidden Battlefields: Rehabilitating ISIS Affiliates and Building a Democratic Culture in Their Former Territories”, 18 December 2020, p. 28.

13 See Karwan Faidhi Dri, “Al-Hol’s ISIS-linked Families ‘Not Forcibly Taken’ to Roj Camp: Kurdish Official”, rudaw.net, 9 September 2020. Many foreign women, particularly westerners, in this camp changed the full-veiled black dress code to more ‘moderate’ fashion as a sign of remorse, hoping for repatriation from their government. See Natalia Sancha, “The Transformation of ISIS Women in Syria’s Al Roj Camp”, elpais.com, 26 March 2021.

The June 2019 list showed the following distribution of Indonesians:

**Table 1. Number of Indonesians in SDF Camps in Syria (June 2019)**

Location	Total	Adult Men	Adult Women	Children
<b>Prisons</b>	46	34		12*
<b>Al-Hol</b>	471		141	330**
<b>Al-Roj</b>	38		13	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>367</b>

*Source: List compiled from Syrian camps in June 2019*

*\*These are boys under eighteen.*

*\*\*includes several married and widowed teenagers.*

**Table 2. Number of Children under Ten and Unaccompanied Children in SDF camps in Syria (June 2019)**

Location	Children under 10 years of age	Unaccompanied Children	Unaccompanied Children under 10 years of age
<b>Prisons</b>	1		
<b>Al-Hol</b>	253	34***	19***
<b>Al-Roj</b>	23		
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>19</b>

*Source: List compiled from Syrian camps in June 2019*

*\*\*\*includes sons of Sudarmini, who was killed in al-Hol in July 2019.*

### *C. Children in the Syrian Camps*

If numbers for Indonesian nationals in Syria remain unclear, it is even more difficult to determine the exact number of Indonesian children, particularly when an age limit, such as ten years old, is involved. Many children came with their parents, but more were born after families arrived in Syria. Several Indonesians who came as single men married local women, and many Indonesian women whose husbands were killed in conflict remarried and had children with their new spouses, some of whom were non-Indonesians. All of the children of these mixed marriages are considered Indonesian nationals under Indonesian law, unless they choose otherwise at age eighteen.

The June 2019 list showed 355 children (eighteen or under) in al-Hol and al-Roj. Another twelve boys under eighteen were held in the more tightly controlled prisons. Out of these 367 children, 277 (75 per cent) were under ten years of age in 2019. By 2021, as children grew older and some were no longer considered minors, the total number of children was estimated at 333 with 236 (71 per cent), under ten. Very few new births were taking place.

**Table 3. Indonesian Children under 10 years old in SDF Camps by Age (June 2019)**

Year of Birth	Age as of 2019	Number
2009-10	9-10	41
2011-13	6-8	58
2014-16	3-5	78
2017-19	0-2	100
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>277</b>

*Source: List compiled from Syrian camps in June 2019*

The 100 children under two years old included 41 born in 2017, 47 born in 2018 and twelve born in 2019. The figures do not include babies born in the weeks and months following the census that produced the June 2019 list.

While the list did not specifically have “unaccompanied children” as a category, it recorded eighteen family units that appeared to be headed by children (defined as single male or female under eighteen years old). Eleven of these had one or two younger dependents, and the other seven were living on their own, adding up to a total 34 unaccompanied children; nineteen were under ten as of 2019. The youngest heads of household were only eight years old. One of them was UF, born in 2011, who was responsible for his two brothers, then aged six and one.

“Unaccompanied” is different from “orphaned” because in many cases, the parents’ whereabouts are simply unknown, not confirmed dead or missing. In February 2019, a Syria-based journalist encountered eight unidentified and unaccompanied Indonesian children in Deir Az-Zour, who had tried to escape from the ongoing battle.<sup>14</sup> They said their father was still fighting in Baghouz while the mother had died in an airstrike. Another group of children, Faruq, Nasa/Nasir, and Yusuf were covered in the BBC documentary in February 2020.<sup>15</sup> Yusuf’s parents and family had died, while Faruk and Nasa had become separated from their parents in the confusion. In the June 2019 list, there is a pair of brothers, Faruq and Nasir, aged twelve and ten, that may be the boys interviewed by the BBC. Faruq is listed as the head of household. There is no obvious listing for Yusuf but he could easily go by another name or have been inadvertently left off it.

The list also showed two groups of minors who had no parents present but did have an elder sibling to look after them. In such cases, the children would not be considered “unaccompanied”. In one case, Hafsa Ali, a childless widow born in 2000, took care of her then nine- and seven-year-old sisters. In another, Sabrina Taufik Ramadhan, born in 1999, took care of siblings then aged seventeen, seven, and two years old.

Two young children, aged eleven and two as of June 2019, would have had to be added in July 2019, after their mother, Sudarmini, was beaten to death in al-Hol.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Hisham Arafat, <https://twitter.com/HishamArafatt/status/1100415568992133122>, 26 February 2019.

<sup>15</sup> “Anak Indonesia Eks ISIS di Suriah: ‘Desa diserang roket, saya lari, setelah itu tak melihat lagi keluarga saya’”, *bbc.com*, 13 February 2020.

<sup>16</sup> “Pregnant Indonesian IS Member Beaten to Death in Syrian Camp”, *The Jakarta Post*, 31 July 2019.

These children are growing up in extreme hardship, with little formal schooling, and knowing nothing of their country of origin. They may end up speaking Arabic rather than Indonesian as their first language. The older children may have witnessed or even taken part in extreme violence. All will likely receive ISIS indoctrination as their primary religious teaching. Bringing these children to Indonesia as soon as possible is not just a question of protecting their rights and ensuring a safer future, but also reeducating them to become well-adjusted members of society in Indonesia. Unaccompanied children under ten should be repatriated as quickly as possible. For children still living with their mothers, the government will have to develop procedures for determining whether to bring back the mothers as well.

#### *D. The Case of Child Brides*

The June list includes 22 women under eighteen who are listed as married and widowed, twelve of whom have one or two children. Upon arriving in Syria, the older girls got separated from families and many were married off to ISIS fighters. Many of the married women lost their husbands on the battlefield, and those whose husbands survived, got separated in different detention facilities. These women bore children at a very young age, ranging from fourteen to sixteen years old. Some of the child brides are now considered adult, in charge of younger siblings or in-laws. Neither they nor their children or siblings would be considered unaccompanied.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 4. Age, Marital Status, and Dependents of Indonesian Child Brides in SDF-camps (June 2019)**

Year of birth	Age	Marital Status		Total Number of Dependents
		Married	Widowed	
2006	13	-	1	1
2005	14	-	2	-
2004	15	-	1	-
2003	16	-	2	3
2002	17	1	8	11
2001	18	2	5	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>

*Source: List compiled from Syrian camps in June 2019*

Among these child brides was KS, born in Malang, East Java in 2005. She was one of the daughters of Salim Atamimi alias Abu Jandal, the leader of an Indonesia combat unit in Syria, Katibah Maasyariq. Abu Jandal left for Syria first in August 2013 and returned in September 2013. He went back in March 2014, this time for good, and brought his two wives, Silvi and Balqis, two daughters, including KS, and three sons, making them one of the first Indonesian families to settle in ISIS-controlled Syria. Abu Jandal died on 22 May 2015, near Aleppo, Syria and the rest of the family, including some children born in Syria, have been detained in al-Hol since March 2019. It is unclear who KS married or when, but the June 2019 list shows her as a widow with no children at age fourteen.

<sup>17</sup> The definition of children according to Indonesian law is somewhat contested. The 2006 citizenship law defines children as individuals below the age of 18 and unmarried, and according to the new amendment of the marriage law in October 2019, the minimum age for marriage was 19. The amendment would not be applicable for Indonesian marriages in Syria as most were done without legal documents and before the amendment was enacted. On the other hand, according to the 2014 child protection law, the government should protect any Indonesian nationals under 18 years old, regardless of their marital status.



### E. Boys in Prison and Child Soldiers

Twelve boys were among 46 Indonesians detained in Kurdish prisons, according to the 2019 list. Most were captured in Baghouz in February-March 2019 and jailed in the same prison as adults in al-Shaddadi prison, Hasakeh province, Syria. The youngest was HNR, born in Jakarta in 2009, who was taken to Syria by his parents in 2016. He was only ten when he entered al-Shaddadi prison with his father, Nur Rasyid Tumanu. The oldest was AN, born in 2002, who arrived in Syria in 2017. He was seventeen when arrested on 5 March 2019. At present, he would no longer be considered a minor.

ISIS actively recruited and trained children as future jihadists, both mentally and physically.<sup>18</sup> Mothers helped indoctrinate and desensitise children to violence through bedtime stories, songs, and videos depicting violence against Muslims in many parts of the world.<sup>19</sup> ISIS indoctrination also permeated school curricula, underscoring the supremacy of the caliphate and religion as the sole source of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> It emphasised the importance of physical education with core values of endurance, obedience, and cooperation to instill loyalty to ISIS.<sup>21</sup> Selected boys would go to separate military training and be rewarded as “Cubs of the Caliphate”. The training aimed to detach children from their families and encouraged a sense of identity and belonging with fellow jihadists.<sup>22</sup> It included the handling of real weapons, assembling explosives, and conducting executions.

In May 2016, a propaganda video featuring more than 20 Indonesian Cubs of Caliphate, and a few adults, was widely circulated online.<sup>23</sup> The boys who appeared in the video could recite ISIS teachings in Arabic and Indonesian. They also had basic skills in combat and shooting. The video ended with the burning of Indonesian and Malaysian passports to symbolise the renunciation of their citizenship. These children included one boy, MKA, then ten years old, who later returned to Indonesia (see Section IV).

Children did not just train – they became active combatants. An example from Indonesia was Haft Saiful Rasul, born on 24 November 2003.<sup>24</sup> He took part in the frontline fighting with adults from a French unit and was killed in Jarablus on 1 September 2016, only a few months before his thirteenth birthday. Haft was the first son of Brekele, a terrorist serving eighteen years for the 2005 bombing of Tentena market, Poso. Haft had been living in radical circles since birth,

18 Kara Anderson, “‘Cubs of Caliphate’: The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State”, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, January 2016.

19 ISIS encouraged mothers to start indoctrination as early as possible. In January 2015, they published ‘guidelines to mothers on how to raise jihadi babies’, which was widely circulated in pro-ISIS channels. See more on Gina Vale, “Cubs in the Lion’s Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 23 July 2018.

20 ISIS changed school textbooks to be in line with their indoctrination efforts. Math books were illustrated with AK-47 and military tanks to normalise violence and war to children. Science was taught only if it supported IS interests, such as chemistry and engineering for bomb-making. Evolution theory and other secular topics were generally omitted from the curriculum.

21 A Joint Publication of National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), “The Children of ISIS, The Indoctrination of Minors in ISIS-held Territory”, 26 April 2017.

22 Ibid.

23 Benjamin Soloway and Henry Johnson, “ISIS is Training Indonesian ‘Cubs of Caliphate’ to Kill for the Cause”, Foreign Policy, 19 May 2016.

24 After Haft died, Saiful Anam alias Brekele, his father, wrote a 25-page obituary expressing pride in his son. The obituary titled *Kisah Inspiratif Sang Mujahid Kecil Daulah Islamiyyah As-Syahid InsyaaAlloh Haft Saifurrasul bin Saeful Anam bin Saefuddin Al Arkhabily -Taqobbalahulloh-* (The inspirational story of the deceased little soldier of Islamic State, Haft Saiful Rasul, son of Saiful Anam, son of Saifudin), signed on 16 September 2016.

and when ISIS called for Muslims to join their fight, he insisted on leaving.<sup>25</sup> He eventually got permission from his parents and left on 25 August 2015 with his cousin and in-law, who later stayed in Raqqa while he was fighting out of town with ISIS French fighters. He always believed that he would die as a martyr (*mati syahid*) and hoped that his mother and siblings would join ISIS in Syria. Haft, had he lived long enough to be repatriated, would have been a difficult case because he had been so eager to go.

As of June 2019, three Indonesian children in Kurdish jails reportedly had been part of the Cubs of Caliphate program. Two, AS and HYH, were in al-Shaddadi while the other was in Umm Madfa prison.

- AS, was born in 2004 and was nine when he arrived in Syria with his parents in 2015. His father, Ust. Ammar alias Abu Qonitah, was one of several hardline militants who had signed a 2017 protest letter against radical Indonesian preacher Aman Abdurrahman, considering him too soft. It is not clear where AS's parents were as of 2019, but Ust. Ammar was likely killed while the mother, Yati, was probably in Al-Hol as of June 2019.<sup>26</sup> AS was captured on 2 February 2019.
- HYH, born in Lampung in 2008, was only eleven when captured on 5 March 2019.
- ANR alias HS, the only Indonesian boy in Umm Madfa prison, was born in Surabaya in 2005. He was only fourteen when he arrived in Syria in 2016 with parents. His father was later killed, and his mother, Anita, remarried an Iranian fighter. He was arrested on 22 February 2019.

Almost every child in the prison list arrived in Syria with at least one parent. An exception was YIS, the third child of Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani Saleh, the couple who bombed the Jolo Cathedral in the Philippines in January 2019. Rullie and Ulfah brought their five children to Syria in March 2016 but after a long wait in Istanbul were caught and deported from Turkey in January 2017. Only YIS managed to make it across the border, presumably with others from the same safe house where his family was staying. He was arrested in Baghouz on 5 March 2019 and subsequently detained in al-Shaddadi prison.<sup>27</sup>

In August 2019, Kurdish authorities began to move boys as young as ten and above to separate facilities, but this was often done by force or without informing their mothers.<sup>28</sup> The authorities often did not explain the reason for the boys' removal or let relatives know their subsequent whereabouts.<sup>29</sup> The boys' transfer was undertaken sometimes to prevent sexual relationships or because some boys were considered dangerous trouble-makers. The three possible destinations for boys transferred in this way were adult prisons, with separate facilities for children; juvenile

25 Haft was born while his father was on the run during the Poso conflict, and he followed his parents' journey ever since. He continuously received indoctrination, particularly from her mother, on being a good Muslim through militant jihad. When the police raided his house and arrested his father in March 2007, he witnessed the incident firsthand which left him with trauma and resentment toward the police. He then studied in radical schools, from al Furqon kindergarten and al-Irsyad elementary school in Tawangmangu, Central Java, to Ibn Mas'od Islamic boarding school in Bogor, West Java, that further shaped his views towards Islam.

26 IPAC found a widow named Nur Hayati Ahmad residing in Al-Hol as of June 2019.

27 It is important to note that YIS's siblings were actively participating in extremist groups in Indonesia and the southern Philippines. The second child, Rezky Fantasy Rullie alias Cici, and her husband joined the Abu Sayyaf Group. Her husband was killed in September 2020; Cici was arrested while pregnant in October 2020. She gave birth to a baby boy in January 2020. The capture of Cici helped unpack the JAD Makassar network. In January 2021, the police arrested 18 people including Cici's eldest sister, Ainun Pretty Aulia, and several of their mother's siblings. The police also shot dead two other family members, M Rizaldy (Cici's uncle) and his son-in-law, Sanjai Azis. Cici's younger brother remained with Abu Sayyaf as a child soldier as of June 2021; a younger sister, Aisyah, who was married to an ISIS fighter in December 2020, was captured by the Philippines military on 23 June 2021 in Jolo; her husband was killed.

28 IPAC interview with a humanitarian worker in Al-Hol, April 2021.

29 The humanitarian organisations oftentimes arrange meetings for families detained in separate facilities, but it was simply inadequate due to the high demand and limited workers providing the support.

detention centres; or a “deradicalisation school” known as the Houry Centre (sometimes spelt as Huri Centre).<sup>30</sup> This was a pilot project for rehabilitation programs, founded in 2017, with more friendly settings and activities for boys, but its capacity was limited to only 110 detainees for all nationals.<sup>31</sup>

As of June 2021, IPAC is not aware of any Indonesian boys removed from al-Hol in this way, but Indonesian mothers in al-Hol were reportedly very concerned about their children being taken away by the authorities.<sup>32</sup> The potential transfer of boys adds a time consideration to the already complicated issue of how to bring Indonesian children home. If the SDF treats these boys as adults once they reach puberty, their chances of being considered for possible repatriation could become dim regardless of their biological age.

#### *F. The Story of Arif Fadillah and Family*

The first Indonesian families, including children, began leaving for Syria in early 2014, before the declaration of ISIS in June 2014. The rate picked up in 2015, but by 2016, more were being caught by Turkish authorities than were successfully making it across the border. By 2020, the total number of deportees stood at over 500, from across Indonesia.<sup>33</sup>

Of those who managed to reach Syria successfully, many lived in Raqqa, the ISIS capital. When Raqqa fell in October 2017, some ISIS loyalists fled towards Deir az-Zour, where they faced death, desperate hardship or detention.

One example is Arif Fadillah, from Pamulang, in the Jakarta suburb of South Tangerang. He became attracted to ISIS ideology in 2013 and became a regular student at al-Munawaroh Mosque, long associated with extremist cleric Aman Abdurrahman. He left for Syria in January 2015 with his mother, his wife, two daughters, then fourteen and eight, and a son, then thirteen years old. They lived in Raqqa, where Arif worked as a mechanic. Among other Indonesians there, Arif was known as particularly hardline. When an ideological debate arose within ISIS on whether civil servants in democracies should be considered *a priori* as apostates or whether individuals should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, Arif took the first, more militant position. This put him in opposition to Aman Abdurrahman, who took the more flexible, case-by-case stance, and Arif joined nine other Indonesians in a statement in 2017 denouncing him.<sup>34</sup>

When Raqqa fell, the family became separated. All of the women in the family sought refuge in al-Roj camp, where Arif’s wife, Cholida, died of cancer a few months later. Arif Fadilla was captured in Deir Az-Zour on 17 November 2017. He was involved in an attempted prison break from al-Malikiyah prison on 5 April 2019 with hundreds of others but was quickly recaptured. In February 2020, the family appeared in a BBC documentary in which Arif Fadilla and his

30 IPAC interview with a humanitarian official in charge in al-Hol, April 2021.

31 Rights and Security International, “Europe’s Guantanamo: The Indefinite Detention of European Women and Children in North East Syria”, 17 February 2021, pp. 24. More explanation about the Huri Centre can be found in Rojava Information Centre *op.cit.*, pp. 30-36.

32 IPAC observation of social media accounts of some Indonesian women in al-Hol.

33 In February 2021, IPAC was able to look at the province of origin of 398 Indonesian deportees and returnees. 43 per cent were from West Java, followed by East Java (16.5 per cent) and Central Java (13.7 per cent). Of the non-Javanese, West Sumatra and Aceh – respectively 3 per cent –, and the provinces of North Sumatra, Jambi, Lampung, West Nusa Tenggara, East Kalimantan, Central and South Sulawesi, and Maluku, were also represented.

34 On 12 June 2017, Indonesian ISIS sympathizers in Syria sent an open letter to Aman Abdurrahman, circulated in Telegram, urging him to condemn all civil servants and election voters for supporting the man-made system. It was followed up by another letter on 3 July 2017 among the names signed by Abu Thoriq Al Indunisy (Arif Fadillah Pamulang). See more on IPAC, “Marawi, The ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia”, Report No. 39, 21 July 2017 p.21.

eldest daughter, Nada Fadilla, then eighteen, were interviewed.<sup>35</sup> Arif showed deep remorse at having brought his family to Syria. Nada, who aspired to be a medical doctor, regretted her father's decision to join ISIS and said that she would be "thankful if there are people who want to forgive me", hoping that the Indonesian society would agree on their repatriation. His son's location was unknown as of 2021.

The case illustrates the policy dilemmas for the Indonesian government. Arif himself would likely fail any initial screening for repatriation, as he would be considered high risk, despite his expressions of remorse. His mother is unlikely to be a threat to anyone, but she would probably not be included in the first tier of "vulnerable" citizens. The elder daughter has the potential to contribute to Indonesia, but given the higher profile of Indonesian women in terrorism, Indonesian officials would likely insist on a direct in-person assessment before allowing any women millennials back – and she is no longer a minor. And while Nada's younger sister, aged fourteen as of 2021, may constitute a little risk, the presence of older relatives means that she would not be considered unaccompanied, despite the fact that her mother is dead and her father is in prison. The likelihood that anyone in this family will be coming home soon seems remote.

### *G. Deteriorating Conditions*

Those in Syria camps face an increasingly desperate situation, with deteriorating conditions in terms of food, water, and sanitation, despite the presence of humanitarian organisations doing what they can.<sup>36</sup> The camp residents face extreme weather, and often natural disasters such as floods and dust storms.<sup>37</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic made the situation even worse due to restrictions of movement, delayed delivery of basic necessities, and limited number of medical personnel working in the camps.<sup>38</sup> Eight children died just within a week in August 2020 due to severe malnutrition and unavailability of health service, three times the death toll rate since the beginning of 2020.<sup>39</sup>

There is a constant threat of violence from ISIS ideologues, often other women, including toward anyone who expresses a desire to go home or violates ISIS rules, especially inside al-Hol camp. Punishment varies from beating the wrongdoers, including children, sometimes fatally, to burning their tents.<sup>40</sup> The danger of sexual abuse is also always present against boys and girls. One source reported at least one case of an older boy who raped a young girl at the urging of his militant mother as a way of intimidating the girl's mother.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, ISIS sleeper cells supply women supporters with money and weapons, sometimes smuggling people in and out, escalating the tension inside the camp. Over 47 people have been killed in al-Hol, with one case of public beheading, since the beginning of 2021 allegedly by ISIS members hiding in the camp, though the victims were believed to be all Syrians and Iraqis, not foreigners.<sup>42</sup> It forced the Kurdish authorities to conduct the first-ever major operation in al-

35 BBC News YouTube Channel, "After the Caliphate: On The Trail of IS", 7 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ONnG3G6OgY>.

36 "NGO warn: Humanitarian Aid Shortage amid Harsh Temperatures and Rising Cases of COVID-19", reliefweb.int, 29 January 2021.

37 Selma Fukelj, "Flood in Syrian Camp Al Hol Prompts Closure and Deportation of Foreign Nationals", N1 Sarajevo, 10 November 2020.

38 In August 2020, three health workers were confirmed positive for COVID-19. It generated fear over an outbreak considering the dense population of the camp with no running water. Healthcare workers could not keep up with the scarce medical supply, protective gears, and testing problems. Some organisations were forced to shut down activities as health and security threats were harmful to the humanitarian workers. See Médecins Sans Frontières, "COVID-19 has devastating knock effect in Northeast Syria", 27 August 2020.

39 Save The Children, "Syria: Child Death Rate Triples in Al-Hol Camp as Medical Access Deteriorates", 13 August 2020.

40 Vera Mironova, "Life Inside Syria's Al-Hol Camp", mei.edu, 9 July 2020.

41 IPAC interview with humanitarian worker in al-Hol camp, April 2021.

42 "1st Phase of 'Humanity and Security Campaign' Ends", ANHA Hawar News Agency, 2 April 2021.

Hol for five consecutive days, starting on 28 March 2021. They collected biometric data of the residents, confiscated military equipment, including electronic units for explosive devices, and arrested 125 ISIS members.<sup>43</sup> The operation clearly revealed that ISIS thoroughly penetrated the camps and the SDF simply did not have the resources or the staff to cope.

### III. CHILDREN OF INDONESIAN EXTREMISTS OUTSIDE SYRIA

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Indonesian children from pro-ISIS families overseas are not just a problem in Syria. Indonesian children have also become stranded in the Philippines, particularly after the 2017 Marawi siege, and have turned up in Iraq and Afghanistan.

#### A. *The Philippines*

One Indonesian child in the Philippines as of June 2021 was FSJ. He was ten years old when he traveled in early 2016 to the Philippines with his father, Irsad Achmad Derajat, from Tasikmalaya, West Java.<sup>44</sup> FSJ pledged allegiance to ISIS in November 2016, trained as a *mujahid*, then left for Marawi to join the ISIS militants holding the city. His father died there; FSJ was captured when the war ended and has been in military custody since. It was only three years after Marawi's "liberation" in early 2020 that the Philippine military informed the Indonesian embassy of his detention. Embassy officials met him and were in contact with his mother, who was prepared to receive him. However, his repatriation had to be postponed due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

There is also the case of Minhati Madrais and her six children in the Philippines, who were assisted by the Indonesian embassy in Manila to return to Indonesia, but under very different circumstances. Minhati was the widow of Omarkhayyam Maute, one of the top commanders of the occupation of Marawi from May to October 2017. They had met as students at al-Azhar in Egypt and initially returned to live in Indonesia, teaching at the Islamic boarding school that Minhati's father ran outside Jakarta. In 2015, they moved to the Philippines, where Omar became a leading figure in pro-ISIS coalition. He was killed by Philippine soldiers on 17 October 2017, in the last days of the Marawi siege. Minhati had no role in Marawi. Her husband had sent her and their six children to Iligan before the conflict began. Minhati was arrested on 5 November 2017 and initially charged with illegal possession of explosives, the default charge used by the police against suspected terrorists because it is a non-bailable offence. It was an implausible charge in this case, but Indonesian police flew immediately to the Philippines to interview her and concluded that she posed no risk. As she waited in detention for her trial, five of the six children were sent back to their grandparents in Indonesia with the assistance of the Indonesian embassy. Her trial began in March 2018 – relatively speedy by Philippine standards – and she was acquitted. In August 2020, she and the youngest child were deported to Indonesia. The case was different from the al-Hol cases because of the close cooperation between Indonesian and Philippine police, the ability to interview Minhati at length and in person, as well as the sense, reinforced by the acquittal, that she had not been involved in her husband's activities. Her case, however, shows that there is a precedent for successful repatriation of children to Indonesia.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> They travelled first to Nunukan, North Kalimantan, then to Tawau, in Sabah, Malaysia. They stayed there for a month, then continued the journey to Sandakan, where the father worked as a cloth trader for almost a year. They then went to Kota Kinabalu and flew to Manila, then took another plane to Zamboanga and a ferry to Basilan.

## B. *Iraq and Afghanistan*

Another case involves four children of two Indonesian mothers detained in an Iraqi prison.<sup>45</sup> They escaped from Syria to Nineveh, Iraq, and got arrested in April 2018 after their husbands died in a U.S. air force attack. They were charged with affiliation with ISIS, tried in court under conditions that did not fulfill basic requirements for a fair trial, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During the trials, they received assistance from the Indonesian embassy in Baghdad and asked for help in getting their children home, considering the poor treatment in the detention centres.<sup>46</sup> Their relatives in Indonesia agreed to take care of the children, and the Indonesian foreign ministry wanted to help, but COVID-19 and other factors meant the case was still pending as of mid-2021.

Three children were also detained in Kabul following their parents' attempts to join ISIS's "Khorasan province", the small territory controlled in Afghanistan. One of the early Indonesian ISIS supporters, Saifullah, managed to arrive in "Khorasan" in July 2017 and later facilitated the travel of other Indonesians.<sup>47</sup> Bagiyo Saleh was the first Indonesian known to have left with his family. They had all been deported in October 2015 from Turkey, but Bagiyo was determined to join ISIS and left for Afghanistan on 22 May 2018, after the Surabaya bombing. His wife, Nadhiroh Nuraini, and his then five-year-old son, AF, followed him, leaving Jakarta on 3 January 2019.<sup>48</sup> They were apparently detained on arrival at the Afghan border and are believed to be in prison in Kabul.

Another man who sought to bring his family to ISIS-Khorasan was Ahmad, a former teacher of Ibn Mas'ood pesantren. He left for Afghanistan with his wife, Sara, and their two young children, one born in 2015, the other in 2018. They were arrested when crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border, sent to Kabul, and remained in custody there as of June 2021.<sup>49</sup>

In the non-Syrian cases, the children are more accessible for contact, identification, and assessment. The diplomatic issues that make dealing with the SDF difficult are also absent. But even in the absence of these hurdles, the repatriation of children from these areas is mostly stalled, with COVID presenting new obstacles.

## IV. CHILD DEPORTEES AND RETURNEES

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Deportations to Indonesia of would-be ISIS fighters began in 2014 but increased significantly in 2017, with the total number of deportees then standing at 573, most of whom were women and children.<sup>50</sup> The high influx of foreign ISIS sympathisers worldwide forced Turkish authorities to tighten security and border patrols, making it even more difficult to cross over. In addition to those arrested in Turkey, pro-ISIS Indonesians were also stopped and deported in Hongkong, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka and Singapore. The number of deportees dropped to zero as of 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "Kronologi Penahanan Dua WNI Simpatisan ISIS di Irak", CNN Indonesia, 7 June 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Change Approach to Foreign Women, Children in ISIS-Linked Trials", 21 June 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Saifullah was a member of JAD Padang, West Sumatra. He was deported from Turkey in March 2016, then became the contact point of Munawar Kholil, facilitators of Indonesians to Syria. Munawar informed him about the possibility of emigration to ISIS Central Asia, and helped him reach Khorasan, Afghanistan. See more on IPAC, "Learning from Extremists in West Sumatra", Report No 62, 28 February 2020.

<sup>48</sup> They were in the same group as Hari Kuncoro, a recidivist extremist who was had just been released in October 2017. Hari was re-arrested by Indonesian police in the Jakarta airport, while Nadhiroh and her children managed to get through.

<sup>49</sup> The mother seemed to be highly radicalised. She had burned her Indonesian passport and determined that her children would grow up in "the blessed land of Khorasan". See Susan Sim, "As US withdraws, Afghanistan's Lure Returns for Southeast Asian Extremists - Woman and Children Included", South China Morning Post, 12 June 2021.

<sup>50</sup> IPAC, "Managing Indonesia's Pro-ISIS Deportees", Report No. 47, 17 July 2018.

In addition to the pro-ISIS deportees, some Indonesian men linked to Jamaah Islamiyah returned, mostly in 2013-2014, some in 2016-2017, after short stints in Syria for training with Jabhat an-Nusra (JN), a militia linked to Al-Qaeda. JN was purely Syrian and strongly anti-Assad, as opposed to ISIS which had many Iraqis and placed a higher priority on establishing the caliphate than fighting the Syrian leader. Some ISIS sympathisers also returned home voluntarily, many of them disappointed with what they found. Some were detained upon arrival; others slipped through the net and managed to get home safely to their communities.<sup>51</sup> BNPT data listed 50 returnees as of 2021.<sup>52</sup>

The only time families, including children, were formally repatriated to Indonesia with government assistance was in August 2017, when 18 people were repatriated from Iraq after having made it there from Syria on their own. Five of them were children. They were disillusioned with life in Syria, struggled to escape ISIS territory, and turned themselves in to the SDF forces.<sup>53</sup> They went through a month-long background check in Ain Issa camp, for women, and Tell Abyad prison, for men, to ensure they were not part of the ISIS structure. After intensive communication between the Kurdish authorities and the Indonesian embassy in Baghdad, they were finally allowed to return.

Only one out of the eighteen repatriated, MKA, was not from the extended family. MKA, born in January 2004, was only ten years old when his father, M Soleh, and mother, Ingrid Al Rukaiyah, brought him to Syria.<sup>54</sup> M Soleh alias Andri Susanto was a long-time aide to Aman Abdurrahman and who served time in prison for his role in a 2004 bomb-making training session in Cimanggis, just south of Jakarta.<sup>55</sup> He went to Syria in 2015 and was reportedly killed shortly thereafter. MKA appeared in the above-mentioned 'Cubs of Caliphate' video and seemed to have been deeply indoctrinated. He became separated from his mother when she remarried an Algerian fighter, and eventually joined the Indonesians wanting to go home.

MKA, together with the women and other children in the group, went through a rehabilitation program at BNPT's facility in Sentul, West Java. MKA reportedly was very quiet and could not make eye contact with other people.<sup>56</sup> Through intensive assistance, MKA, who was seventeen as of 2021, began very slowly to develop a few friends and was reportedly doing better at socializing with others at a nearby Islamic boarding school.

Another case from the group was a young woman whose trajectory has been widely covered in the media. Nurshadrina Khaira Dhania alias Dhania, then seventeen years old, had become captivated by the idea of living a righteous life in a pure Islamic state through social media.<sup>57</sup> Dhania was from a middle-class background; her father, Dwi Djoko Wiwoho, held a top position in a state-owned enterprise in Batam, Riau Islands. She eventually persuaded her family to join a group that her uncle was putting together to emigrate to ISIS. The extended family of 26 members left in August 2015; seven, including her uncle, got deported in Turkey while nineteen

51 Most of them were from the first group leaving for Syria in 2013 with Abu Jandal alias Salman Atamimi. See Heyder Affan, "ISIS, Terorisme dan Pertobatan Tiga WNI 'Eks Jihadis' di Suriah: 'Kamu Harus Pulang Ayah dan Ibu Tak Restui Kepergianmu'", BBC Indonesia, 4 May 2021. One returnee successfully managed to avoid the immigration system was May Yusrul of Laskar MMI. Left in May 2014 and joined al-Nusra front in Idlib, Syria, he returned at the same year and decided to stand with ISIS. See more in IPAC, *Learning from Extremists in West Sumatra*, *op.cit.* pp. 6-8.

52 "BNPT Sebut Sekitar 1.500 WNI Menjadi Teroris Lintas Batas", *kompas.com*, 27 May 2021.

53 Syailendra Hafiz Wiratama, "Jalan Pulang dari Suriah (2)", *detik.com*, 19 February 2020.

54 Jabbar Ramdhani, "Polri Periksa 18 WNI Terduga Eks-ISIS yang Baru Saja Pulang", *detik.com*, 13 August 2017.

55 On 21 March 2004, a bomb exploded prematurely at M Sholeh's house in Cimanggis, Depok, next to Aman's house. No casualties from the incident. The bomb-making training was part of series activities, including study groups and idad training, conducted by Aman Abdurrahman and some others since December 2003.

56 Ruang Ngobrol ID, "Repatriasi Anak Returnees dari Suriah, 17 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ruangobrolofficial/videos/2611873369103185>.

57 Anne Barker, "Meet the Indonesian Girl who led Her Family to move to Syria to Join Islamic State", ABC Australia, 23 March 2019.

others managed to cross the border, including Dhanial and her parents and her then 78-year-old grandmother who eventually died in Syria.

In Raqqa, Syria the family got separated. Dhanial, her mother, and her sisters were placed in a women-only guest house while her father and uncles were housed in an apartment for men. They were encouraged, often intimidated, to take a more significant role for ISIS, but refused. They eventually decided to escape, and after several false starts with people smugglers, managed to reach Ain Issa camp. Dhanial's father and two uncles were arrested and sentenced after returning for supporting a foreign terrorist group. Dhanial became an anti-extremist activist, aiming to counter ISIS propaganda online. She hoped in this way to atone for her wrongdoings in the past and prevent more people from joining ISIS.

These cases show that there is a precedent for successful repatriation of children to Indonesia.

## V. THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHILD REPATRIATION

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No one is suggesting that repatriation of children, let alone adults, will be an easy task, and even if the Indonesian government becomes more willing to bring back unaccompanied children, it will still have to deal with defining this category more clearly, verifying citizenship, undertaking risk assessment, dealing with diplomatic issues, and managing competing bureaucratic interests at home.

### A. Definition of Children

The first hint that the government was considering repatriation of young children came in a statement from Coordinating Minister Mahfud MD in February 2020.<sup>58</sup> The idea that young children could and should be brought home was gaining currency in several countries, among them Belgium, Germany, Sweden and France. Young children were considered more vulnerable, less indoctrinated, less likely to have been directly engaged in violence and therefore less of a security threat.

In Indonesia, children who had lost at least one parent (the standard definition of "orphan" in Indonesia) were considered particularly deserving of consideration, but even here there were qualifications of those under ten-years of age. Child psychologists considered it unwise to separate young children from their mothers. However, some mothers wanted their children to be sent back to relatives. In one case under consideration in Iraq, imprisoned mothers had appealed to the Indonesian government for help so their children would not have to grow up in prison.

The perception of a risk to the state increases with age. As such, infants and toddlers might be considered completely innocent but very young boys, who had been included in the Cubs of the Caliphate program and other forms of military training, would be seen as more of a threat. As children grow older, the possibility of exposure to ISIS doctrine and violence in the camps steadily increases. The longer the government dithers, the fewer children under ten years of age there will be. By the time there is a clear policy directive, most of these children could be teenagers. Faruk, Yusuf, and Nasir, the children who got separated from their families as Baghouz fell, were already on or over the verge of the ten-year-old threshold in 2019.

The Indonesian government's understanding of "children" also disadvantages families headed by underage mothers or elders but still underage siblings. These heads of households would likely not themselves be considered unaccompanied children, simply because they are taking

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58 "WNI Eks ISIS Tak Pulang, Mantan Pengikut: Pemerintah Lebih Paham," Tempo.co, 12 February 2020 and "Sambangi Kemenkumham, Mahfud MD Cek Perkembangan Pemblokiran Paspor WNI eks ISIS, Kompas, 6 March 2021.



care of others. Most of these caretakers, however, also came to Syria following parents and other family members without knowing the real consequences of joining ISIS.

### B. Citizenship and Data Verification

Before any children would be considered for repatriation, their nationality would have to be verified. This is not a simple undertaking. Some Indonesians who joined ISIS undertook ceremonial burnings of their passports, and videos circulated on YouTube and other social media showing children joyfully throwing documents on the flames.<sup>59</sup> Other Indonesian passports appeared in Syrian markets for sale, including that of Munawar Kholil, a JAD leader now in an SDF prison. Whether he turned it in to an ISIS leader who sold it or whether he himself disposed of it, a journalist found it for sale in July 2019.<sup>60</sup> Many children were born to Indonesian mothers in Syria, sometimes through mixed marriages.<sup>61</sup> Legally, they would be considered Indonesian citizens but verification is difficult because there is no record of their existence in Indonesia.<sup>62</sup>

Adding complexity to the issue is the debate within the government about the possibility of revoking nationalities of foreign fighters. On 13 February 2020, Moeldoko, Jokowi's chief of staff, stated that Indonesian nationals who renounced citizenship after joining ISIS in Syria would be considered stateless. Mahfud MD immediately denied that citizenship would be revoked.<sup>63</sup> Moeldoko appeared to be relying on a provision of the Indonesian citizenship law referring to nationals who pledged allegiance to another state, but most governments do not recognise ISIS as a state.<sup>64</sup> As of 2021, there have been no revocations of citizenship on terrorism grounds.

Assessing and confirming the nationalities of eligible children would involve considerable cost and effort. In June 2020, camp administrators conducted a registration operation of foreigners in Al-Hol, including collecting biometric data and DNA samples of mostly of Western nationals.<sup>65</sup> They did another round of data collection in al-Hol in March 2021 as security deteriorated. It is not clear if any Indonesians were included, but BNPT has acknowledged that there will be no real progress on repatriation until it can send a team from relevant agencies to interview Indonesians directly. This will not even be contemplated until COVID restrictions on air travel are lifted.<sup>66</sup> In the past, the SDF has said that interviews in camps and prisons by governments will only be allowed if there is an *a priori* commitment to repatriate. This requirement may have changed, but it underscores that getting to Syria (or to Kurdish-controlled Rojava) is only the

59 Farnouk Arnaz, "Police Probe Video Showing Indonesian Kids Trained by IS in Syria," *jakartaglobe.id*, 18 May 2016.

60 IPAC personal communication, July 2019.

61 The above list showed two Indonesians with foreign spouses. The first was Aulia Sulistyowati, born in 1995, who married an Algerian fighter with a two-year old son as of June 2019. The other was Maria Abdul Gafur, born in 1983, with three children. The first was born in 2009, therefore likely from her former marriage. Her second and third children, born in 2016 and 2017 respectively, could be from her latest marriage with an ISIS fighter from Aleppo, Syria.

62 The 2006 Indonesian citizenship law stipulated children would be granted nationality as long as they were born through or out of legal wedlock of Indonesian mothers. Indonesian fathers married with other nationalities could also claim the citizenship of their children if the claim was declared before the child reached 18 years old or had married.

63 "Bantah Moeldoko, Mahfud Tegaskan Kewarganegaraan WNI Eks ISIS Belum Dicabut", *kompas.com*, 13 February 2020.

64 Nanda Saraswati, "Kembali Eks-ISIS: Antara Keamanan Nasional dan Perlindungan HAM, CRCS UGM, 22 February 2020.

65 "In Syrian Camp for Women and Children who Left ISIS Caliphate, a Struggle Even to Register Names", *Washington Post*, 28 June 2020.

66 Febrianto Adi Saputro, "BNPT Bakal Lakukan Asesmen terhadap WNI Eks ISIS", *Republika*, 22 March 2021.

beginning of the assessment process.<sup>67</sup>

For any samples to assist the Indonesian verification effort, the government would have to obtain DNA matches from relatives. Even if this expensive process of checking were to take place, there is no guarantee that repatriation of those confirmed to be Indonesians would follow.

### *C. Initial Screening and Risk Assessment*

Even if the hurdles to on-site assessment can be overcome, there is a question of what would be assessed and how. Any assessment for children under ten years of age should be used as the basis for aiding rehabilitation programs, not to decide whether to repatriate or not. For adults and teenagers, risk assessments make sense, but these evaluations have a chequered history in Indonesia. Most questionnaires developed outside Indonesia have focused on assessing the risk level of terrorism suspects in custody. The instruments have been difficult to translate, in terms of both language and cultural approach, and too complicated to administer and analyse.

A simple behavioral checklist for determining the level of extremism proved useful for assessing the radicalism of newly arrested detainees in Indonesia, but would be largely inapplicable for children who have spent years in Syria.<sup>68</sup> For younger children especially, the assessment should be aimed less at evaluating risk than evaluating psychological health and the impact of exposure to violence and conflict for aiding the rehabilitation process. The experience of working with children exposed to violence in the former conflicts of Poso, Ambon and Aceh might be more relevant as a basis for developing assessment tools than instruments designed to assess risk in prisons.

### *D. Diplomatic issues*

Another complication in the repatriation process is the fact that Indonesia maintains diplomatic relations with the government of Bashar al-Assad, which does not recognise the Kurdish-led territory where the SDF camps and prisons are located.<sup>69</sup> The SDF would like maximum publicity for any cooperation on repatriation. Governments like Indonesia and Malaysia that value their relationship with Damascus want to avoid this. However, humanitarian organisations have indicated that if there is political will to repatriate, ways can be found to overcome these diplomatic hurdles, including by working through proxies. The return of the eighteen Indonesians in August 2017, which involved getting them from an SDF-controlled camp to Iraq, shows that such transfers can take place without lasting political damage.

Other governments that maintain good relations with Assad have repatriated citizens through Damascus. Albania, Kosovo, Russia, Sudan and Uzbekistan were among the countries that repatriated a total of 361 children this way between 2017 and 2021.<sup>70</sup> Still others have brought

<sup>67</sup> Another way of verifying nationality is by acknowledging the ISIS birth certificates of those born in Syria, as encouraged by the UN, many of these certificates are also likely to have been destroyed or lost during escape from the battle. See Agence France Presse, “UN Says Children of ISIS Must be Repatriated”, Courthouse News Service, 16 January 2020.

<sup>68</sup> The behavioral checklist consisted of some indicators of highly indoctrinated child deportees, including ignoring one’s greetings, refusing any art and musical activities, refusing to eat meat or chicken, and rejecting Pancasila. The Pancasila indicator does not apply because the children have not heard about it in most of their life. Other indicators may not be applicable as well. ICG report in 2019 mentioned one way of doing ISIS indoctrination to children was through songs and audio recordings (i.e., musical activities). See ICG, “Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS”, Middle East Report No. 208, 18 November 2019, pp. 8. Camp residents also reportedly casually cooked and ate chicken since they believed it was slaughtered according to Islamic law.

<sup>69</sup> Ismira Lutfia Tisnadibrata, “Indonesia Maintains Its Stance on Syria Following Pressure from US and Its Allies”, Arab News, 22 April 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Record of repatriation of foreign children in Northeast Syria as of February 2021, made available to IPAC in April 2021.

their nationals out through Turkey. Regardless of the routes used, repatriating residents of the Syrian camps has become more urgent in the midst of deteriorating health and safety conditions. In February 2020, the UN urged the 57 member states with nationals in al-Hol and al-Roj, including Indonesia, to repatriate them as soon as possible.<sup>71</sup>

### *E. Competing Bureaucratic and Political Interests*

A final complication is the competition among bureaucracies involved in addressing the issue of repatriation. There is a difference in perspective between security agencies that focus more on risk and those like Social Affairs and the Foreign Ministry more focused on humanitarian aspects of repatriation.

There is also bureaucratic rivalry among security agencies themselves, such as police, BIN and BNPT vying to position themselves as the most committed to protecting Indonesia at all costs. Any apparent willingness to bring nationals back without sorting out every last detail can lead to criticism from those with a more rejectionist approach. President Joko Widodo appears to have been more influenced by the security approach. He said in a press conference that he would prioritise the safety of 260 million Indonesians over the relative few in Syria, although he would consider returning children out of humanitarian concerns.<sup>72</sup>

Agencies working in the child protection sectors, on the other hand, were more focused on how, not whether, the children would be reintegrated back into Indonesian communities. They had to consider the lack of effective community-based counter-radicalisation programs and low numbers of trained personnel with experience in helping children exposed to violent extremism.<sup>73</sup>

The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection tried to fill the gap in May 2019 by promulgating a ministerial regulation with the guidelines for protecting children from radicalism and terrorism. It was triggered by public shock over the involvement of children in the 2018 Surabaya bombing but the provisions were applicable for any child exposed to violent extremism. It listed steps for prevention, reeducation, and provision of social, psychosocial and psychological rehabilitation for children within extremist networks. But the ministry had not developed any concrete programs and even if it had, it had no capacity to enforce it or ensure the compliance of relevant agencies.

Likewise, BNPT included child protection principles in its National Action Plan on Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism (RAN-PE), signed by President Joko Widodo on 17 January 2021. The plan has no specific provisions for deportees, returnees, or Indonesians affiliated with extremist groups abroad.

## **VI. REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS**

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If the political, diplomatic and bureaucratic hurdles to bringing children back from Syria are daunting, so are the difficulties of formulating an effective rehabilitation program.

If Indonesia were to decide in June 2021 to repatriate all unaccompanied children under ten, there would likely be less than ten children involved. The first priority will be to get them medical and psychiatric attention. Several could be malnourished and suffering from a variety of ailments. Babies and toddlers could have attachment issues, while older children could be

71 OHCHR, “Syria: UN Experts Urge 57 States to Repatriate Women and Children from Squalid Camps”, 8 February 2021.

72 Muhammad Choirul, “Jokowi Buka-Bukaan Keputusan Tak Pulangkan 689 WNI Eks ISIS”, CNBC Indonesia, 12 February 2020.

73 Inas Widyaturatikah, “KPAI: Anak WNI Eks ISIS Jangan Sekedar Dipulangkan”, Republika, 18 February 2020.

susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), irritability, flashbacks, and dissociative behavior.<sup>74</sup> It will be equally important to place them in a foster care environment where they can begin to get the kindness and nurturing they need to cope with the new surroundings.

There are few previous models in Indonesia. The government took charge of the surviving children of the 2018 Surabaya bombers but no evaluation has been done of the strengths and weaknesses of the program or its impact on the children. Little sustained attention has been given to the children of deportees beyond their initial stay at the Handayani centre.

#### A. *The Handayani Centre*

The centre that the Indonesian government often showcases to visitors is the Handayani centre in Jakarta, a Ministry of Social Affairs complex. The centre, initially set up as a halfway house for juvenile delinquents, became a temporary shelter for families sent back from Turkey. Most of the deportees spent less than two months there, with little or no follow-up thereafter.

The centre seemed to work as a temporary shelter for the deportee families because it had a good manager, a trained staff eager to help the children, and most importantly, a cheerful atmosphere that encouraged play with children from other backgrounds. Even when overwhelmed by the influx of families coming in – some 176 individuals went through Handayani in 2017 – its staff of thirteen social workers and three child psychologists managed to cope.

But several issues arose in the handling of deportees that could arise with any group repatriated from Syria. One was that the staff was initially very nervous about working with extremists, especially when adults and teenagers were involved. There would likely be less concern about very young children, but they also have less experience in the area, since the deportee children were mainly aged eight to seventeen. Toddlers and younger minors were largely still under parental supervision and considered less risky.<sup>75</sup> Any repatriation program of children would have to consider training needs for staff.

Second, because all the deportees were considered extremists, the programs developed for their short stay put heavy emphasis on Pancasila (the five founding principles of the state). For younger children, more attention would need to be given to the child's recovery and catching up on learning and language skills. These children may not see repatriation as an advantage, but rather as another uprooting, taking them away from a familiar environment.<sup>76</sup> The important thing is to show them kindness and concern and encourage them to be children again, before worrying about inculcating nationalism.

#### B. *Reintegration Efforts*

Limited models are available in Indonesia for rehabilitating young children exposed to conflict.<sup>77</sup> Few programs were put in place for children, let alone for child combatants, in post-conflict areas, such as Ambon, Poso, and Aceh, or at least if there were useful initiatives, few remember them decades later. Some of the more general peace-building programs, however, had useful elements.

74 Ian C. MacVicar, "What about The Camp Followers – and Their Children?", *Journal of Deradicalization*, Spring 2020, 22, pp.319-378.

75 IPAC interview with Handayani staff, March 2021

76 Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Children Growing Up in Extremist Families", RAN YF&C Academy, 25 April 2019.

77 Some local governments issued regulations on the protection of children associated with terrorism which consist of the need of reeducation, counselling, rehabilitation and reintegration, such as Gianyar regency, Bali; Bangka Belitung, West Sulawesi, and Yogyakarta. Nevertheless, few concrete actions are in place.

The first important aspect is addressing individual complexities and problems through the development of targeted programs.<sup>78</sup> Attention to medical and psychological needs is important, and gender differences may also play a role.<sup>79</sup>

Second is working with their main caregivers, mentors, foster parents and teachers. There is a need to ensure that they are given adequate background information on the children and what happened to them abroad. They should have opportunities to meet some of the returnees to get a better idea of what the children went through. They also should be briefed on what problems have occurred during the reintegration of other pro-ISIS individuals or families, including released prisoners and deportees and how these were handled.<sup>80</sup> Interagency coordination, including with schools, is particularly important to prevent confusion and gaps in teaching life values to children, such as understanding differences and tolerance.

The government also needs to ensure that repatriated children do not face stigmatisation and ostracization. For child returnees, school will be crucial. In a 2008 study in Poso, Central Sulawesi, a structured school-based trauma intervention among high-schoolers (aged eight to fourteen), which involved cooperative plays and drama, helped improve children who showed PTSD symptoms.<sup>81</sup> Affirmation from peers is essential for children as part of their identity building and sense of belonging.

### C. *The Example of the Children of the Surabaya Bombers*

One example that might be useful to look at more closely is the government's handling of the seven children of the Surabaya bombers, who took part in a rehabilitation program at the Handayani Centre. It seemed to work well but an independent evaluation is needed to assess what elements could be strengthened.

The May 2018 bombings involved four JAD families in a series of suicide or would-be suicide attacks. It was the first time in Indonesia that parents had deployed their own children as bombers, and it recast how officials regarded children, affecting the debate on repatriation of children from Syria. The first attack on the morning of 13 May targeted three churches. The bombers – parents and four children ranging in age from eighteen to nine – were killed, together with twelve civilians. In the evening, a bomb exploded prematurely at a house in Rusunawa Wonocolo, Sidoarjo, outside Surabaya. Anton Febrianto, 47, who had been making the bomb, was wounded. His wife and one son, aged seventeen, were killed, and Anton was shot and killed by police when they arrived on the scene. Three remaining children, aged fifteen, eleven and ten, were eventually taken into Handayani. On 14 May, another family consisting of father, mother and three children, tried to ride two motorcycles into the Surabaya police station. All were killed when they detonated their bombs, except the youngest daughter, then aged eight, who fell off the motorcycle and survived. She also was taken in by Handayani. Finally, on 15 May, police shot and killed Anton's younger brother, Dedi Sulistiani alias Teguh. Dedi's three children – two girls, aged fourteen and ten and a boy, aged seven, were also placed in Handayani's care.<sup>82</sup>

78 Aleksandar Pasagic, "Between Child Soldiers and Terrorists: Reintegrating Child Members of Islamic State", *Journal for Deradicalization*, Fall 2019, No. 20, pp.109-155.

79 Fitri Fausiah, Sherly Saragih Turnip, Edvard Hauff, "Community Violence Exposure and Determinants of Adolescent Mental Health: A School-based Study of A Post Conflict Area in Indonesia", *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 40, pp. 49-54.

80 Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Building Resilience among Young Children Raised in Extremist Environments - Specifically Child Returnees", RAN Policy and Practice Event, 4 July 2018.

81 Wietse A Tol, et al, "School-based Mental Health Intervention for Children Affected by Political Violence in Indonesia", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 300, No. 66, pp. 655-662.

82 "Aisyah Putri Luka di Dada Kiri, Mengalami Trauma Terparah", *jpnn.com*, 17 May 2018 and "Bangkit dari Trauma, Kondisi Ais Mulai Membaik", *Jawapos.com*, 17 May 2018.

Neither the Surabaya government nor the community where they lived, nor their relatives would accept the children. Handayani was the only available option, especially if siblings were to be kept together. All the children went through a rehabilitation program for a year, through mid-2019. They were then placed in an NU pesantren in central Java. Officials deemed the Handayani program successful for a number of reasons. Most notably, by the end of the program, none of the children still aspired to die as martyrs, and none still saw the Indonesian government as anti-Islamic. These were children who had been subjected for two full years to ISIS videos, including of suicide bombings and executions. Not all the children had been equally radicalised, however. Anton's fifteen-year-old son, AR, had rejected his father's ideology from the beginning and had elected to stay with his grandmother so that he could go to school, rather than undergoing the "home schooling", which was more in the nature of systematic indoctrination, that the other children received.<sup>83</sup>

While the Handayani program seemed to work, it is worth noting that there is no information as to how the children themselves viewed it. AR, for example, might have found the pesantren environment restrictive after having attended ordinary day school. On the other hand, Handayani allowed him to stay with his siblings and this was likely important in their own healing.

Three aspects of Handayani program for the Surabaya children could be modified for the rehabilitation of children returning from Syria. First, it was designed to be both intensive and long-term. The rehabilitation phase lasted for a year with activities every day. As one of the social workers at Handayani said, "It took them years to get radicalised, it's not possible to undo this in a matter of months."<sup>84</sup> She said it took six months before she and her colleagues saw clear changes in the children's attitudes and behaviour.

Second, it was focused on fulfilling the need to belong, with the social workers seeing themselves as a substitute family for these children. Some acted as older brothers or sisters, others more like parents who gave them maximum attention but were also prepared to exert discipline as necessary. The emotional bonds thus created lasted beyond the children's stay, with some still calling the Handayani social workers even two years after they left.<sup>85</sup> They were also exposed to different sources of information at Handayani that served as a counter to their old values. The social workers would use stories about the Prophet to instill new character-building goals, such as helping others, countering hatred, learning to control anger. Social workers also made a point of trying to bring the seven Surabaya children into contact with five non-Muslim residents who were already rehabilitated, as a way of increasing their social interactions.

The Handayani centre also worked for the seven children because it avoided a prison environment. The facility resembles a small neighbourhood, with school, dorms, mosque, small shops, and a playing field. The days were filled with school and extracurricular activities as well as counseling and therapy. Handayani staff acknowledged the need to strengthen the centre's trauma healing capacity. One of the Surabaya children was deeply affected by the death of her close friend, one of the children who bombed the church on 13 May. She had not fully recovered by the time the Handayani program came to an end.

Finally, the Handayani program could also improve community outreach so that the broader public and local authorities, understand its work. This might lessen the public's tendency to consider children of extremist parents guilty by association and rejecting their return.

83 "Terkuak, Ini Anak Bomber Rusun Wonocolo Sidoarjo yang Tidak Mempan oleh Doktrin Teror yang Diajarkan oleh Ayahnya," *indonesiakininews.com*, 15 May 2018.

84 IPAC interview with Handayani social worker, June 2021.

85 IPAC interview with Handayani social worker, June 2021.

## VII. CONCLUSION

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The Indonesian government should move ahead as quickly as possible to bring home young children from war zones, perhaps starting with unaccompanied children under ten but maintaining flexibility on who else might be considered. The initial number could be very small, so that the process can be monitored, adjusted and strengthened for future returnees. These children should be seen as victims of conflict, not terrorists-in-the-making. If they are left in camps and prisons without education and under constant intimidation from ISIS morality police, the risk that they will absorb ISIS values could increase.

Data verification on Indonesian nationals in the Syrian camps is ongoing, but it is not enough. A priority list for returns, a clear road map for overcoming obstacles and a timeline for action needs to be drawn up, with an achievable target set: perhaps the return of ten children from al-Hol by the end of 2021. President Jokowi personally should lead this humanitarian effort to ensure the public that the program has his support.

The Indonesian media and online bloggers have an important role to play in getting out as much information as possible about conditions of Indonesians in the camps as reported to their relatives at home or through partnerships with journalists on site. Images of squalor and fear in the camps would also be an important way to discredit the ISIS dream, as long as the information is collected by professional print and broadcast journalists. These accounts could have a major impact in building public sympathy for returnees—and that in turn could expedite bureaucratic decision-making.

Continuing as is, with young Indonesians growing older and conditions growing worse, is not tenable. Bringing these stranded children home is the only option that addresses both the humanitarian imperative and the security aim of weakening Indonesian links to terrorist networks abroad.

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