



The Radicalization of Indonesian Migrant Workers and Security Governance Challenges

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the relationships between terrorism in Indonesia and international migration and examines the impact of the current counter terrorism governance framework on addressing terrorist activities using migration as a tool. The research employs qualitative case study methods that combine document analysis with official and radicalized migrant worker interviews and secondary data evaluation to study the migration-terrorism connection. The research found that terrorists have been using the migration system for their purposes. Based on the empirical research findings, three governance gaps are identified: (i) the exploitation of Southeast Asian migration routes by terrorists; (ii) the inadequate border control measures; and (iii) the inadequate counter terrorism measures at the national level among the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Service Center (BP3MI), and Special Detachment (Densus) 88 due to a lack of sufficient national budget and inconsistent national policy implementation. Furthermore, the 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law and the amended 2024 Immigration Law are considered inadequate in addressing the terrorist threats associated with the use of modern information and communication technologies due to technological limitations and the absence of proactive crime-tracking measures. Therefore, this study recommends that the risk-based approach be used in combating terrorism through policy recommendations on effective governance of migration and terrorism at the national level, including the implementation of targeted intervention at strategic entry points for migrants and the enhancement of intelligence-based counter terrorism measures at the domestic level.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Radicalism, Risk-Based Policy, Qualitative Case Study, Migration Governance*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia faces a distinctive governance dilemma: how to manage one of the world's most complex migration systems while simultaneously countering a persistent terrorist threat. Indonesia's unique position at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, combined with its sprawling archipelago of over 17,000 islands, presents formidable challenges for managing international migration and countering terrorism. As the world's fourth most populous nation and home to the largest Muslim population globally, Indonesia functions simultaneously as a major origin, transit, and destination country for international migrants, including labor migrants, refugees, and irregular border crossers.

The post 9/11 era fundamentally transformed global counter-terrorism paradigms, and Indonesia has not been immune to this shift. The nation has endured a devastating series of terrorist attacks: the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings that killed over 200 people; the 2003 JW Marriott Hotel bombing; the coordinated 2009 attacks on the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta; and more recently, ISIS-affiliated attacks including the 2016 Thamrin bombing in Jakarta, the 2018 Surabaya church bombings that involved entire families as perpetrators, the 2019 Medan bombing,

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and the 2021 Makassar cathedral attack (Dewi et al., 2026; Harruma & Nailufar, 2022). These attacks have raised critical questions about the intersection between international migration flows and the expansion of terrorist networks within Indonesian territory.

Yet migration is not merely a security concern for Indonesia; it is an economic lifeline. In 2024 alone, 297,434 Indonesian migrant workers were deployed abroad, representing a 0.11% increase from the previous year (BP2MI, 2025a). The majority work in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore, collectively remitting USD 15.7 billion to Indonesia in 2024. Simultaneously, Indonesia hosts asylum seekers and refugees from conflict zones, many transiting through the archipelago en route to Australia, as well as victims of human trafficking. This multifaceted migration landscape creates persistent governance dilemmas: how can the state fulfill its humanitarian obligations and protect vital economic interests while simultaneously safeguarding national security?

The tension between these imperatives has intensified following revelations that terrorist organizations, particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), have successfully exploited migration pathways for recruitment, financing, and operational purposes. Most notably, approximately 50 Indonesian female migrant workers in Hong Kong were radicalized through sophisticated online campaigns between 2015 and 2019, with some providing financial support and logistical coordination for terrorist activities (BNPT, 2023). This case exemplifies how geographic distance, social isolation, digital connectivity, and financial capacity can converge to make migrant workers unexpectedly vulnerable to extremist recruitment.

Research on the migration-terrorism nexus has developed in many areas, but many gaps remain, especially in the Indonesian context and in how vulnerabilities created by migration governance are exploited. While research in the West has shown there is no empirical basis for the migration-as-threat narrative (Abdulqadir, 2021; Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022; Kuntić & Mihalinić, 2021; Sinha, 2023), there is less research into how policies play out in capacity-constrained Southeast Asian sending countries, where the relationship between digital terrorism, remittances and migrants has not yet been fully theorized. This paper fills this gap by examining the Indonesian government's response to the migration-terrorism nexus.

This study addresses two fundamental questions. First, how does international migration facilitate or intersect with the development of terrorism in Indonesia? Specifically, what mechanisms do terrorist organizations employ to exploit migration systems, and what vulnerabilities in governance structures enable such exploitation? Second, what strategies has the Indonesian government adopted to manage this nexus? What institutional, coordination, and implementation challenges limit policy effectiveness? By examining these questions through detailed case analysis of radicalized migrant workers, policy document review, and interviews with government officials and former extremists, this research aims to move beyond simplistic "migration-as-threat" narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

Studies on international migration and terrorism have sparked extensive academic discussion because researchers have shown that migrants do not represent security threats. Research in Western nations shows that immigration levels do not create a measurable link to terrorism incidents (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022). Mavrakou et al. (2022) show that terrorism prediction depends more on governance quality, economic conditions, and geopolitical tensions than on migration patterns. The research warns against linking migration to security threats because this practice leads to discriminatory policies that do not improve national security.

Adamson (2006) distinguishes between migrants posing a threat to national security per se

and migration infrastructure being utilized by terrorist organizations to help them build their cells and gather funds for their activities. Here, the threat to national security arises not from the migrants themselves, but rather from the weaknesses in the system that can be exploited by terrorist organizations, and therefore presented as a legitimate threat. [Rudolph \(2006\)](#) develops this idea further, in stating that a national security threat is only created when an extremist organization can capitalize on weaknesses in migration infrastructure, such as transportation routes, migration policies, or border control regimes.

In Southeast Asian countries, migration patterns exist within complex systems. The combination of weak state control, active terrorist networks and porous borders in Southeast Asia enables illicit activities to use migration routes for their operations ([Acharya, 2006](#); [Chalk, 2008](#)). [Kassim \(2014\)](#) shows that irregular migration between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines happened through established networks that also operate human trafficking, smuggling activities, and sometimes enable terrorist movement. The 2017 Marawi siege exposed how militants used migration and fishing routes to cross maritime borders because of insufficient regional border management ([International Crisis Group, 2021](#)). In short, research has shed light on the governance challenges present in Southeast Asia. These have produced a unique set of 'vulnerabilities' in the region that differ from those experienced in the Western world.

A large body of literature analyzes the economic effects of securitizing terrorism-induced migration, and a growing body analyzes its policy implications. All conclude that the effects of counter terrorism policies on migration are counterproductive. This study builds on [Helbling and Meierrieks \(2022\)](#) by examining the effects of migration restrictions. Such restrictions affect migrants, but not security. [Böhmelt and Bove \(2017, 2020\)](#) report similar findings on terrorism diffusion. The authors find that countries with more open migration markets and higher levels of institutional quality have lower levels of terrorism diffusion than those with closed migration markets and weak administrative capacity. This finding is interesting because it suggests that migration restrictions can be counterproductive and contribute to greater insecurity. The shadow economy is the most difficult to control and therefore the most insecure part of the economy. So, while migration restrictions are put in place to counter terrorism, they can unintentionally increase insecurity.

Securitization and Migration Governance

This research framework combines securitization theory ([Buzan et al., 1998](#)) with critical migration governance. Securitization theory explains how political leaders create migration threats that enable them to establish emergency procedures that bypass standard democratic processes. The post-9/11 period has seen migration securitization worldwide, with governments establishing stronger surveillance systems, tightening entry control, and expanding detention authority ([Adamson, 2006](#)).

The implementation of securitization produces multiple adverse effects. [Demuynck and Renard \(2025\)](#) show that basic migration-terrorism connections in public discourse produce unproductive policies that neglect genuine security risks while causing migrant groups to experience discrimination and rights infringement. The security-oriented migration policies ([Ullah et al., 2020](#)) create additional marginalization for minority migrant groups, which potentially increases their risk of radicalization.

This study uses risk-based migration governance as a new method for migration management. The system identifies weaknesses in the migration system through vulnerability assessment and delivers targeted solutions for screening procedures, inter-agency coordination, and biometric registration. The system protects authorized migration while strengthening security through improved governance rather than broad immigration restrictions. [Novikova \(2022\)](#) shows

that migration-terrorism governance succeeds when migration management systems integrate with counter-terrorism measures. Developing security-enhancing institutional frameworks must also protect migration's economic and social value.

A growing literature on the migration-terrorism nexus in Southeast Asia has been widely noted. At the national level, however, Indonesia still needs more academic research on how its governance structure addresses the challenge of terrorism in migration affairs. Previous studies have largely focused on specific incidents or terrorist groups ([Congressional Research Service, 2017](#); [Ramakrishna, 2009, 2015](#)). However, no in-depth examination has yet assessed the institutional frameworks of Indonesia's multi-agency governance structure in addressing terrorism and migration. Thus, this study will bridge the research gap by employing the securitization and risk-based governance theories and by focusing on the governance issues which Indonesia is presently facing in respect of the migration-terrorism nexus.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study uses qualitative case study methods to analyze how migration affects terrorism in Indonesia. The authors use interpretivist epistemology because migration-security relationships develop through social processes of policy statements, institutional actions, and public storytelling instead of being fixed facts. The research method allows the authors to study how terrorist organizations use migration systems and how government organizations handle these security threats in particular social and political environments.

The research design uses a single case study with multiple embedded units of analysis ([Yin, 2018](#)) to examine two distinct aspects: migration-terrorism connections and national-level government policy. The research design combines multiple perspectives to achieve a complete understanding while preserving logical connections between the different elements.

Data Collection and Sampling

The data were collected through three complementary methods to enable triangulation across data sources and validate data reliability ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). First, interviews were conducted with two groups of key informants: officials from the BNPT, BP3MI, and Densus 88 with institutional roles in managing migration and carrying out counter-terrorism operations, and former migrant workers who joined ISIS and participated in the BNPT deradicalization program. The sampling method used two methods. The first was purposive sampling, which involved interviews with policymakers (BNPT, BP3MI, and Densus 88), given that the relevant officials had already been clearly identified. The second was snowball sampling, which involved interviews with former migrant workers who had been ISIS sympathizers. The researchers used this technique because they did not yet know who could be interviewed. The first informant, introduced by a non-governmental organization, was then asked who else could be interviewed. And so on. The interviews were carried out between 2024 and 2025. The interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes and used a semi-structured interview guide on migration-terrorism linkages, challenges in policy implementation, and coordination between government institutions.

The second stage of analysis involved examining Indonesian migration and counter-terrorism policy documents to contextualize the aims, content, and institutions involved in Indonesia's counter-terrorism policies in relation to migrants. These policy documents included Law No. 6/2011 on Immigration, as amended by Law No. 63/2024, Law No. 18/2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, the 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law, and institutional reports and policy briefs produced by the BNPT and BP3MI. The terrorist incident data was sourced from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), produced by the National Consortium for the Study of

Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), for Indonesia. These policy and terrorism-related documents were chosen because they were relevant to Indonesia's migration counter-terrorism policies and could provide statements on policies, institutional roles, and the policy environment addressing migrant-related issues of potential terrorist significance.

The third stage involved incorporating secondary quantitative data from various sources, including BP3MI and BPS for the period 2015–2024, which contained annual information on Indonesian immigration movements. The BNPT's terrorism data, as well as terrorist incident data sourced from the GTD, were also incorporated into the data collection.

Data Analysis

The analysis used a six-phase thematic analysis approach as outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#): data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme refinement, and report writing. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examined how policy documents articulated the migration-terrorism link and how governance assumptions shaped governance practices. Thematic analysis was used mainly to examine policymakers' and implementers' interview statements to describe governance practices empirically. Meanwhile, CDA was employed mainly on policy documents to discursively examine the migration-security relationship ([Demuynck & Renard, 2025](#)).

The data triangulation was carried out by cross-matching sources, including information gathered through interviews, policy documents, and migration and terrorism data. In this case, the analysis referred to both convergent and divergent sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarises the profiles of the study's key informants. Because the informants were human subjects, the study assigned respondent codes to anonymize them. They were grouped into two categories: government and civil society officials involved in governing migration and counter-terrorism policies, and former migrant workers who had undergone radicalization and participated in the BNPT's deradicalization program.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Code	Role	Institution	Interview Year
R1	Former migrant worker (ISIS member / deradicalized)		2025
R2	Former migrant worker (ISIS member / deradicalized)		2025
R3	Former migrant worker (ISIS member / deradicalized)		2025
R4	Government official	BP3MI (Migrant Worker Protection Service Center)	2025
R6	Government official	BNPT (National Counter Terrorism Agency)	2024
R8	Civil society activist/trainer	Serve Indonesia (grassroots counter-terrorism NGO)	2024
R9	Former ISIS recruiter/facilitator (deradicalized)		2025

R10	Former ISIS member (deradicalized)	2024
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Source: Compiled by authors

Migration and the Pathway of Terrorism

The study found no direct or indirect relationship between international migration and terrorism in Indonesia. Rather than migrants and migration being a cause of terrorism, a complex set of factors is involved, including immigration policy, the social media networks that facilitate communication, and the socio-economic circumstances that affect Indonesian migrant workers. This study supports the view that migrants per se are not terrorists. Rather, terrorist movements and organizations seek to recruit members, raise funds, and carry out other activities that utilize the migration system; they exploit the weaknesses in the system (Adamson, 2006). Rudolph (2006) agrees that migration does not create national security threats; rather, terrorist organizations exploit or create weaknesses across migration contexts, including border security, money transfer systems, and migration routes.

The use of new media, such as social media, is one characteristic of the migration-terrorism nexus in Indonesia. This is intended to make migrant workers working abroad and far from their home country or place of origin become radical. The way of radicalization of respondents as former migrant workers carried out in this study is the same as the way they are indoctrinated to become a member of ISIS. They are introduced to ISIS ideology through Facebook, then are invited to join a WhatsApp group or Telegram. They are further indoctrinated and are asked to send money or goods to ISIS. The story of L (initial name), the former Indonesian migrant worker who worked in Hong Kong and Singapore, can be seen as an example of how a person can become a terrorist after unintentionally reading ISIS information that was uploaded to her Facebook account:

"Initially, I was scrolling through social media and saw that there was a commotion in the Middle East... But because it involved Islam, I became more interested, especially among fellow Muslims." (Respondent 2, 2025).

She commented on a Facebook post, was contacted, and was asked to join a WhatsApp group called *Penerus Daulah Panji Hitam* (The Successors of the Black Flag Caliphate). She was promoted to admin a few days later. This multi-stage recruitment process aligns with the radicalization process identified by Ramakrishna (2009) in her study of radicalization in Indonesia.

Another story is told by IP (initial name), a former domestic worker who was arrested by police in 2016 on suspicion of being the leader of an ISIS cell. She said she became interested in the ideology of the Mujahideen after reading an article on a news site about an attack carried out by Jundullah on February 17, 2012, in Solo:

"In 2012, there was news about the bomb in Solo... I clicked on Arrohmah Media, Al-Mustaqbal... From there, I started to know that there was a jihad problem. Not long after that, there was the Arab Spring, and ISIS, so I took the oath of allegiance, and the oath of allegiance was all online." (Respondent 1, 2025)

IP confirmed that approximately 50 Indonesian female domestic workers in Hong Kong were exposed to and radicalized by ISIS ideology through online platforms (Respondent 1, 2025).

The transformation of the original site, Arrohmah.com, into FPI, then into HTI, and finally into online baiat to ISIS exemplifies what Adamson (2006) terms the multi-platform strategy of migration infrastructure that was allegedly utilized by terrorist groups, albeit not in the form of

human migration, but in the form of the establishment of cyber-space infrastructure that could capitalize on the migrants' social networks. IP recalled:

"More powerful than Hollywood films... watching executions, we thought: Alhamdulillah, Allah's enemy is slain. We kept looking forward to more." (Respondent 1, 2025).

This may be the reason why the formal pre-departure literacy programs aimed at training Indonesian migrant workers to be able to withstand the influence of extremist groups have not achieved much impact.

The living and working conditions for domestic workers in Hong Kong have turned their working and living environment into a fertile ground for radicalization. Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong are entitled to at least one day off every week. Combined with affordable unlimited internet plans, domestic workers in the city have a whole week of unaccounted time and internet they can spend doing whatever they like, free from their employers' prying eyes. This matches Ullah's (Ullah et al., 2020) description of the state of "social isolation, emotional alienation and emptiness" that migrant domestic workers face. As UI (initials), a former ISIS sympathizer explained:

"Because I had a lot of free time, I started using social media and Facebook, and that is where I came to know about the caliphate and others." (Respondent 10, 2024)

One of the material conditions that made the Hong Kong citizens vulnerable to being hacked digitally by ISIS was the resources that made the internet affordable. IP explained:

"I paid 90 dollars, unlimited, nonstop, YouTube 24 hours a month, any app you wanted." (Respondent 1, 2025).

Similarly, the cheap and unlimited internet and spare time afforded the 'liberty' that many people believed to be unique to Hong Kong, as mentioned by A (initial name) – ISIS member recruiter:

"Hong Kong is not on the radar of prohibited countries." (Respondent 3, 2025)

So, even though Hong Kong had issues with illegal activities that citizens were aware of, the territory as a whole was effectively "below the radar" because of its assumed terrorism-related vulnerability and counter-terrorism surveillance.

While much focus has been placed on various aspects of the migration-terrorism nexus, many other aspects still require further investigation and study. One less-explored aspect is the financial dimension. Indonesian migrant workers sent back USD 15.7 billion in 2024 (BP2MI, 2025a, 2025b). Studies have shown that money channeled by radicalized migrant workers for terrorist purposes comes from their salary. IP explained that she was involved in the plans to bomb Indonesia in 2016 and the funds that sponsored the attack were allegedly derived from her salary as a domestic worker in Hong Kong:

"In 2015, I formed a team to make bombs. I then set out to bomb Shiite headquarters in Indonesia. My funding came from Hong Kong." (Respondent 1, 2025).

In relation to individual financing, IP described how online crowdfunding campaigns through Telegram and Facebook could mobilize tens of millions of rupiah almost instantaneously from dispersed sympathizers:

"Suddenly, it's all collected. No matter how many tens of millions or how many, it's collected so quickly." (Respondent 1, 2025)

Meanwhile, L said that the money she earned from her job was used to buy weapons for ISIS fighters (Respondent 2, 2025). On this occasion, the Arrahmah Dakwah Center (ADC) is an example of crowdfunding for ISIS. As said by R (initial name) – an ISIS recruiter – that he got money from Western Union from donors in the Maldives, Germany, France and Uzbekistan (Respondent 9, 2025). This fits in with the argument of Böhmelt and Bove (2020) that there is a link between economic aspects and terrorism

Beyond the radicalization and financing dimensions, this study reveals how established migration routes were systematically repurposed for terrorist logistics, including the movement of personnel and weapons. R was revealed by the Counter Terrorist Trends and Operations (CTTO) as being a JAD logistics coordinator. He said that ISIS members had long utilized the migration infrastructure in Southeast Asia:

"To deceive the government... we, the people of the congregation, are probably constantly monitoring our movements. That's why we skipped going to Thailand." (Respondent 9, 2025)

The potential ISIS members were advised to accumulate travel stamps across Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand before proceeding to Turkey and Syria, to appear as ordinary tourists. At the peak of ISIS recruitment in 2014–2015, the entire journey from Indonesia to Syria could be arranged within 24 hours at approximately 20 million rupiah. Asaid that Hong Kong was one of the routes they took:

"We also used to use Hong Kong as a transit point from Indonesia to Hong Kong... because several Indonesian migrant workers expressed their willingness to help." (Respondent 3, 2025).

A told how he traveled to Basilan Island in the Philippines to buy 37 M16 rifles for Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) from the ISIS affiliate of Abu Sayyaf. The ISIS leadership in Syria was to pay for the rifles through money transfers, remittances, and bartering (Respondent 3, 2025).

The International Crisis Group reported in 2021 that the 2017 Marawi siege showed that the extremist groups in the region have been exploiting the migration and maritime networks of Southeast Asia to move terrorists and goods across international boundaries. Affiliated with ISIS, Indonesian recruitment networks were using the channels of regular migration. R explained that Indonesian recruitment agencies had recruited thousands of Indonesian female domestic workers to be deployed in Iraq and Syria to work in ISIS-controlled areas. (Respondent 9, 2025) The ISIS transnational financial architecture along migration routes and the international money transfer systems used indicate how terrorist groups can use official migration channels to facilitate the recruitment of foreign fighters and their financial operations (Congressional Research Service, 2017; Ramakrishna, 2009).

The findings suggest that the variables of migration do not explain the variable of terrorism, not because the variables of migration do not have any effect on the variable of terrorism, but rather to understand the context of how migrants can be recruited and turned into terrorists. In this

respect, [Mavrakou et al. \(2022\)](#) concluded that governance and geopolitical disputes explain terrorism, rather than the movement of people. The findings confirmed this assertion and explained in detail how the poor coordination amongst institutions created a conducive environment for terrorist groups to carry out their activities. In Indonesia, previous terrorist attacks were carried out using migrants and the networks of labor migration; for example, the Bali bombings of 2002 and the Jakarta bombings of 2016 ([BNPT, 2023](#); [International Crisis Group, 2021](#)).

The Government Policy and Its Challenge

In 2011, the Indonesian government implemented a comprehensive policy framework to address the links between migration and terrorism. This policy framework has undergone a significant shift since the early 2000s and was accelerated by the Jakarta attacks in 2016 and the return of ISIS fighters ([BNPT, 2023](#)). Indonesia has three key laws that form the basis of its policy response to migration and terrorism. These include the Immigration Law of 2011, amended by Law No. 63/2024. The Immigration Law covers migration procedures, penalties, and the coordination mechanism between government institutions on migration matters. The amendment provided further details on information sharing between government institutions and on border patrol measures, including at entry points. The Migrant Worker Protection Law was implemented in 2017, and it empowered the state to increase its control over migrant workers abroad. It mandated employers and recruitment agencies to implement a system of surveillance for migrant workers to prevent the spread of extremist ideology. The Anti-Terrorism Law was implemented in 2018 and gave national security institutions more authority to combat terrorism. The law provides grounds to arrest and detain suspects before criminal proceedings begin, allows detention periods to be extended for up to two years, and imposes harsher penalties on individuals involved in acts of terrorism, including those who fund such activities. The law also requires government institutions to enhance cooperation between the police and the prosecutors in counter-terrorism.

The National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) was established in 2010 as a coordinating body. BNPT's role is to prevent acts of terrorism, deradicalize, and coordinate counter-terrorism efforts. Law enforcement functions remain with the police. BNPT's deradicalization work in detention and in the community has so far achieved few results. This is because the number of detention places for deradicalization purposes and in the community is not enough to tackle the massive number of detainees and the community who need to be deradicalized. This was addressed by establishing the Ministry of Migrant Worker Protection through Presidential Regulation No. 165/2024 (issued in September 2024). This new Ministry combines the protection of Indonesian Migrant Laborers and Recruitment under one Ministry to address the complex issues in the migrant recruitment process, which has been fragmented in the past. Meanwhile, Densus 88 has been conducting counter-terrorism raids on terrorist networks that involve migrants. These operations also include investigations into cases of terrorism financing that allegedly involved migrant workers and have involved cross-border cooperation with Interpol and other foreign police agencies ([Narda Chaterine, 2022](#)).

In 2023, BNPT and BP3MI, in cooperation with Indonesian employer associations, organized a pre-departure briefing on radicalization issues for Indonesian migrant workers leaving for Malaysia. In addition, Indonesian embassies/consulates were asked to monitor the condition of migrant communities in destination countries. BNPT also began carrying out deradicalization programs for those already sentenced for terrorism crimes by offering Islamic counseling, skills training, and community socialization ([Respondent 6, 2024](#)). However, several respondents were not convinced that this type of program addressed the core of radicalization. They also pointed out that sentences for crimes related to terrorism were often too short. As an example, the average sentence for the "crime of providing support" to terrorists is less than 36 months, thus leaving a

very short rehabilitation time ([Respondent 1, 2025](#)).

The linkage between Indonesia's counter-terrorism and migration governance is characterized by a lack of coordination at the interagency level within the government, between civil society organizations, and with the international community. According to BP3MI, several implementation gaps have weakened the counter-terrorism strategy as a whole. The pre-departure orientation program (OPP) provided by BP3MI for migrant workers going to Saudi Arabia faces challenges. An official at BP3MI described how the OPP was only one day long and overly focused on labor contracts and basic regulations. There was no counter-terrorism training provided. She explained that the Ministry of Interior had requested that it include information on building migrant workers' psychological resilience. Still, it had to be excluded because it was not possible to cover this subject matter within the allotted time, and it was replaced with information on labor contracts and regulations. Besides, BP3MI officials had not yet received any information on the counter-radicalization materials that should be included in the training activities. As a result, BP3MI officials have had to create the counter-radicalization materials for the training activities themselves. They are basing their work on the do-and-don't presentations they previously received. Young migrant workers who may be open to extremist messages and ideas disseminated on social media are not protected by measures to prevent the spread of online recruitment material because these measures focus solely on warning people about the dangers of misinformation and identity theft ([Respondent 4, 2025](#)). This highlights the fragmented, ideology-driven, and risk-assessment-often-incongruent nature of the counter-terrorism approach ([Demuyne & Renard, 2025](#); [Novikova, 2022](#)).

Additionally, BP3MI has no specific funding assigned to cover counter-terrorism and extremism-related activities. BP3MI has no mandate for work related to counter-terrorism and extremism, except to provide administrative support to the police during police operations against suspected terrorists ([Respondent 4, 2025](#)). As a result, the migration infrastructure, set up to provide an effective preventive tool to underpin the counter-terrorism strategy as a whole, is not being fully utilized.

Although BNPT works with 48 other ministries and institutions in five thematic areas ([Respondent 6, 2024](#)), this has not translated into effective cooperation on the ground. The Forum of Coordination of Counter-terrorism (FKPT) is supposed to take place at the provincial level in all 34 Indonesian provinces. But currently, only two district-level FKPTs have been established – local governments initiated both. As a result, counter-terrorism prevention activities are not being carried out at the village level – the same level from which the vast majority of terrorist recruits are recruited and from which most migrants depart ([Respondent 6, 2024](#)).

The post-departure monitoring of migrant workers is considered the largest structural gap in Indonesia's counter-terrorism governance chain. BP3MI claimed that there is no monitoring system for migrant workers abroad. No regulation mandates post-departure monitoring of migrant workers, and the state lacks a mandate to conduct intelligence activities abroad. An official from BP3MI mentioned that the instructors would work only within the BP3MI framework and that there were no collaborations with other external psychologists or CSOs. So, the agency mainly acts as a reporting body for complaints and therefore is not structural enough to prevent Indonesian migrant workers from being recruited by terrorist groups abroad before they are capable of carrying out acts of terrorism ([Respondent 4, 2025](#)).

Likewise, BNPT's counter-terrorism cooperation with Malaysia, considered to be based on shared interests between neighboring countries, has not yet been formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that requires presidential approval, review from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the consent of several ministries and institutions. The bureaucratic process that must be carried out can take such a long time that it is no longer relevant to the

terrorist network that operates internationally. Besides, coordination between Deputy I (prevention) and Deputy II (law enforcement) is problematic, and the sub-directorate's counter-propaganda program also lacks coordination with the National Cyber Agency (BSSN) and the Ministry of Communication and Information ([Respondent 6, 2024](#)). The Weaknesses in coordination between government agencies in preventing migrant workers from being exposed to terrorism are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Institutional Roles and Coordination Failure to Handle Terrorism among Migrant Workers

Institution	Role	Coordination Failure	Consequence
BNPT	Coordinate counter-terrorism across 48 ministries & institutions; lead deradicalization	Internal disconnect between Deputy I (prevention) and Deputy II (law enforcement); counter-propaganda unit has no coordination with BSSN or Ministry of ComInfo	Fragmented prevention efforts; online radicalization not countered effectively
BP3MI	Protect migrant workers; conduct pre-departure orientation	No counter-terrorism mandate or dedicated funding; no collaboration with psychologists or CSOs; self-produced materials	Counter-radicalization training absent from departure pipeline; structural prevention gap
Densus 88	Counter-terrorism police unit; conduct raids, investigations, cross-border operations with Interpol	Reactive rather than preventive; counter-terrorism agents abroad lack sufficient training; information silos with BNPT	Late intervention — action taken after radicalization complete; missed prevention windows
MOFA	Monitor migrant communities abroad; assist bilateral cooperation	No systematic intelligence-sharing protocol with BNPT or Densus 88; embassies asked to monitor but lack mandate & tools	Overseas radicalization blind spot; no early warning from destination countries
BSSN/Kominfo	Cybersecurity; regulate digital communications; counter online extremism	No coordination with BNPT counter-propaganda sub-directorate; online recruitment content not systematically flagged or removed	Social media platforms remain open recruiting grounds for ISIS-linked groups
NGO	Grassroots counter-terrorism education; training in high-risk provinces	Operates within narrow limits; no formal integration with government programs; fills gaps informally only	Village-level prevention under-resourced and dependent on ad hoc NGO work

Source: Compiled by authors from interview results

Non-governmental organizations are expected to support deradicalization and counter-terrorism programs. Civil society organizations have, to some extent, filled the institutional gap, but only within the limits of what is permitted. This was stated by an activist from Serve Indonesia, which trains grassroots women in East and West Java – two of the provinces with the highest terrorism index levels – on how to combat terrorism in their villages and fight misinformation on the internet ([Respondent 8, 2024](#)).

Risk-Based Governance as an Alternative Framework

International migration vulnerabilities create opportunities for terrorist development, and weak coordination among Indonesian government agencies in addressing them requires a new framework for thinking. Accordingly, the regulation primarily aims to address vulnerabilities in the migration governance system that terrorist organizations can exploit, rather than targeting the root causes of those vulnerabilities. That is, rather than using a risk-based approach that pinpoints weaknesses in the governance system and addresses them accordingly, the regulation as it stands targets vulnerabilities in the migration governance system primarily that terrorist organizations can exploit. As stated by [Helbling and Meierrieks \(2022\)](#), security outcomes have more to do with governance than the stringency of immigration policies, i.e., that even with less restrictive immigration policies, countries with efficient and coordinated governance will always succeed in managing their security issues, while countries with poor governance will always suffer from the same weaknesses regardless of the stringency of their immigration policy. In Indonesia, this is clearly an issue of governance. In fact, despite having a multitude of laws governing migration, implementation of pre-departure training, post-departure tracking, and inter-agency coordination remains inadequate.

The transition towards a more risk-based governance system in Indonesia will require actions across three areas:

1. Differentiated screening: Indonesia should assess which travelers need a higher degree of screening and determine whether border crossings have the capacity to enable the assessment. This can be achieved by applying the most effective security measures at high-risk choke points confirmed through intelligence analyses, while facilitating legitimate travelers at airports and permanent land border crossings. Entry screening decisions should be based on migration route and traveler behavior analysis, and intelligence gathered on specific trends and traveler activities. Such decisions should not be based on race or religion, as such discrimination is not only unethical, but also unworkable for making important entry decisions.
2. Differentiated technology. Technology at the border should be differentiated based on the potential of each crossing and capacity constraints. Given Indonesia's geography and the number of border crossings, and limitations of infrastructure and budget, the purpose of technology at the border should not be to secure 100 percent of all crossings, but rather to enhance the sharing and analysis of information from existing systems of border-related agencies including Immigration, BNPT, BP3MI, Densus 88, and BSSN, along the borders to facilitate more informed decision-making at the actual border crossing.
3. Differentiated surveillance: Indonesia also needs to ensure that limited surveillance capacity is applied more effectively at the border. The purposes of surveillance need to be better defined, surveillance activities better targeted and based on analysis of intelligence shared from other countries, including Indonesia's neighbors, and adequate national border legislation needs to be put in place and ratified, as needed, to ensure that the standards of countries of origin are met in relation to individual fundamental rights in the event of real-time monitoring on an individual or group basis of suspicious traveler activities detected along the borders. Enhanced information-sharing is needed between BNPT, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Densus 88, as well as between Indonesian embassies and consulates in the countries of origin and transit of travelers.

To tackle trafficking through risk-based governance, this study recommends adopting a risk-based governance approach and expanding its scope to meet the increasingly complex nature of trafficking in Indonesia. All three dimensions – victims, traffickers and the State – demand

differentiated policy measures for each migration category. Even though undocumented labor migrants, regular contract workers, returned foreign fighters, and asylum seekers all present different risks, which need to be addressed with different types of governance responses, the current practice of conflating these categories is actually what misallocates resources. It ignores the specific vulnerabilities highlighted in this paper. Therefore, risk-based governance through delivering the right interventions for each migration category, depending on the specific exploitation risks they pose, should allow the State to manage better and allocate its resources in those areas where there is the greatest risk of preventing immense suffering to potential victims – thereby addressing the governance quality gap that the current legislation in Indonesia so far has not yet filled.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses two gaps in current knowledge regarding the relationship between international migration and the development of terrorism in Indonesia. First, it investigates the connection between international migration and the development of terrorism. How do terrorist organizations exploit the structure of international migration? What specific vulnerabilities in governance practices do terrorist organizations exploit? The findings indicate that migration in itself is not a cause of terrorism, but terrorist organizations do exploit the structures of the international migration system to achieve their goals. Specifically, three key mechanisms have been identified: first, the use of online media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, to perform outreach and indoctrination of potential terrorist recruits who are migrant workers. The second mechanism involves the use of formal remittance systems, as well as informal bartering practices between family members and terrorist operatives, to move resources for terrorism. The third mechanism involves a multi-country transit approach, which exploits governance vulnerabilities in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

The second question is what strategies Indonesia is taking to address the so-called migration-terrorism nexus. What institutional, coordination, and implementation-related challenges does it face? In addressing the research question, the analysis identifies a governance quality gap between legislation and practice. On the one hand, Indonesia has sophisticated normative frameworks embodied in the 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law and the 2024 Immigration Law. These are supported by institutional architectures created to deal with terrorist threats and the flows of migrant workers. They include the National Agency for Combating Terrorism (BNPT), the Ministry of State Secretariat and Bureau of Threat Assessment and Ideology (BP3MI), and Densus 88. However, serious collaboration and data-sharing among these bodies remain lacking. The pre-departure orientation program (OPP), designed to deradicalize migrant workers, is a simple single-day function that only explains labor rights to prospective migrant workers. No monitoring mechanism exists for returned flagged militants. The Bureau of Threat Assessment and Ideology (BP3MI) lacks a clear mandate to counter extremist ideology. At the same time, the BNPT deradicalization program falls short in several critical areas, particularly its duration and scope. Two key findings underpin the analysis: national security is not solely determined by the stringency and efficacy of migration policies but by overall governance quality; and closing the exploitation gap requires a more integrated, cross-institutional approach that goes beyond legislative fixes.

The study carries two sets of theoretical implications. First, the study extends the governance-quality framework to a non-Western sending-country context. Specifically, the findings highlight that while the migration-terrorism nexus is not necessarily mediated by migration volume, it is fundamentally shaped by the governance quality of corresponding flows. Second, the study revisits and updates the exploitation thesis by mapping the specific *modus operandi* that terrorist organizations in the region use to exploit formal migration infrastructure. The study thus

calls for a more nuanced interpretation of the complex and rapidly evolving migration-security discourse, focusing on digital radicalization, terrorist financing through remittances, and the exploitation of formal migration infrastructure through multi-transit routes, particularly in countries with limited capacity to govern migrant flows.

This study uncovers several pressing issues and gaps in current practices and regulatory frameworks. On this basis, this study derives four policy recommendations. First, the OPP administered by BP3MI needs to shift from a single-day briefing to a more integrated and comprehensive program. BP3MI should reform the OPP in collaboration with BNPT, covering several sessions to ensure all aspects of radicalization are addressed, especially the vulnerability window at the pre-departure stage. Second, Indonesian embassies and consulates in countries with a high risk of extremist recruitment (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, etc.) need to be empowered and supported by relevant parties to conduct welfare monitoring of Indonesian migrant workers. They should report any early signs of radicalization to BNPT, with a strong preference for using a digital platform (e.g., an online reporting system via mobile apps or email) to address the overseas monitoring gap. Third, the government should create and connect an interagency data integration and cross-referencing platform (the Integrated System) to BP3MI's OPP data and migration records, BNPT's watch-list of suspected terrorists, Densus 88's intelligence on extremist networks, and PPATK's data on suspicious financial transactions. Fourth, the government needs to replace the current uniform migration management regulation with a risk-based and risk-tiered approach. Indonesian migrant workers going to countries with a higher risk of extremist recruitment and potential harm to themselves and the Indonesian nation may require more thorough screening and support in the pre-departure stage and assistance in post-return integration processes.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This qualitative study, which employed purposive sampling, may have resulted in selection bias, and the small number of interviewed migrant workers who had been radicalized may not be representative of the real situation. The study was also conducted before the full implementation of the 2024 Immigration Law and the new Ministry of Migrant Worker Protection. The study also focuses on Hong Kong, while the dynamics of radicalization in other destinations such as Malaysia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore were not investigated. Respondents were also not always forthcoming, accurate, or complete in their responses. Finally, the translation from Indonesian to English also introduced some degree of interpretation.

Some potential areas for future research in Southeast Asia include: a comparative study of migration and security across the region to identify patterns and mechanisms of governance that may be common to all and which could therefore inform regional policy-making; a long-term ethnographic study of migrant worker populations deemed at risk of radicalisation, to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the factors involved and to assess the impact of attempts to deradicalise migrants; the application of computational network analysis techniques to terrorist networks that recruit migrants for terrorist activities, with a view to better understanding how to map such networks and therefore how to disrupt them; and a wider investigation into the processes of radicalisation online and the role of social media algorithms in facilitating the spread of extremist propaganda, as well as ethical considerations around the development of AI tools that can detect such propaganda.

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