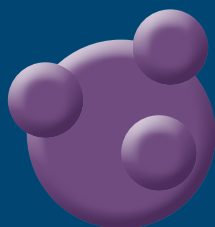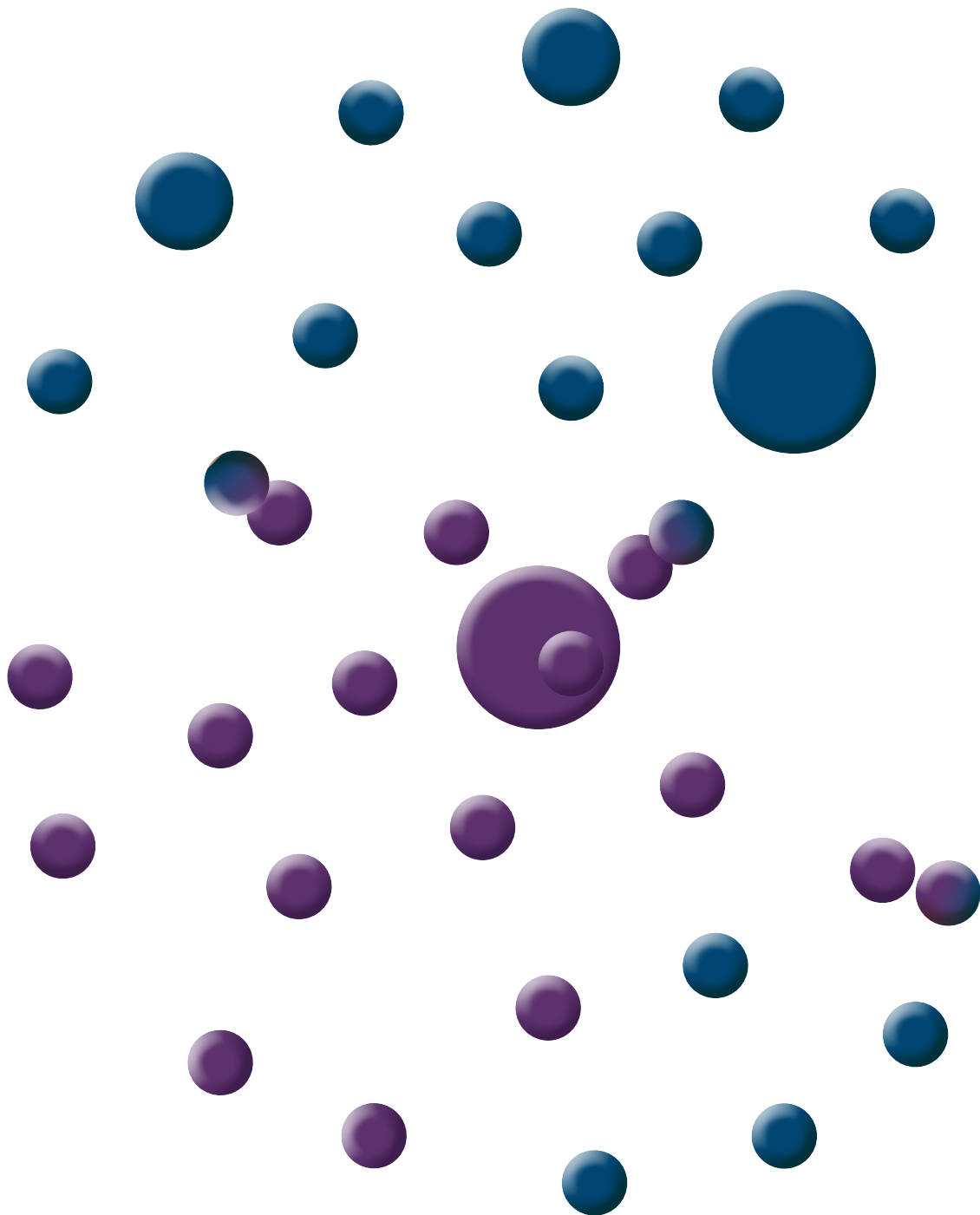SOUTHEAST ASIA  2020

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
## ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

## ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES

**AUTHOR**

**ARK Group** is a social enterprise, empowering local communities through the provision of agile and sustainable interventions to create greater stability, opportunity and hope for the future.

**EDITED BY**

Galen Lamphere-Englund
Farangiz Atamuradova
Denis Suljic

*The contents of this publication were developed by researchers at Ark Group and do not necessarily reflect the views of Hedayah or its donors.*

Hedayah
countering violent extremism

This series of reports use ideological or ideologically motivated extremism to refer to forms that are religiously, politically, and/or nationalistically inspired. Recognizing that typologies of extremism are fluid and lacking a global standard definition, we have elected to use this larger catch-all term to cover groups ranging from nationalist radical right actors to religiously-based fundamentalists. This includes racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE), as well as religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE).

Whenever possible, we eschew umbrella terms and refer directly to the extremist or violent extremist organization by name and, where discernible, the specific ideology advanced by the group.

We also refer to the radical right as a catch-all for hateful or violent far-right extremists and organizations when no specific organizational affiliation is noted.

Across these reports, we refer to Daesh instead of ISIS, ISIL, or IS.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to its proximity to China, Southeast Asia was particularly vulnerable to the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020. The health and safety measures that were put into place throughout 2020 restricted regional mobility and, in turn, violent extremist activity by Daesh-affiliated groups in the region.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) across Southeast Asia appeared to adopt a wait-and-watch approach to the new conditions, many of them turning inward, retreating into apocalyptic visions inspired by the unfolding global pandemic. Violent attacks were deprioritized and, in any case, were difficult to conduct in Indonesia, given effective counter-terrorism policing. The pandemic's impact on the People's Republic of China and then the West was watched with glee by many groups, who interpreted the virus as divine retribution against the enemies of Islam. Over time, and as lockdowns and other pandemic interventions were rolled out, most VEOs adopted conspiratorial narratives that understood the pandemic as a hidden plot by powerful Western or Chinese interests. In adopting such narratives, actors disseminated anti-vaccination and related disinformation, much of it adapted from Western, especially US, sources.

Support for Daesh in its two major regional hotspots of the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic of the Philippines declined, in line with the decline of Daesh in the Middle East, partially due to the restrictions on mobility, but also due to counter-terrorism efforts that had been in effect since before the virus outbreak. In Indonesia, the Government continued to press their advantage against the Islamist opposition, and the capabilities of counter-terrorism police were at their peak. Local Daesh affiliates, known as Jamaah Anshorut Daulah (JAD), were reduced to scatterings of small, largely autonomous cells. Large-scale shutdowns by the Telegram platform to remove violent extremist content restricted Daesh sympathizers to small chat groups with limited lifespans of 100-200 subscribers. In the Philippines, the relative success of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) under the auspices of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) limited the opportunities for splintering into militant offshoots, such as those that coalesced in 2017 under the banner of Daesh in the siege of Marawi city.

Generally, the pandemic reduced VE activity across Southeast Asia. The most notable example of this effect was the unprecedented unilateral ceasefire declared in April 2020 by the National Revolutionary Front (BRN), the largest armed group in the 16-year Malay-Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand. The BRN entered a peace dialogue with the Thai government, facilitated by the Federation of Malaysia. But as the pandemic dragged on, peace began to fray, and sporadic attacks occurred. For the region as a whole, the post-pandemic period will likely see a rebound in VE activity as travel and crowds return to their pre-pandemic levels.

The pandemic accelerated trends in online radicalization and recruitment as the internet continues to displace face-to-face networking. Regional violent extremist activity—already heterogeneous and marked by a disparate constellation of VEOs—became ever more insular and localized, as militants focused on the welfare of their communities via an expanding network of charities or contemplated and prayed for the end times. One of the lasting marks of the period of pandemic isolation may be the growth of extremist-linked charities and foundations, especially in Indonesia, against the backdrop of the flourishing of mainstream charities in Indonesia during this period.

Although violent extremist activity was at a low ebb by the end of 2020, there are indications that the pandemic period may represent a temporary lull. Foreign fighters and their families could find their way back to the region as mobility restrictions are eased and travel routes reopen.

But for now, the pandemic drags on across Southeast Asia, with some predicting effects running through 2024-2025. The course of violent extremism is always hard to anticipate in a region so diverse, and even broad trends can be challenging to identify. When it finally arrives, the post-pandemic period will likely reveal a changed Southeast Asia in many respects, and the landscape of terrorism and violent extremism will be no exception.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**1** Continue to analyze militant narratives and operational structures in anticipation of a return to the status quo ante, especially once regional and international travel is restored. Although violent extremist activity has decreased during the pandemic period in Southeast Asia, there is a likelihood of a rebound in activity post-pandemic.

**2** Governments and civil society organizations (CSO) should provide services to children and families of fighters to supplant Daesh charities and enhance disengagement from violent extremism. Charities are the one area in which violent extremist-linked activity remains undiminished by the pandemic. Pro-Daesh foundations are both an indicator of a gap in government service provision and a risk of future re-engagement in terrorism. Greater public awareness of the need for due diligence when donating to charities might reduce the risk of unintentional funding of VE-linked groups.

**3** Social media platforms and educational institutions should counter and disrupt propaganda from VEOs using anti-Chinese conspiracy theories as a mobilizing narrative. Anti-Chinese sentiment, exacerbated by the pandemic, presents a risk of communal conflict targeting ethnic Chinese and, as an issue that appeals to prejudices across the region, may serve as a cause that unifies otherwise disparate VEOs.

**4** COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation became endemic in violent extremist communication channels by the close of 2020. This misinformation takes the form of narratives that appeal to the full spectrum of violent extremist actors in Southeast Asia. Yet, at the outset of the year, pandemic content on VE communication channels was more consistent with sound public health advice. A solution may be to **deliver public health messages to VE channels via credible third parties, such as CSOs and trusted religious actors rather than national governments distrusted by violent extremist actors.**

# METHODOLOGY

This report analyzes the intersection of violent extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia from early 2020 until the end of the same calendar year. Data was collected and analyzed using primary and secondary open sources, to include social media channels of violent extremist actors in vernacular languages for the region. Platforms consulted in this research include the Telegram encrypted chat application, home to most VE accounts in Southeast Asia, and Facebook and Instagram. This research benefits from access to a large longitudinal database built from Telegram data from before the pandemic, allowing for a comparison across time. The preponderance of data originates from Indonesia and is in Bahasa Indonesia, reflecting Indonesia's status as the largest country of the region and the home to the oldest and most resilient VE networks.

Open-source coverage of the more remote areas of violent extremist activity, such as southern Kingdom of Thailand and the southern Philippines, is less comprehensive, reflecting the relative isolation of these regions, their impoverished access to internet communications, and the difficulty of collecting material in diverse local languages. Yet, there is sufficient data to draw conclusions about broad trends in these areas and cross-check findings with the more comprehensive Indonesian data. To an unknown extent, however, data on violent extremist trends and narratives in Southeast Asia is by its nature imperfect and always subject to improvement and reassessment. The region is highly diverse and characterized by highly localized networks and conflicts. The downturn in activity and travel due to the pandemic has only further compartmentalized and constricted the nature of violent extremist activity in Southeast Asia.

# NARRATIVES  ❯

Throughout 2020, as the reality of the pandemic set in Southeast Asia, violent extremist networks became more inward-looking, conspiratorial, and preoccupied with apocalyptic narratives that saw the pandemic as a sign of the end times. At the outset of the year, pro-Daesh militants were focused on pledging allegiance to the newly appointed Daesh "caliph," Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. By the end of the year, they were, like violent extremists across the board, focusing their attention on government lockdowns widely seen as a way to repress Muslims. COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation often adapted or translated from Western forums, became common currency on militant social media channels, embedded in a narrative that posits the pandemic as a Western or Chinese conspiracy.

*An Indonesian pro-Daesh charity outreach post on social media from mid-2020*[1]

## "THE PLIGHT OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS FAMILIES"

At the beginning of the year, the fate of hundreds of mostly women and children of Daesh foreign fighter families stranded in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Iraq became mainstream news in Indonesia.[2] Most of the next of kin were Indonesian citizens held at the Kurdish-run al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. The news was sparked by the Indonesian government's move to to remove the Indonesian citizenship of Daesh families, preventing them from returning home. This policy was highlighted in the JAD and pro-Daesh narratives in Indonesia, where a network of charities has sprung up to collect money and resources. By 2020 these charities were the primary above-ground presence of JAD militants—a presence they maintain to this day. The number of Daesh-linked charities appears to be growing but their size is hard to estimate from their online activity alone. Although they provide a public service (see below), and on this basis appear to be tolerated by the authorities, there are allegations that some charities support militant activities.[3]

There are at least nine JAD/Daesh-affiliated charities in Indonesia.[4] The most well-established, such as Anfiqu Center and Rumah Infaq Kita, have their social media accounts on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram. Although these channels do not publish overt VE propaganda, they disseminate certain narratives that cultivate a sense of community and solidarity among Daesh sympathizers. Primary among these narratives is one that focuses on families and the obligation of the community to help them.

[1]  Telegram, April 2020.
[2]  "Repatriasi WNI eks-ISIS: 'Risiko meninggalkan mereka di kamp lebih besar daripada memulangkan'", BBC News, January 22, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-51175049
[3]  "9 Lembaga Amal Di Indonesia Pendukung Terorisme", Redaksi PAKAR, January 26, 2020, https://www.radicalismstudies.org/656/2020/01/lembaga-amal-di-indonesia-pendukung-terorisme/
[4]  The nine idendified by PAKAR are Infaq Dakwah Center (IDC), Baitul Mal Ummah (BMU), Azzam Dakwah Center (ADC), Anfiqu Center, Gerakan Sehari Seribu (GASHIBU), Aseer Cruee Center (ACC), Gubuk Sedekah Amal Ummah (GSAU), RIS Al Amin, and Baitul Mal Al Muuqin.

*Ihsan Tanjung Youtube video. "3 Conditions Before the Appearance of Imam Mahdi[5]*

## "THE PANDEMIC AS A SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE"

Consistent with their introspective turn as the pandemic set in, apocalyptic narratives became popular with pro-Daesh militants in Indonesia. These narratives were promoted by popular preachers, most notably Ihsan Tanjung, cross-posted to mainstream forums, and featured on Daesh Telegram and Facebook accounts. A preacher who had been welcoming the end of times for years before the pandemic, Ihsan Tanjung, suddenly became popular among Daesh (but also mainstream) audiences through his YouTube videos and audio sermons delivered via Telegram. Ihsan advised followers to respond to the end times by making *hijrah* to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to await the redeemer, to seek higher land in Indonesia to avoid the coming tidal wave or to simply wait and accept death. He also became a prominent disseminator of COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories.[6]

A related narrative is of the pandemic as divine retribution, a "soldier of Allah" attacking the enemies of Islam, particularly the US, Europe, and China. Propaganda images and videos shared on Telegram in this vein reveled in the suffering caused by the pandemic in the US. This narrative became less popular, however, as the pandemic toll rose in Indonesia and Malaysia during 2021. These narratives have served to depress violent extremist operations in Southeast Asia, as militants took a more passive stance due to the pandemic conditions.

---

[5]  Youtube, March 2020.
[6]  "Ustadz Ihsan Tanjung Curigai Vaksin", Islami.co, July 6, 2021, https://islami.co/ustadz-ihsan-tanjung-curigai-vaksin-ustadz-ahong-begini-jadinya-kalau-masalah-dikomentari-bukan-ahlinya/

*Anti-Chinese propaganda circulated on pro-Daesh and mainstream Islamist Telegram channels[7]*

## "CHINA AS A SOURCE OF THE PANDEMIC"

A major violent extremist narrative of the pandemic casts SARS-CoV-2 as a bioweapon deployed by China and/or spread by Chinese migrant workers. Although anti-Chinese conspiracy theories and disinformation are common in Malaysia and the Philippines, they have the most traction in Indonesia. Anti-Chinese narratives in Indonesia serve as a crossover issue for militants from across the spectrum, appealing to both Daesh followers and followers of militant nationalist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Propaganda within this narrative vein includes viral videos on Telegram claiming to show groups of Chinese workers arriving in Indonesia, despite pandemic restrictions. Some of these videos may show health workers arriving in Indonesia to support pandemic efforts, but others are inauthentic or represent the arrival in a misleading way.[8]

7   Telegram, March 2020.
8   "COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia", Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), Short Briefing No.1, April 2, 2020.
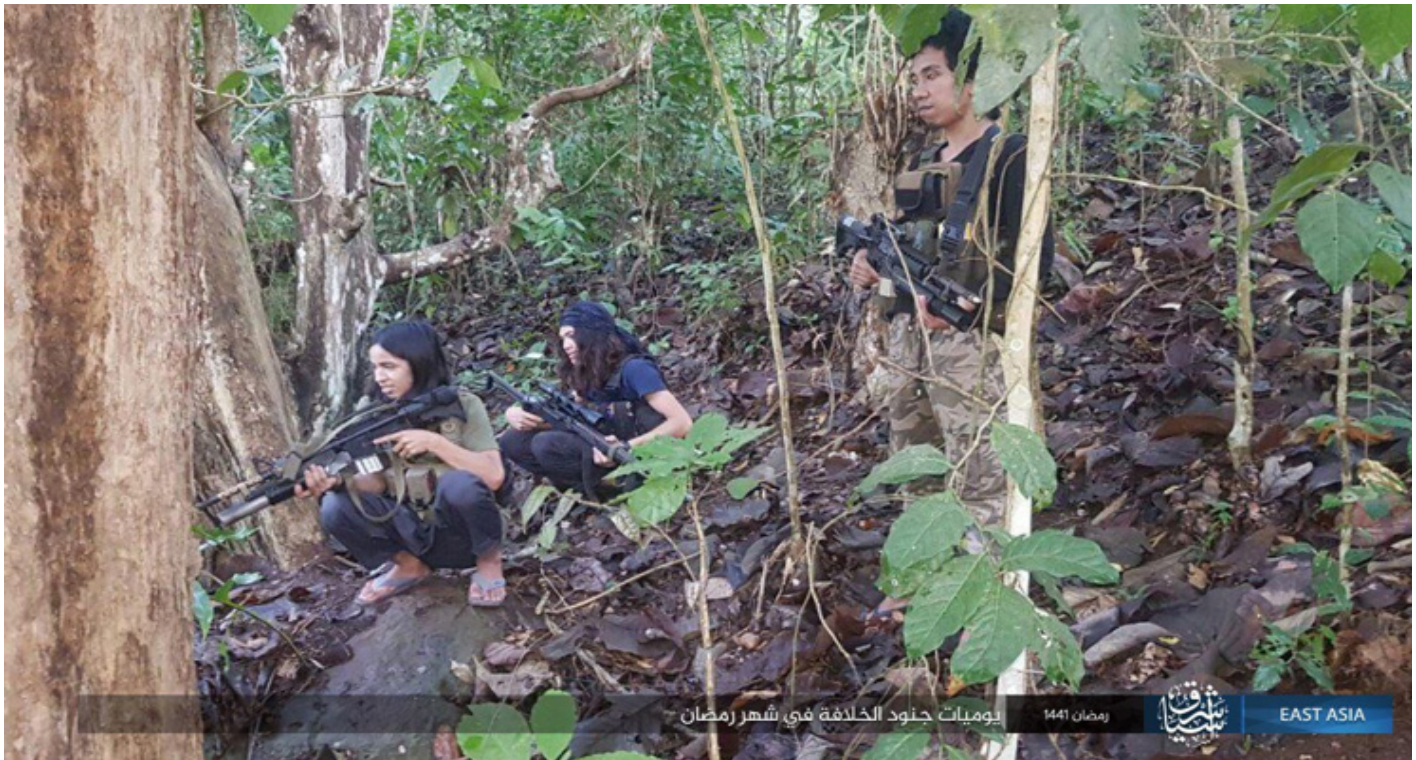
## "THE EAST ASIA WILAYAH REMAINS"

In the aftermath of the Marawi siege of 2017 (the largest pro-Daesh operation in Southeast Asia), the negotiated end to the long-running insurgency in the southern Philippines was a remarkable achievement. In February 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was created under Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) control, with the non-state armed group demobilizing and transforming itself into a civilian government. Although splinters from the insurgency remain active, including pro-Daesh VEOs such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the negotiated peace has largely held thanks to MILF discipline. In this context, militant offshoots inspired by Daesh consider the MILF to have betrayed the cause by accepting autonomy under the central Philippines government. Pro-Daesh fighters post memes on Facebook and other platforms depicting MILF fighters as collaborators with the Catholic "crusaders" from Manila.

Yet there is not much narrative coherence to the steady drip of small-scale attacks in the south, except an implicit line that the East Asia Wilayah is "remaining and expanding," even if, in reality, it is barely holding on. Although the peace process has been successful so far, BARMM territory does not cover all of the conflict zones of the south and the new dispensation has not been as successful in the remote Sulu archipelago, where the ASG network is intertwined with local clan and governance systems. A series of Daesh-inspired bombings have struck Sulu in recent years, the most recent of note being the August 24, 2020, suicide bombings on the island of Jolo, which killed 14 people. The bombings, unlike previous significant attacks in Sulu, were not publicized in official propaganda disseminated by Daesh central media, suggesting that communication links between the Philippines and the Middle East may have deteriorated during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the steady drip of smaller attacks that characterize the conflict in the south often does make it into official Daesh media, constituting narrative signalling that the East Asia Wilayah is still alive and territorially integral to the Daesh caliphate.

9   Telegram, May 2020.

# COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

During 2020, violent extremist networks became more locally-focused in their communications and links with official Daesh media productions appeared to decay. Nevertheless, translations of Al-Naba newsletter and reports via Amaq News from conflict zones were regularly translated into vernacular languages and distributed on Southeast Asian Telegram channels.

Mid-year saw a large-scale takedown of jihadist Telegram groups and channels in Southeast Asia and an increased tempo of banning or blocking accounts. Since then, pro-Daesh groups have been restricted to small, low-volume Telegram chats of 100-200 subscribers when in the past groups might have many hundreds of subscribers. The Telegram space is thus increasingly fragmented, with small groups or cells maintaining niche chats based on their affiliations (Daesh, JAD, Jemaah Islamiyah, Islamic Defenders Front (FPI)) and operating at a low profile.

Extremist content is still widely available on Facebook, especially in the southern Philippines where it is the platform of choice. Local languages and obscure references allow such content to survive Facebook's automated detection. Facebook remains a powerful tool for violent extremism networking across Southeast Asia, as militants harness the platform's friend recommendation algorithm to connect to fellow militants. But as content moderation has gradually improved, violent extremist accounts on Facebook have adapted more subtle imagery and wording to evade detection.

Similarly, Instagram has emerged as a site where even-pro Daesh accounts can maintain a modest presence if they stay within certain limits. Numerous accounts are banned, but many survive with hundreds and sometimes over a thousand followers by using Instagram only for marketing products, such as herbal medicine or military-style clothing, or raising money for Daesh-linked charities. More generally, violent extremist accounts evade Instagram content moderation by limiting their posts to subtle memes featuring verses from the Qur'an, apocalyptic imagery, or historical references to war and conflict. More explicit material is sometimes posted as a temporary "Instagram Story," taking advantage of the facility to expose risky content for only 24 hours before it automatically disappears from the platform.

# PUBLIC SERVICES

In 2020, much of the violent extremist ecosystem in Southeast Asia has turned to charity and providing for families of slain fighters, as options for above-ground activity have reduced, and transnational mobility became difficult due to COVID-19. As one of the five pillars of Islam, almsgiving (zakat) is exploited by VEOs in Southeast Asia as a cover for charities that specifically mobilize resources for militant communities. These include pro-Daesh schools in Muslim Mindanao, pro-Daesh charity organizations in Indonesia, and networks for cash donation boxes run by Jemaah Islamiyah (also largely in Indonesia). Charities appear to raise resources for orphaned children, widowed women, and healthcare and the like. They are alleged, however, to also provide support for violent extremist activity.[10] Despite this, violent extremist-aligned charities have largely avoided sanction by authorities, perhaps because of the social services they provide or because their extremist activities go undetected.

Although VEO charities likely perform a blend of licit and illicit work, some of which fills a gap left by under-resourced government agencies, they are also likely to hamper efforts to reintegrate families of former militants into mainstream society. In the worst scenario, the growing industry of such charities could serve as a basis for consolidating extremist networks and provide cover for future violent operations.
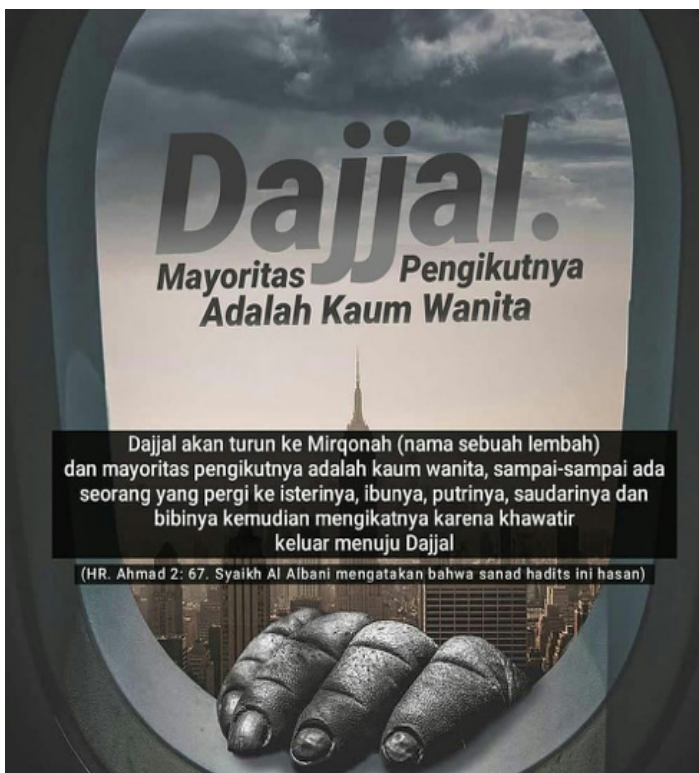


*Apocalyptic imagery, popular during the pandemic on pro-Daesh Instagram accounts. Such accounts are subtle enough to evade detection[11]*

---

[10] "9 Lembaga Amal Di Indonesia Pendukung Terorisme", Redaksi PAKAR, January 26, 2020, https://www.radicalismstudies.org/656/2020/01/lembaga- amal-di-indonesia-pendukung-terorisme/. See also, "Pendanaan Terorisme Lewat Badan Amal Rutin Terjadi di Indonesia tapi Sulit Terlacak," Vice, March 18, 2020, https://www.vice.com/id/article/epg8va/pendanaan-aksi-terorisme-jad-dan-isis-lewat-badan-amal-rutin-terjadi-di-indonesia-tapi-sulit-terlacak-ppatk

[11] Instagram, September 2020.

# MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION TACTICS

Since the pandemic, mis- and disinformation tactics of VEOs have been greatly influenced by the deluge of misleading and conspiratorial COVID-19 content, sometimes referred to as an "infodemic." For much of 2020, regional VEOs typically took a pro-public health line on the pandemic, if only to capitalize on mistakes by governments in their pandemic policies. But as the pandemic dragged on, violent extremists on Telegram, Facebook, and other platforms began to re-post and adapt COVID-19 mis- and disinformation from US and other Western sources. Much of this content originates from far-Left or far-Right anti-vaccination networks.

Some content, however, seems to be unique or have greater influence in Southeast Asia than elsewhere. As noted above, pandemic misinformation included narratives that cast the virus as a "soldier of Allah" attacking only the enemies of Islam or a sign of end times. Additionally, a primary disinformation narrative targeted Chinese-developed vaccines, such as Sinovac, that play a central role in the vaccination strategies of most Southeast Asian nations. Misinformation spread in violent extremist networks claimed Chinese-made vaccines were part of a plot by China to incapacitate local populations and occupy the region. Such misinformation leverages historical anti-Chinese prejudice in the region and the contemporary suspicions of many Islamist groups.

# RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

The pandemic has accelerated the shift towards an online-first pattern of radicalization and recruitment, especially in urban areas where internet penetration is high. Online recruitment disrupts older patterns of networking based on historical and kinship networks—often those embedded in the region's long-running insurgent movements such as Darul Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia and MNLF/MILF in the southern Philippines. Radicalization and recruitment processes have been sped up by digital communications technology, especially encrypted chat platforms and social media platforms. In turn, these platforms have made it easier for authorities to monitor and disrupt violent extremist networks, such that the shift online may make recruitment faster but may also make networks less resilient. VEOs have been greatly disrupted by the mass banning of accounts on Telegram, and authorities across the region have a technological edge over violent extremist communications. This may change in time with the shift to decentralized social media protocols, but until then, VEOs are likely to remain on the backfoot, especially during the pandemic when mobility to organize face-to-face is also limited.[12]

Generally, the force of the pandemic in 2020 was to suppress violent extremist activity in Southeast Asia. However, it remains to be seen whether this was merely a short-term effect as networks adjusted to the uncertain conditions. For the time being, the pandemic can be seen as a further blow to VEOs following the collapse of Daesh in the Middle East, the success of the peace process in the southern Philippines, and the dominance of counter-terrorism authorities in Indonesia. Militant networks across the region became smaller, cell-like and more isolated than before. New and emerging grievances may drive future cycles of radicalization and recruitment.

---

[12]  For more on the coming wave of decentralized social media, see Twitter's Bluesky project and the recent ecosystem review. Jay Graber, "Ecosystem Review," January 2021, https://matrix.org/_matrix/media/r0/download/twitter.modular.im/981b258141aa0b197804127cd2f7d298757bad20

# FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

It is hard to estimate the total number of Southeast Asian foreign fighters and returnees, but they would likely not exceed 1,000 individuals. By 2020, those who remain alive are only a few key individuals, but precise data is hard to come by. This attrition reflects that foreign terrorist fighters aligned with Daesh sought martyrdom in the conflict zones of Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and thus, many have been killed on the battlefield. But a small number of individuals present a risk. Battle-hardened and experienced, in the aftermath of the pandemic, they are likely to attempt to return to the under governed spaces and conflict zones of the region, such as the southern Philippines (especially the Sulu archipelago), southern Thailand, and Poso (Indonesia).

With the restrictions on international travel due to the pandemic, the travel route between Southeast Asia and Syria that had facilitated foreign terrorist fighters was largely non-operational throughout 2020. Small numbers of transnational terrorists have often been a force multiplier for attacks in Southeast Asia, such as in the January 2019 suicide bombing of a Cathedral in Jolo, Southern Philippines, by an Indonesian husband-and-wife team that had returned from attempting to reach Syria.[13]

The 2019 Jolo bombing was conducted by FTFs who were frustrated in their efforts to join the war in Syria after being deported from Turkey. The trend of such frustrated deportees presenting a threat to the region was also seen later in 2019 when Indonesian foreign fighters who were deported from the Republic of Turkey went on to inspire pro-Daesh cells in West Sumatera, Indonesia.[14] The failure to return and reintegrate FTFs and their families are likely to present a risk to the region in the post-pandemic period.

By the end of 2020, around 500 family members of Indonesian foreign fighters remained stranded in camps in Syria, where they have become adept at mobilizing grievances and philanthropic support back home in Indonesia. These instigators are primarily women who use Facebook and other platforms to generate support.

Besides Daesh, Jemaah Islamiyah sent steady numbers of recruits to Syria to train with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Estimates are difficult to make, but the numbers are likely modest if regular. By 2020, it is probable that JI had sent less than 100 individuals to Syria. Over the longer term and post-pandemic, however, these individuals may have more impact on violent extremist capability in Southeast Asia than the Daesh returnees.

---

[13] Who were the Indonesian husband and wife behind Jolo bombing?", Rappler, December 27, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesian-husband-wife-behind-jolo-bombing
[14] "Learning From Extremists in West Sumatra", Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, February 28, 2020.

# COUNTRY SUMMARIES

## PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia where violent extremist activity continued sporadically throughout 2020, defying the regional trend of a reduction in violence due to the pandemic.[15] The country remains the primary area in Southeast Asia where militants control territory and have access to high-powered weapons and explosives, both due to sparse governance and large illegal weapons markets.[16] As such, the Philippines poses a risk to its neighbors at its southern tri-border with Malaysia and Indonesia.

Yet the continued success of the Bangsamoro peace process, and the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) under the auspices of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) control, has reduced the momentum of VEOs in the southern Philippines.[17] However, sporadic violence continues mostly due to local factors such as poor governance and competing family, clan, and power factions. The Sulu archipelago, home to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), remains the least integrated into the peace process and the most vulnerable to renewed violence, especially if transnational violent extremist actors find their way there across porous regional borders as a substitute for travel to the Middle East and Central Asia.[18]

## INDONESIA

Indonesia is the largest country in the region and hosts the most significant number of VE actors and organizations. But the pandemic served to reduce violent extremist activity, turning Indonesian militants inwards and leaving scattered cells of Daesh followers even more isolated. Still, ideologically inspired groups and actors committed at least three acts of terrorism in 2020, including the killing of two civilians in Poso in April, a policeman in Kalimantan in June, and four civilians in Central Sulawesi during November.[19] At least 72 individuals suspected of terrorism were arrested between June and August of 2020.[20]

Transnational terrorism and FTF cohorts in Southeast Asia often also draw on Indonesians. Some 600 individuals and stateless families of Indonesian Daesh fighters in Syria and Iraq represent a large cohort in themselves and a challenge not just for Indonesia but for the region.[21] Some of them will likely return to Indonesia once travel is normalized and become

[15] The Global Terrorism Index 2021: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, Australia, Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021.

[16] "The Philippines: Extremism and Terrorism," *Counter Extremism Project*, 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/philippines (accessed 3 March 2022).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Van Ginkel, M.," Deconstructing Abu Sayyaf's Resilience to Counter-Insurgency Operations," *The Diplomat,* February 5, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/deconstructing-abu-sayyafs-resilience-to-counter-insurgency-operations/ (accessed 2 March 2022).

[19] Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Indonesia," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism*, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/indonesia/ (accessed 3 March 2022).

[20] "Indonesia: Extremism and Terrorism," *Counter Extremism Project*, 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia (accessed 3 March 2022).

[21] Hussein R. and Madrim S., "Indonesia Considers Repatriating More Than 600 Citizens With Alleged Terror Ties," *Voice of America News,* https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_indonesia-considers-repatriating-more-600-citizens-alleged-terror-ties/6183028.html (accessed 3 March 2022).

involved in militant activity. Yet, most of the key Southeast Asian militants active in the fighting in Syria have likely been killed.

As some violent extremist groups are working underground and online, boundaries between them appear to be becoming blurry as actors mix on forums in Telegram.[22] Meanwhile, Indonesia hosts some of the militant networks in the region, such as Darul Islam and its offshoot, Jemaah Islamiyah.[23] These groups may serve as resilient structures for regenerating violent extremist networks post-pandemic, as they have after previous historic lulls in activity.

## MALAYSIA

Malaysia is much less affected by violent extremism than its neighbors,[24] yet it plays an important role in regional mediation and counter-terrorism efforts. In 2020, violent extremist activity in Malaysia centered on the tri-border with the Philippines, where Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) militants from the Philippines and Darul Islam networks stretching back to Indonesia have a long-standing presence.[25]

Eastern Malaysia followed the regional trend in seeing a decline in violence during the pandemic period. ASG militants continue to use the eastern provinces of Sabah and Sarawak to avoid Philippine military operations in the neighboring Sulu archipelago. Kidnappings and border-related crime continued to occur at low levels amind vigorous law enforcement by Malaysia's Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM).[26] Although violent extremist activity is lower than Indonesia and the Philippines, and militants tend not to conduct attack operations in Malaysia, they are known to operate in the tribal-border region, including in the waters near Sabah.[27] In the north, the cross-border area between Thailand and Malaysia provides routes for illicit arms trafficking and for insurgent fugitives to escape Thai military operations.[28] Due to its border zones and its high counter-terrorism capabilities, Malaysian authorities play a crucial role in regional CVE and CT operations.

[22] Nuraniyah, N., "The Evolution of Online Violent Extremism in Indonesia and the Philippines," *Royal United Services Institute and the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict,* 7 January 2020, https://gnet-research.org/2020/01/07/the-evolution-of-online-violent-extremism-in-indonesia-and-the-philippines/.

[23] "Indonesia: Extremism and Terrorism," *Counter Extremism Project,* 2022.

[24] The Global Terrorism Index 2021: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, Australia, Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021.

[25] "Malaysia: Extremism and Terrorism," *Counter Extremism Project,* 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/malaysia (accessed 3 March 2022).

[26] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Malaysia," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism,* 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/malaysia/ (accessed 3 March 2022).

[27] "Stopping Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings: An Indonesia-Malaysian Case Study," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict,* 27 March 2020, https://cdn.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/03/IPAC_Report_63.pdf (accessed 3 March 2022).

[28] Van Ginkel, M., "Thailand's Deep South Insurgencies: Exploiting the Maritime Domain," *The Diplomat,* August 14, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/thailands-deep-south-insurgencies-exploiting-the-maritime-domain/ (accessed 3 March 2022).

## THAILAND

The COVID-19 pandemic opened a rare opportunity for a ceasefire and negotiations in the long-running insurgency in southern Thailand, which has claimed over 7,000 lives since 2004. Still, insurgent attacks continued against Thai military and government facilities, including via the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne IEDs.[29] In early 2020, the Royal Thai Government (RTG)held peace negotiations in Kuala Lumpur with representatives of the National Revolutionary Front (BRN), the strongest of the southern insurgency groups and one that had hitherto avoided talks with Bangkok.[30] It was the first peace talks with the insurgency group since 2013.[31] As a result, BRN declared a unilateral ceasefire on April 3, 2020, resulting in a reduction in violence across the southern Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat.[32] Despite the pandemic, negotiations between the RTG and the BRN appear to have continued throughout the year online.[33] Nevertheless, occasional clashes between Thai soldiers and Malay-Muslim insurgents occurred, indicating that the end of the pandemic may lead to a return to the previous level of violence.[34] Key Malay-Muslim leaders are based in Malaysia and Indonesia, adding a trans-national dimension to the low-intensity war in the south.[35]

[29] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Thailand," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism*, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/thailand/ (accessed 3 March 2022).

[30] Nanuam, W., "Peace talks with BRN launched," *Bangkok Post*, January 22, 2020, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1840724/peace-talks-with-brn-launched (accessed 3 March 2022).

[31] "Thai Peace Negotiator Meets with BRN Rebel Delegates in Malaysia," *Benar News*, January 21, 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/peace-talks-01212020154917.html.

[32] Quinley, C., "In Thailand's deep south conflict, a 'glimpse of hope', but no momentum to sustain a COVID-19 ceasefire," *The New Humanitarian*, August 3, 2020, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/08/03/Thailand-deep-south-conflict-coronavirus-ceasefire (accessed 3 March 2022).

[33] "Thailand Extends State of Emergency in Restive Deep South for 65th Time," *Benar News*, September 14, 2021, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/thailand-extends-deep-south-emergency-09142021155145.html.

[34] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Thailand," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism*.

[35] Mulyana, A.D.D, "Assessing Indonesia's Diplomacy on the Regional Conflict Management: Lessons from the South Thailand Conflict Settlement," *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, Volume 9, 2011, https://jurnal.upnyk.ac.id/index.php/komunikasi/article/download/3419/2589 (accessed 3 March 2022).