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### **FACING ISIS RETURNING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS: INDONESIA PERSPECTIVE**

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#### **Abstract**

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The presence of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in armed conflicts pose a series of problems for third countries, they become involved even though their country is not one of the warring parties. FTF cannot be ignored because of its association with the activities of international terrorist networks. The paper begins with a brief overview on how FTF is becoming a burning issue in Indonesia's national security. This paper argues that, globalization has played part in terms of making terrorism and radicalization spread easily throughout the world, including Indonesia. Hence, fighting terrorism in both the traditional or contemporary forms is not an easy task anymore. While tackling any practices of terrorism and radicalism is a main priority for many countries around the world, the growing number of FTF in recent years is a clear impact of unfinished government's effort of fighting terrorism that already growing beyond borders. This paper uses qualitative method and the data analysis was undertaken using phenomenology approach. This paper then reflects the complexity of how Indonesia facing its citizen who come back to the country as ISIS returning fighters. It concludes by analyzing the problem of fighting FTF returnees in Indonesia and suggesting how dealing with FTF returnees can be more effective by considering both domestic and regional factors.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Indonesia and New Threats of Terrorism

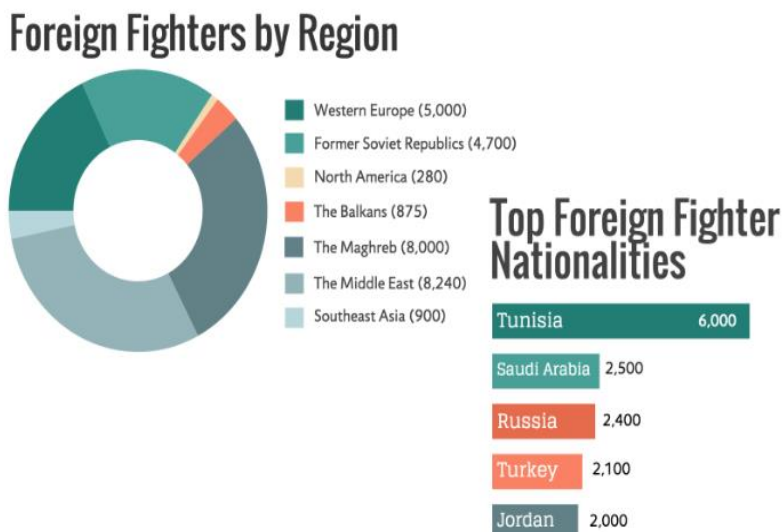
In the process of globalization and the increasing development of transportation, not only facilitates the movement of goods but also the movement of people or services from one country to another. This causes the phenomenon of a movement carried out by various nations with the destination to many countries in the world. This kind of movement is often referred to as migration. Many of migration started and occurred motivated of pursuing a better welfare. Aside for seeking of better wellbeing, there are other reasons of migration such as conflict, war, avoiding repressive power and even as a result of natural causes such as climate change that cause migration (Santoso, 2014).

There are three known types of migration in international migration which are immigration, emigration and remigration. Immigration is the condition where the movement of people is from origin country to another country where the person is not a citizen of the destination country, for example Afghan citizens who enter Indonesia. Whereas emigration is an immigration activity with the perspective of the origin country, for example Indonesians who travel abroad. While remigration is the movement of the residents to travel back to the origin country.

In Indonesia, the immigration cases are also expected to ascend due to the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) groups phenomenon which have controlled numerous areas in Syria and Iraq (“Bagaimana kelompok jihadis ISIS terbentuk?,” 2014). Basically Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) is not a new phenomenon, FTF has been known since the Spanish Civil War and the war in Afghanistan at the time after the Soviet invasion of 1989. But the term FTF became prominent after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States. This is because the FTF or the emergence of foreign fighters in the area of Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The existence of ISIS group

even triggered large numbers of Indonesians to pledge allegiance to the *Khilafah* or caliphate movement that ISIS promoted and decided to migrate to Syria and other neighboring areas to join the movement. The involved FTF are typically in their mid-20s’ and only a few of them are middle-aged. Moreover, ISIS FTFs are not only dominated by men but also women. Despite the limitations of the data, but many found that it is not uncommon that ISIS FTF also associated with the recidivists from radical movements. This argument proved that FTF is strongly linked with terrorism activity in their own country (McVeigh, 2014).

FTF were different from or mercenary members of a private company's security personnel. This is because the mercenaries or private security personnel hired and recruited legal and not prohibited by the state. While FTFs are usually not motivated by material but comes from a sense of empathy on an equality. Thus, the foreign fighters are defined as individuals who join the revolt abroad with the primary motivation or religious ideology and not merely economics (Hegghammer, 2010). There are at least two reasons why people all around the world are inclined to join the ISIS or even decided to out of the country as FTF. Firstly, the narrative and propaganda built by ISIS to recruit FTFs has motivated people to be sympathetic with this movement and aspire with *khilafah* ideas. Even so for some people who were disposed by the propaganda thought that it was another way of Jihad. Secondly, they are tempted by the money or salary promised by ISIS. ISIS is predicted to be able to provide a salary of US \$ 400-500 per month per one member (Colgan, 2011). In this regard, globalization poses not only the positive impact but also brings the negative consequence. These immigration and remigration activities have developed a new problem, not only for Indonesia, but also to many countries in the world. The cause of the problem is related with citizens who have become ISIS FTF



**Figure 1.** Numbers of foreign fighters traveling to join the so-called Islamic State and other violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria

and already migrated to Syria or another country but trying return to Indonesia or do remigration to their origin country. The ISIS Foreign Terrorist Fighters who returns to origin country are also called ISIS Returnee (Santoso, 2014).

Despite its challenges, Indonesia has been so persistence to build a set of policies for facing the ISIS returnees. One of the main consideration of Indonesia's contribution in facing the ISIS returnee is due to the geopolitical complexity related to this issue. While Indonesia has national interest as a global maritime axis, the border between the Sulu sea and Sulawesi posed a vulnerable threat as an area for distributing illegal forces which are indicated as potential FTF and as a area for weapons circulation. The borders, such as the border between the Sulu sea and Sulawesi, with a large degree of proximity not only become the area for distributing illegal forces, but also illegal weapons. Besides the geopolitical consideration, Indonesia is also weighing on the number of Indonesian ISIS returnees. It is known that Among Indonesian who joined as ISIS FTFs in Syria, 77 of them have died while fighting and 61 people have returned to Indonesia. This is thought to be the most dangerous threat to Indonesia because Indonesia government cannot afford have risk of 61

Indonesians with the ability to use military weapons and has possibility to carry out acts of terror in Indonesia (Simbolon, 2017). There are even some foreign terrorist fighters who carried out the attack without being ordered to do by their networks, it is commonly called the "blowback" action (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). Seeing how diverse the ISIS returnee issue could give impact to Indonesia's security and defense condition, Indonesia must begin immediately to implement its strategies effectively. Therefore, this paper intends to examine further Indonesia's strategy to face the ISIS returnees.

### **The Impact of ISIS Existence to Indonesia**

Daesh or ISIS who carried out resistance in Iraq and Syria succeeded in provoking, inviting, attracting foreign fighters from all over the world who share the same ideological views as them. The United Nations (UN) report said ISIS militants had 300 thousand foreign fighters from 100 countries (Amanda, 2015). It can be seen in Figure 1 that the number of FTFs successfully recruited by ISIS came mostly from the Middle East, North Africa and Western Europe and the origin country are mostly from Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. In the Southeast Asia region,

the number of FTFs continues to increase in line with the upheaval condition in the Philippines. In addition to the spread of ideology, ISIS is also affiliated with anti-government movements in the Southeast Asian region, such as the movement that took place in the Southern Philippines, which is predominantly a political subversion. In the case of Southern Philippines, there are groups who is using diplomatic politics, but some also carry out acts of terror. Internal conflicts in the southern Philippines began with the birth of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) group followed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and now a separatist Islamist group with the name Maute affiliated with ISIS has emerged. The Maute group cross the terrorist network map since May 2017 when pledging allegiance with ISIS.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

It can be seen from Table 1 that even though Indonesia is not the highest origin country of ISIS FTF but Indonesia is also a country with a large number of FTF contributors, with a total of 1139 people involved in the FTF at the early of 2017. Both living, dead and not yet identified whereas the numbers were 524 men and 147 women.

According to the author from the Center for Terrorist Studies and Social Conflict at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia, Solahudin, there are at least five main reasons that encourage Indonesian to enter the conflict area. Firstly, to defend Sunni groups who were oppressed by the Shiites. The public believes that Syrian

leader President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Shiites are discriminating Sunni groups. Some parties even believe that the only group has the ability to fight Bashar al-Assad is ISIS. Second, they believe that the Syrian region will be the location of the apocalypse war or *al-malhamah al-kubra*. Their belief is based on the hadith which states that the war of the end-of-the-world will occur around the area, namely in Syria or the area around Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Third, people were tempted to leave because they saw ISIS as the most committed group to enforcing Islamic law. Fourth, there is propaganda that people who is defending ISIS will get a reward and live in a five-star lifestyle. Life will also be guaranteed such as getting a big salary, the wife gets compensation, free apartments, gasoline, and even healthcare is free. Lastly, there is also a reason that people who join ISIS missed being under the auspices of the Caliphate (Ansyari, S., and Wicaksono, 2016).

In addition, the increase of FTF originating from Indonesia is due to many being deceived by ISIS propaganda videos. One of the visual propaganda carried out by ISIS members through online media, namely youtube that published in 2014 with the title "Join The Ranks", gave rise to a man identified as an Indonesian citizen named Bahrumisyah a.k.a Abu Muhammad al-Indonesiy. In the video, he took provocative actions through *da'wah* messages in the form of hijrah, jihad and daulah using Indonesian language. The main message contained in the video is asking for support for the ISIS struggle to

**Table 1.** Indonesian citizens involved in the FTF per January 2017

| No   | Category   | Male | Female | TOTAL |
|--|--|------|--------|-------|
| 1  | Indonesian in Syria                                | 403  | 114    | 517   |
| 2  | Indonesian Deceased in Syria                       | 75   | 1      | 76    |
| 3  | Indonesian Deported by Foreign Countries           | 183  | 115    | 298   |
| 4  | Indonesian Failed to Depart from Indonesia         | 42   | 21     | 63    |
| 5  | Indonesian Planned to go to Syria                  | 81   | 32     | 111   |
| 6  | Indonesian Returnees                               | 55   | 5      | 60    |
| 7  | ISIS - affiliated foreigners who came to Indonesia | 12   | -      | 12    |
| Total Number of Indonesian Citizens involved with ISIS |  | 851  | 288    | 1139  |

Source: The National Agency for Combating Terrorism (2017)



**Figure 2.** Indonesian FTF involved in Marawi Incident  
 Source: Kompas, 2017

become a world *khilafah* and an invitation to join and jihad with ISIS (Dewi, 2018).

Head of the National Counter Terrorism Agency (NCTA) since 2016, Police Commissioner General Drs. Suhardi Alius, MH invited Southeast Asian countries to increase awareness of foreign terrorist threats after the Philippine military operation in Marawi against armed groups suspected from the ISIS terrorist network. While there are also a number of Indonesian FTFs who were prominent with the Maute front in Marawi.

Based on the news of the arrest of 12 Indonesian citizens in Turkey who are strongly suspected of joining ISIS, consists of a group of mothers and children who intend to follow her husband who is already in Syria. They were deported by the Turkish government and recognized by the Indonesian government to take steps to assist or going through the deradicalization. A total of 217 Indonesian citizens were arrested and deported because they were indicated to be involved in terrorist networks. According to the Director of

Protection of Indonesian Citizens and BHI of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Muhammad Iqbal, 217 Indonesian citizens who were arrested came from 7 different countries namely; 2 Indonesia Citizens from Saudi Arabia, 200 Indonesian Citizens from Turkey, 3 Indonesian Citizens from Malaysia, 2 Indonesian Citizens from Japan, 1 Indonesian Citizen from Sudan, and 4 Indonesian citizens from Singapore. All those 217 Indonesian citizens allegedly related to FTF activities (Gabrillin, 2016). Another incident is when The Philippine National Police (PNP) released the names of dozens of members of the Maute militant group who invaded Marawi City, Southern Philippines. Seven of them are known as Indonesian citizens (Movanita, 2017).

Related to this incident, Indonesia's Immigration Director General Ronny Sompie said that his office, namely the Directorate General of Immigration, was ready to revoke the passport of the people who were on the search list, including suspected terrorists who were on the list of deterred people. Ronny emphasized that the revocation of Indonesian citizens' passports

whose involved in acts of terror would make the repatriation action easier. So then the Indonesian police and the NCTA could easily examine them (Saputra, 2016).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Indonesia's Challenge for Regulating ISIS Returnees**

Basically to regulate ISIS FTF can not be done individually by each country because the FTF phenomenon involving at least three countries, that is country of origin, transit country and destination country. Therefore, there is no single country can solve its own problems related to FTF and the need for cooperation in handling. FTF countermeasures regulation in Indonesia has been implemented by the government; especially by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Politics, Law and Security of the Republic of Indonesia, the Indonesian National Police along with the task force in charge, namely Densus 88, the National Agency for Combating Terrorism and the Directorate General of Immigration.

Compared to other terrorism issues, the activity of ISIS is considered as an anomaly due to its expansion outside of Iraq and Syria. ISIS also brought the FTF not only from countries that are geographically close to Iraq and Syria such as Yemen, Afghanistan and East Africa, but also range from country with low number of muslim population like Europe. Initially, based on geopolitically perspective, ISIS might not be a dangerous threat to Indonesia, but due to its significant development from the base of supporters and flow of funding, it grow as a tangible threat to Indonesia.

Moreover, in its development, ideological differences and lack of understanding about the caliphate has significantly influenced the decision of FTFs. The FTF somehow posed to options whereas they able to return to their origin country or to another third country, whether for peaceful purposes or with the intention of carrying out a terrorist attack. Regardless of the option to live in a other terror groups

bases or join other terrorist organizations and continue to fight in other conflict areas. Currently, around 15.000 FTFs are identified to be in Syria and Iraq. The number of ISIS returnees, especially originating from Indonesia, is expected to increase. At present, there are 6 returnees who have their movements monitored. Hundreds of Libyan FTF have also returned from the Iraqi or Syrian battlefield to join ISIS in Libya which seems to be a strategic step to expand the organization's global footprint (Van Ginkel, B., 2016).

Unpredicted various motivations of ISIS FTF to return to its origin country is also an obstacle in anticipating the regulation for its movement. Some may feel practically incompatible with the act of terror and not ready for brutality or the cruelty that they have seen and carried out by the ISIS. While others are merely disappointed with life they have under ISIS leadership because it is not in accordance with their previous expectations (Neumann, 2015). However, other people notoriously returned to their origin countries with the intention and ability to carry out terrorist attacks in their country. This is shown as the evidence of how the systematic export of terror is also a new element in ISIS strategy.

The dilemma posed by FTF issue is also because the nationality of the FTF has an important role in determining whether an individual is protected by their country or not. If civilians were involved in the conflict for ISIS, consequently their immunity will be lost as citizen for certain country for engaging in war crimes (Sassòli, 2006). However, if a citizen trapped in the ISIS conflict occurred in foreign conflict territory and they have qualification as legal citizens, then these individuals still have the right to be protected by their country through their diplomatic representatives. Despite the international law applied, there is still a lot of debates about the FTF returnees. Some countries argue that the law applied for those returnees can no longer based on nationality alone but should also look on the basis of their ideology. This

kind of debate then raised a tricky situation in the international community because many countries are then reluctant to provide protection (Goldsmith, 2004).

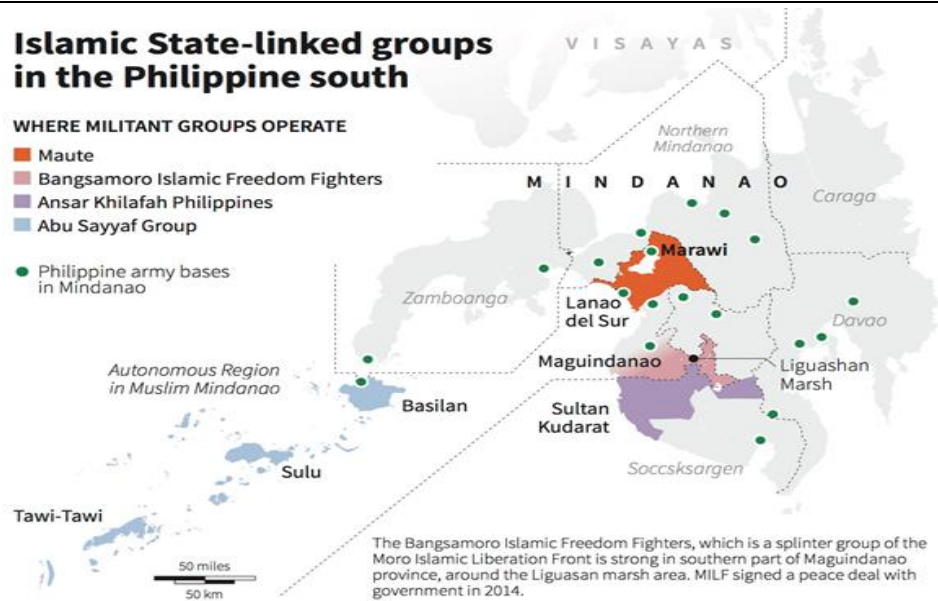
Thus, preventing the Indonesian Community from joining ISIS as an FTF has been a challenge for Indonesia's government. Despite the challenge that the government face, the Indonesian government is persistent to made effort and program to eradicate the impact that FTF returnees could create. Some policies that Indonesia has implemented such as; revocation of citizens' passports that has traveled to countries affiliated to ISIS, submitted changes of Law No. 15 of 2003 concerning the Eradication of Terrorism Crimes in order to accommodate sympathizers or supporters for terrorist movements abroad (Waluyo, 2015). However, regulating ISIS returnees has not been an easy task, rather its dilematic. One of the reasons is that the Indonesian citizens who went abroad to reach their aspiration as FTFs do not directly go from Indonesia to the destination country. Nonetheless, some have transit first to neighboring countries such as Singapore or Malaysia and then go to Turkey to cross the border of Syria. The proof of that event is found from Indonesian citizens which deported from these transit countries because they are captured when trying to cross the border to Syria to become FTF.

To overturn the development of the ISIS FTF movement, many countries have taken different and varied countermeasures. Especially when considering the potential risks posed by ISIS returnees which creates more threat to returnees' origin countries. The risk itself is proved by the involvement of many ISIS returnees' in planning, recruiting, facilitating or even carrying out attacks in various acts of terror that previously occurred in their origin countries; such as in Paris, Brussels,

Istanbul and Jakarta. Although, previous acts of terror that brought by ISIS returnees considered as soft targets, in which the combination of the use of low-tech tactics and easy-to-access targets provides a distinct obstacle for the adequate protection of public space.

Knowing this circumstance, Indonesia then established various collaborations with neighboring countries to tackle terrorism, specifically which related to FTF issues. Starting from the Trilateral Meeting on Security in Manila on June 22, 2017, in which the forum discussed specifically about the Marawi conflict and other security issues in Southeast Asia. Indonesia also joined the Working Group on Combating International Terrorism which a cooperation of many agencies that tackle the problem of terrorism in their respective country. Beside also join ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on The Rise of Radicalization, where at the meeting there were several issues discussed, namely the sensitivity of the Marawi subject for the Philippines, strengthening the exchange of information and intelligence between ASEAN members, supervision and security of border areas including border control, and preventing/ countering violent extremism including addressing the root causes and underlying factors of the terrorism. Related to that agenda, many countries found confusion when terminologies like radicalist, terrorist and extremist put in one sentence.

In conjunction with regional cooperation, Indonesia also maintaining cooperation by hosting the International Meeting on Counter-Terrorism (IMCT) in Nusa Dua, Bali with On August 10, 2016. More than 300 participants which represented 21 countries and three international organizations attended the meeting. The participating countries are Australia, United States, Belgium,



**Figure 3.** Map of Militant Group Operations in the Philippines  
 Source: Asia Times, 2017

Netherlands, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Philippines, United Kingdom, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Pakistan, France, Russia, China, Thailand, Turkey, Vietnam and three international organizations; namely ASEAN, The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), and the UN. The meeting was held because the Indonesian government has special awareness in the new dynamics of international terrorism, especially the challenges faced by various countries associated with the movement of terrorists and arms trafficking, explosives, information, and funds across borders. The Indonesian government through the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Agency for Anti-Terrorism and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will hold the IMCT alongside the Second Financing Summit of Counter-Terrorism held by the Financial Transaction Reports Indonesia and Analysis Center (PPATK) and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) colleagues in Australia. IMCT meeting will consist of the Ministerial Meeting with the theme of Fighting Cross-Border Terrorism and Panel Dialogue which discussed the issue of de-radicalization and Foreign Terrorist Fighters and chaired by the

Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Wiranto. Indonesia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs will also attend the meeting. The meeting produced a Statement by the Chairman as a result of the strengthening of international cooperation to combat terrorism (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2016).

### CONCLUSION

The Syrian conflict has triggered the involvement of Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) from various countries, including Indonesia. The ISIS group received sympathetic support from radical groups in Indonesia, as well as direct support by joining the ISIS group and turn themselves into the FTF. This condition certainly raise concern of the Indonesian government because the radical notions campaigned by this group can pose a threat to security and unity in Indonesia. The government declared that the ISIS organization is a banned organization and prohibited Indonesian citizens from joining ISIS.

The phenomenon of many Indonesian joined or even only sympathized with the ISIS movement and departing for Syria is certainly not in accordance with the ideology of the Indonesia as a nation which is Pancasila. The



Indonesian government has proved that they are not remaining silent facing this situation. The government also stated that the ISIS group is a terrorist organization and has been misusing the religion as their motive, hence the public is strictly prohibited from supporting or joining. The Indonesian government's efforts to prevent the access of people in terrorist activities, especially if they are previously known as FTF, have been carried out. Even though there are still a few Indonesian people who leave for Iraq and Syria or a number of people from Uighurs ethnic who join terrorist groups in Indonesia such as the East Indonesia Mujahidin group led by Santoso (Santoso, 2014) (Edward, 2014).

Some suggestions for optimizing coordination between institutions in preventing ISIS FTF from returning to Indonesia, for example involving the function of BNPT as the main element in national defense that is responsible for protecting the country from the threat of terrorism can be increased with synergy with other government agencies. In addition, other institutions such as Immigration Directorate, National Police and Indonesian Military (TNI) are the leading institutions in preventing Indonesian citizens from leaving and becoming FTFs. In dealing with ISIS returnees to Indonesia, the TNI and Police can take part in hard approaching. However, the soft approach can be implemented by the Ministry of Communication and Information with the function of blocking social media which contained radical content, by the Ministry of Human Rights related to strengthening Indonesia's counter-terrorism laws, while PPATK must also be involved in dealing with terrorist network funding and from NCTA by continuously evaluating and optimizing deradicalization and counter-radicalization programs. As an actor who has prerogative related to the entrance for ISIS returnees, the involvement of immigration directorate is also essential to prevent the issuance of passports and the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighter from conflict areas abroad. In addition, to prevent the departure

of Indonesian citizens to Syria to become ISIS sympathizers.

Coordination between institutions is also important in prevention, especially the cooperation for limiting unknown foreigners who will arrive Indonesia. Beside that, the prevention of ISIS returnees required support from many parties. Because the nature of terrorism as a transnational criminal offense, good coordination from all the institutions mentioned above is very fundamental to overcome the problem of ISIS returnees to the country which could threaten Indonesia's security and unity.

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