

SOUTHEAST ASIA 2022

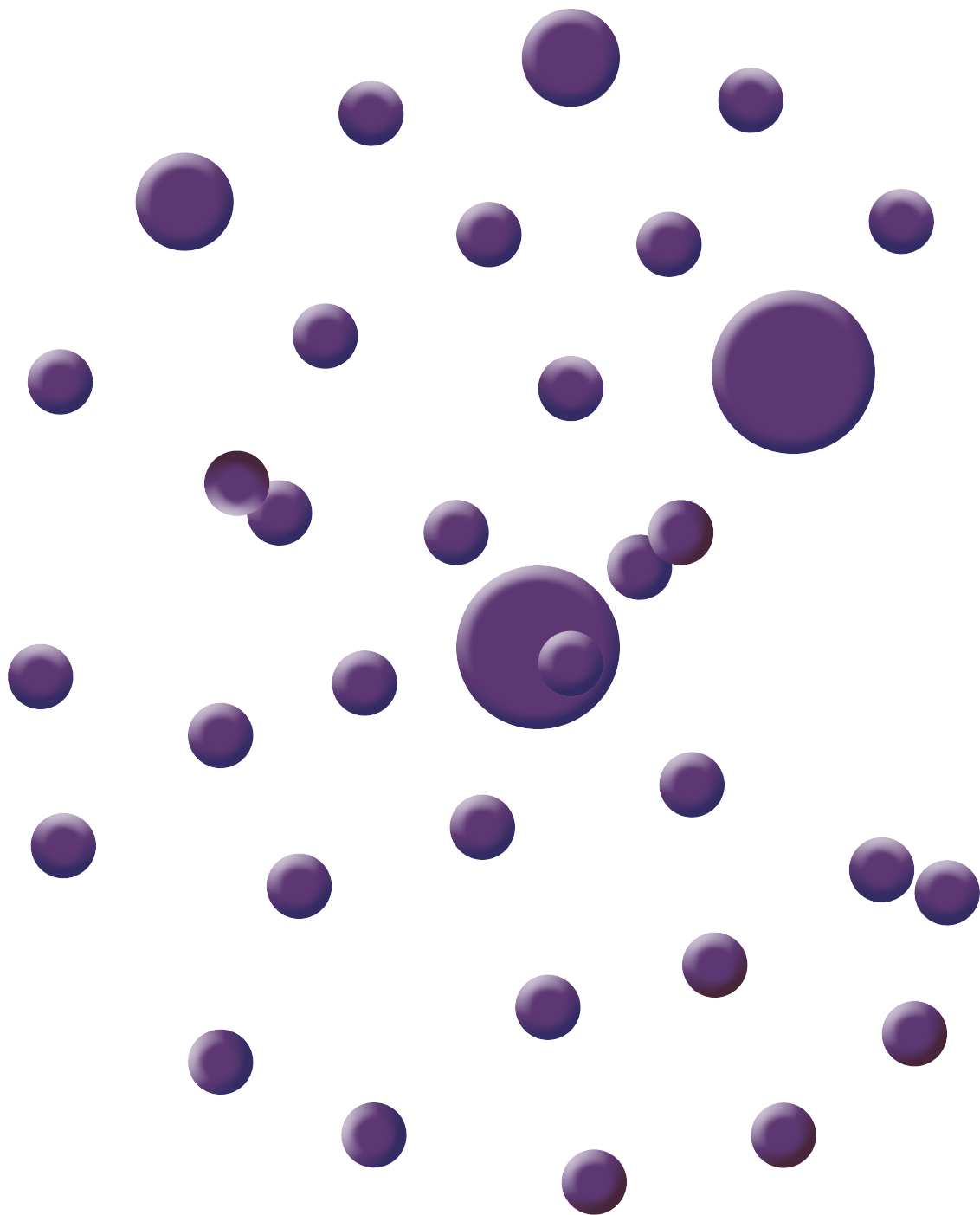
# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

## ON TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM NARRATIVES



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## 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.

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**Note on ideologically motivated 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.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, violent extremist (VE) activity in Southeast Asia showed signs of returning to pre-pandemic levels as countries eased COVID-19 restrictions, while regional cases of the virus reached their highest levels by the third quarter year. At the same time, according to a report from the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), the overall number of terrorist incidents in Southeast Asia declined in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Al-Qaeda and Daesh-aligned militants demonstrated a capacity to conduct sporadic high-impact attacks, primarily in Indonesia and the Philippines. These two countries have been the most vulnerable to the spread and threat of violent extremism and terrorism in the region.

In March 2021, Daesh followers attacked the Jakarta police headquarters and a church in Eastern Indonesia. Multiple arrests in this country revealed that the al-Qaeda-aligned Jemaah Islamiyah group has a considerably more significant presence than previously thought.<sup>2</sup> At present, Jemaah Islamiyah is limited to Indonesia and has nowhere near the strength it displayed in the early 2000s when the group represented a Southeast Asian regional network with strong ties to Al-Qaeda. There is a risk that the group's recent rise prefigured the region's return to pre-Daesh patterns when Jemaah Islamiyah was the dominant, violent extremist network capable of linking militants in Southeast Asia to battle zones worldwide, notably in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The developments and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan compound this risk over the longer term.

Similar ideologies and subscribers were also responsible for attacks in the Philippines across 2021. The pro-Daesh Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), for instance, attacked villages on mainland Mindanao in the same month, displacing thousands of civilians.<sup>4</sup> These assaults led the towns of Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, and Mamasapano to declare "a state of calamity."<sup>5</sup>

Despite a return to prominence in 2021, Daesh is organizationally weak in the two areas in the region where it has previously been the strongest: Central Sulawesi (Indonesia) and Mindanao (Southern Philippines). Pro-Daesh insurgents in Central Sulawesi acting under the banner of the East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT: Mujahidin Indonesia Timur) are nearing a total military defeat following the killing of the group's leader, Ali Kalora, in a shootout in September 2021.<sup>6</sup> In Mindanao, Abu Sayyaf Group militants responsible for the spate of suicide bombings in the Sulu archipelago have been killed or kept constantly on the run by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). BIFF

1 International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), "Counter Terrorism Trends and Analysis," *RSIS*, January 2022, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTTA-January-2022.pdf>.

2 "Police Arrest 13 Suspected Jemaah Islamiyah in Sumatra," *Jakarta Globe*, December 17, 2021, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/police-arrest-13-suspect-ed-jemaah-islamiyah-members-in-sumatra>.

3 Charles Vallee, "Jemaah Islamiyah: Another Manifestation of al Qaeda Core's Global Strategy," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/nppf/jemaah-islamiyah-another-manifestation-al-qaeda-cores-global-strategy>.

4 "3 Maguindanao towns declare state of calamity over skirmishes," *Philippine News Agency*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1136000>.

5 Ibid.

6 "Menumpas Jaringan Terorisme," *Media Indonesia*, September 20, 2021, [https://mediaindonesia.com/editorials/detail\\_editorials/2437-](https://mediaindonesia.com/editorials/detail_editorials/2437-).

fighters in central Mindanao are increasingly isolated as their former allies, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), cooperates with Manila in the ongoing peace process.<sup>7</sup>

Counter-terrorism operations across the Philippines and Indonesia have greatly restricted the physical space in which militants can operate. Consequently, Daesh no longer has a safe haven in Southeast Asia, and it has no clear leader (emir) after the death of Salahuddin Hassan in a military raid in the Southern Philippines in October 2021.<sup>8</sup> The restriction of extremists' and militants' ability to act offline alongside the growing role of the internet in radicalization and recruitment suggests that the intensive exploitation of cyberspace may be one of the legacies of the pandemic in Southeast Asia. In 2021, in online forums such as Telegram, militants from across the spectrum gathered and interacted in new ways as they continued to play a cat-and-mouse game with cyber authorities and platform moderators. Meanwhile, overall COVID-19 related narratives from extremist organizations seemed to decline in favor of continued anti-governmental propaganda and exaggerated territorial claims from Daesh-affiliates. Online militants – even Daesh sympathizers – were also energized by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the rapid collapse of the previously democratically elected government in August 2021.<sup>9</sup>

Adapting to online content removal and monitoring efforts by tech platforms, primary data analysis by the authors reveals that pro-Daesh actors in Southeast Asia are leading a shift to decentralized social media technologies to avoid bans and content moderation takedowns.<sup>10</sup> The intensified scrutiny of online content by governments has been prompted in part by increased online socialization during the pandemic period, as spoken to in detail throughout the 2020 iteration of this report. This trend dovetails with the increased popularity of more decentralized and encrypted online platforms and technologies – Telegram, Matrix, and Element, for example – that may shift the balance of online power and content access potentially away from large platforms to more distributed, acephalous platforms. The combined presence of these, largely decentralized platforms increasingly based on blockchain technologies is referenced in this report. However, it remains to be observed to what extent Daesh activists and extremists more generally can convert their online capabilities into offline action and how effective their growing use of non-mainstream social media platforms will truly be.

While the pandemic drags on, as indicated by resurgent caseloads towards the end of 2021 in Thailand, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, violent extremism in the region is unlikely to reach pre-pandemic levels. However, as COVID-19 restrictions on travel and events ease, and governments shift to policies of “living with the

7 “The Philippines: Extremism and Terrorism,” *Counter Extremism Project*, 2022, <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/philippines>.

8 “Philippine Govt Forces Kill Top IS Militant, Wife in Mindanao Raid,” *Benar News*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/militant-killed-10292021134428.html>

9 Note: Based on primary source analysis of an internal Telegram dataset referred to elsewhere in this report as “ARK Telegram Data, 2020-2021.”

10 Ibid.

virus,” it is likely that extremism in the region will return to the norm over the long term. Violent extremism may rebound as militants see opportunities to disrupt upcoming election cycles in key countries, first in presidential and central government elections in the Philippines in 2022 and later in the 2024 national elections in Indonesia.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

**Authorities should prepare for a potential rebound in violent extremist activity**, with national election cycles approaching in the Philippines in 2022 and Indonesia in 2024, COVID-19 restrictions easing, and inter-and intra-regional travel on the rise. This will be a shift from the more conducive environment during the pandemic for counter-terrorism authorities across Southeast Asia, which saw a decline in violent incidents, a ceasefire in Southern Thailand, and successful counter-terrorism operations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

2

**Preventing and countering violent extremism practitioners and government should increase online countermeasures such as positive interventions and ‘pre-bunking’ narratives via inoculation theory techniques to prevent battlefield propaganda from Afghanistan from proliferating** further and inspiring offline operations in Southeast Asia. The Taliban’s return to power and the intensified fighting between Taliban forces and Daesh (IS-Khorasan) in Afghanistan have given inspiration to all sides of the extremist community in Southeast Asia.

3

**Social media platforms must adapt their systems to detect more nuanced forms of messaging – and those offered in local languages – than current algorithms are able to capture.** Platforms should also collaborate more closely with localized subject-matter experts to bolster their knowledge of and capacity to detect signals and language patterns being used by terrorist groups. Mainstream and especially less popular social media platforms remain vulnerable to violent extremist actors, despite the advances made in recent years in automatic detection and content moderation. The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), Tech Against Terrorism (TaT), and the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN) all offer complementary and accessible resources for platforms and regulators alike to improve their efforts in the preventing and countering violent extremism space.

4

**Authorities and policymakers are encouraged to develop new tools and methods to counter extremist content and novel disinformation tools as the transition to decentralized communications and social media technology begins to impact Southeast Asia.** Although decentralized communications are at an embryonic stage, the region hosts a tech-savvy population who are likely to be early adopters of such technologies, potentially making it easier for extremists to radicalize, propagandize, and recruit on alternative platforms.

5

**Authorities are advised to prepare for a possible post-pandemic scenario in which Jemaah Islamiyah emerges as the strongest violent extremist network in the region.** Arrests of networks of Jemaah Islamiyah militants in Indonesia indicate that the organization is much larger and more structured than assumed. In recent years, Jemaah Islamiyah has succeeded in raising donations and capital as part of a move into above-ground business operations. Although Jemaah Islamiyah has pursued a strategy of avoiding conflict to date, more violent and less patient Jemaah Islamiyah splinter groups, facilitated by sophisticated cyber technologies, should be anticipated.





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GRAPHIC DESIGN

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# METHODOLOGY

This report provides an analysis of the intersection between violent extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia during the year of 2021. It builds on a similar report covering events and narratives during 2020. Both are part of a series of analysis published by Hedayah and aiming to assess the putative relationship between violent extremist activities and events and the pandemic in multiple regions. As with the previous report, this was conducted through an all-source – primary and secondary – data collection and analysis of open-source data. Much of the primary source material was collected from ideologically motivated violent extremist actors on social media in vernacular languages. Platforms covered in this research include Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Element, and Matrix. Smaller platforms were targeted based on a general shift by violent extremist organizations away from major providers amid increased content moderation and takedown operations. This research benefits from access to a large longitudinal database built from Telegram data from before the pandemic, thus allowing for comparison across time.

This Southeast Asia report covers the countries of the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, and the Kingdom of Thailand. Open-source coverage of more remote areas of violent extremist activity, such as Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines, is less comprehensive, reflecting the relative isolation of these regions, their limited 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. However, given the above caveats and other variables such as the complexity and diversity of the region characterized by localized networks and conflicts, available data on violent extremist trends and narratives in Southeast Asia is by its nature non-exhaustive and subject to improvement and reassessment. 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 in ways that are yet to be explored and should be expanded on in future studies.



# NARRATIVES



During 2021, extremist narratives in Southeast Asia largely deprioritized pandemic-specific narratives. A mixture of pandemic normalization, lifting of public health restrictions, and the reality – not just fear – of new waves of COVID-19 cases starting in July after largely escaping serious outbreaks during the first year of the pandemic all played out during 2021. This was likely in part due to wider acceptance of the pandemic as a persistent, non-emergent struggle, and the rescinding of 2020 lockdowns that violent extremists had capitalized on by propagandizing as repressive towards Muslims. Those narratives are elaborated on in detail in the 2020 version of this report. New narratives in 2021's ongoing pandemic context focused on continued criticism of and propaganda against governments, the promotion of resurgent Daesh-affiliated terrorist attacks, and opportunistic reframing of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.



## Anti-state narratives and propaganda

In 2021, after leading attacks on COVID-19 public health measures and circulating disinformation on the origins of the virus during the year prior, a broad array of Indonesian actors including Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia, pro-Daesh supporters, and others intensified anti-government online disinformation campaigns. These narratives became more prominent following the outlawing of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in December 2020 and the death of six FPI members in a clash with police in the same month. Following these incidents, pro-FPI and like-minded sympathizers flocked to deep web forums where their rhetoric became more extreme, and groupings of FPI sympathizers adopted more militant names and identities.<sup>11</sup> In September 2021, amid the highest mortality rates from COVID-19 that Indonesia experienced throughout the pandemic to date, the FPI formally rebranded itself as the Islamic Brotherhood Front (Front Persaudaraan Islam), retaining the same initials to maintain an above-ground presence.<sup>12</sup> Under this new identity, FPI attempted to re-commence offline activities, including its public service programs for the poor and those in need. The group has yet to establish a *modus vivendi vis-à-vis* the Indonesian government as its rebranded operations continue to be a target of government law enforcement actions.

Proliferating pro-FPI Telegram groups exhibited the most extreme anti-government rhetoric. These groups adopted some of the militant imagery and language of Daesh, using posters and videos to call on supporters, albeit in vague terms, to fight the Indonesian government (see Image 1). Circulated memes urged for a ‘revolution’ or for supporters to take up arms, and one poster called for the ‘sacrifice’ of Indonesian president Joko Widodo.

Beyond their rhetorical convergence with Daesh, pro-FPI actors increasingly populated Telegram groups where they mixed with Daesh followers and followers of other organizations, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> As Indonesian violent extremists have lost ground offline, they appear to be forming new intergroup associations in the online world. This “digital convergence” is marked by the emergence of catch-all Telegram chats where Daesh followers discuss with, and compete for influence with, militants from other groups in ways that dissolve traditional intergroup boundaries.<sup>14</sup>



Image 1: Text reading “There will come a time when we will enter the battlefield” excerpted from a extremist-affiliated Telegram video in Indonesia.<sup>15</sup>

11 ARK Telegram Data, 2020–2021.

12 Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “FPI Reborn: Old Wine In A New Bottle?,” *Fulcrum*, October 8, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/fpi-reborn-old-wine-in-a-new-bottle/>.

13 ARK Telegram Data, 2020–2021.

14 Quinton Temby, “Why Indonesian militants of different stripes are exchanging anti-Chinese sentiment and extremist memes on Telegram,” *South China Morning Post*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3145293/why-indonesian-militants-different-stripes-are-exchanging-anti>.

15 Telegram, August 2021.

## Daesh Claims “Harvests” from Attacks

In regional Telegram channels, a key Daesh narrative was the so-called “harvest” of the fruits of war: Daesh parlance for battlefield successes, including the killing of enemies and acquisition of the spoils of war as shown in Image 2. Daesh war propaganda featuring claims of battlefield spoils was regularly translated into Indonesian along with official or quasi-official Daesh infographics from Daesh Arabic sources such as An-Naba and Amaq News Agency. These infographics detailed the victories and spoils of war across its provinces (Wilayah) Regional Daesh channels appear to emphasize any Daesh central propaganda that reference the “East Asia Wilayah,” despite the fact that neither Daesh nor its Jamaah Anshorut Daulah affiliates have a coherent organizational structure in Southeast Asia.<sup>16</sup>



Image 2: Indonesian translation of An-Naba Infographic, “Harvest, Khorasan Province.”<sup>17</sup> The image claims to show the number of targets killed and injured, the number of military operations, and other battlefield figures.

Bolstering these claims amid continued pandemic limitations tempered by the gradual opening of movement, Daesh returned to activity in Southeast Asia in 2021 with attacks in Indonesia and the Southern Philippines. On March 28, Palm Sunday, a husband-and-wife team conducted a suicide bombing of a church in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The attack injured 20 bystanders and killed both parties – the wife was also pregnant at the time of the attack.<sup>18</sup> Although the sophistication and impact of the attack were relatively low, counter-terrorism police revealed that the couple was part of a Jamaah Anshorut Daulah cell led by a Makassar local, Rizaldy. Jamaah Anshorut Daulah remains the central albeit loosely networked Daesh affiliate in Indonesia. The Rizaldy cell is the same cell that coordinated the husband-and-wife suicide bombing of the Jolo Cathedral in the Philippines in January 2019.<sup>19</sup> The attack demonstrated the ongoing capability of small numbers of violent extremists in Southeast Asia to evade strong counter-terrorism measures in place and conduct attacks across porous regional borders, despite a lack of technical sophistication.

<sup>16</sup> ARK Telegram Data, 2020–2021.

<sup>17</sup> Telegram, November 2021.

<sup>18</sup> “Mertua Ungkap Pelaku Bom Bunuh Diri Makassar Hamil 4 Bulan,” CNN, March 30, 2021, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasion-al/20210330175343-20-623987/mertua-ungkap-pelaku-bom-bunuh-diri-makassar-hamil-4-bulan>

<sup>19</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), “The Crackdown on Islamist Radicals in Indonesia,” May 25, 2021, p. 12. <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/100/The-Crackdown-on-Islamist-Radicals-in-Indonesia>.

In another sign that the threat from Daesh may be returning to its pre-pandemic levels, on March 31, 2021, a woman who was reportedly radicalized online attacked the Jakarta police headquarters with an airsoft gun. She was shot dead by police before injuring anyone.<sup>20</sup> As in the Makassar attack, the operation was isolated and unsophisticated but effective in raising the specter of Daesh despite the overall decline of the group's influence in Southeast Asia. The female assailant left behind a testament outlining her alienation from mainstream society and her solitary radicalization.<sup>21</sup>

It appears that the woman was radicalized entirely online, namely on Instagram, where she had posted a Daesh flag just before her attack. As illustrated previously in the 2020 version of report series, the pandemic has likely accelerated an "online-first pattern of radicalization and recruitment, especially in urban areas where internet penetration is high."<sup>22</sup> Despite consistent efforts by Instagram at content moderation and detecting and removing extremist material, a network of violent extremist accounts in Southeast Asia has cultivated a following on Instagram. The communication platforms section of this report assesses this trend in more detail. The leading role of women in the March attacks across Jakarta and Makassar highlights the more publicly active profiles of women in violent extremism across the Southeast Asia region. The curious interplay of gendered dynamics in radicalization and recruitment is underscored both by highly public conservative, anti-feminism debates<sup>23</sup> held during the pandemic in Indonesia alongside Daesh-led calls to action that "open[ed] the door for women to participate more readily than under previous command and control structures."<sup>24</sup> The latter highlights the dialectic relationship of female-led attacks both as a means of actualizing agency and as a recruitment tool by violent extremist organizations seeking to draw women into active combat roles.<sup>25</sup>

## **"East Wilayat (Province) Remains" – Daesh Clashes with the Armed Forces of the Philippines**

The ongoing conflict between pro-Daesh militants in the Southern Philippines and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was a central theme in 2021 Daesh Telegram communications. In a continuation of 2020 narratives, the conflict is presented as a thread in the broader narrative of Daesh battles in its various provinces (Wilayat) worldwide. Amaq News Agency provided coverage of Southern Philippines attacks in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesian, and English translations, and this coverage was posted on dozens of pro-Daesh Southeast Asia Telegram chats.

Battles between the Philippines' military and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) militants operating in the remote Sulu Archipelago were also covered prominently in extremist Telegram chats. One notable incident was a battle on June 13 in which the AFP killed family members of the ASG fighter thought to be responsible for the twin suicide

20 "Woman shot dead after opening fire at Indonesia's national police headquarters," *ABC News*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-01/lone-wolf-woman-shot-dead-jakarta-national-police-hq-terrorist/100042976>.

21 "How middle-class Indonesian millennial Zakiah Aini became an Islamic militant," *SCMP*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3128176/how-middle-class-indonesian-millennial-zakiah-aini-became-islamic>.

22 Hedayah and ARK Group, "2020 Southeast Asia: The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism and Extremism Narratives," *Hedayah – The Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism*, 2022, p 18.

23 Ivany Atina Arbi, "Feminism is not for Indonesia: Conservative Muslims' recipe for women's empowerment," *The Jakarta Post*, March 8, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/08/feminism-is-not-for-indonesia-conservative-muslims-recipe-for-womens-empowerment.html>.

24 Aisyah Llewellyn and Arif Budi Setyawan, "Why are more Indonesian women getting involved in bomb attacks?," *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/why-are-more-women-leading-bomb-attacks-in-indonesia>.

25 Ibid.

bombings in the town of Jolo in August 2020.<sup>26</sup> This incident came in the context of an uptick in conflict in 2021, in which key Daesh fighters were killed during counter-terrorism operations. On October 29, Salahuddin Hassan, the leader (emir) of local Daesh forces, was killed in Maguindanao, mainland Mindanao. On December 2, his purported replacement, Abu Azim, was killed in a government raid, also in Maguindanao.<sup>27</sup>

Reports of Daesh activity in the Southern Philippines (see Image 3) were not as prominent in violent extremist chats on Telegram. Still, reports in Southeast Asia were regular enough to suggest ongoing regional interest in the conflict across the so-called East Asia Wilayat (province). Southeast Asian militants' interest in the Southern Philippines may reflect its status as the last remaining Daesh territorial presence in the region after the defeat of Daesh in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.



Image 3: Indonesian translation of Amaq News Agency report of the battle between “Caliphate soldiers” and “Philippine Crusaders” in “East Asia Province.”<sup>28</sup>

26 “Abu Sayyaf leader, 3 others killed in Sulu clash”, *Inquirer.net*, June 14, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1445634/abu-leader-3-others-killed-in-sulu-clash>.

27 Ferdinandh Cabrera, “Daulah Islamiya terror group ‘behind’ North Cotabato bus bombing 0 military,” *Minda News*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.mindaneews.com/top-stories/2022/01/daulah-islamiya-terror-group-behind-north-cotabato-bus-bombing-military/>.

28 Telegram, August 2021.

## Victory of the Taliban



Image 4: Meme celebrating US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Khandaq Media Channel.<sup>29</sup>

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in mid-2021 re-energized and motivated violent extremists across Southeast Asia. The withdrawal of US forces inspired online militants out of the relative passivity and introspective fatalism of the pandemic period analyzed in 2020. Given COVID-19 restrictions across the region and sporadic public events only returning later in the year, the response to events in Afghanistan mostly occurred in the online spaces of Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and other less popular platforms. The response to the developing situation in Afghanistan was initially confused or hedged, as different violent extremist actors and groups sought to clarify their positions. Generally, the Taliban takeover was celebrated by all extremist groups and actors not aligned with Daesh. However, even pro-Daesh groups reveled in what they perceived to be an American defeat and humiliation, widely circulating propaganda that drew on images of the hasty American withdrawal common in international media at the time as seen in Image 4.

In Indonesia, as elsewhere in the world, Daesh seemed less inspired by the fall of Kabul than various of the group's traditional rivals. For instance, former Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) members in Indonesia welcomed the Taliban advance, arguing that the Taliban represent a traditional Sunni lineage that is in line with adherents to the way of the Prophet and the Islamic Community (Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah). FPI-linked Telegram groups circulated dozens of memes celebrating the Taliban advance and endorsing the creation of its "Islamic Emirate."<sup>30</sup>

One popular poster, Image 5, manipulated the events in Afghanistan to stoke tensions about a hypothetical occupation of Indonesia by China. The Taliban evicted the American colonizers from their country and thus, image read, "anyone who hates the Taliban is someone who, if Indonesia is attacked and colonised by Chinese forces, will immediately turn lackey and collaborator."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Telegram, August 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Quinton Temby, "Indonesian Militants React to Taliban Takeover", *Fulcrum*, September 15, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/indonesian-militants-react-to-taliban-takeover/>.

<sup>31</sup> Telegram, September 2021.





Image 5: Extremist meme with text reading that “The Taliban expelled the colonial forces (America) from its country. Thus anyone who hates the Taliban is someone who, if Indonesia is attacked and colonised by Chinese forces, will immediately turn lackey and collaborator.”<sup>32</sup>

A prominent thread in pro-Taliban narratives on Telegram claimed that the rise of the Taliban represents a sign of the coming apocalypse and the final victory of Islam. This trend builds on – and represents a shift – from apocalyptic content in 2020, which mainly focused on the pandemic as a sign of the end times. Presumably, with the pandemic failing to deliver as promised, new versions of end-times eschatology became more lucrative to extremist propagandizers. According to an Islamic prophecy, the messiah (Imam Mahdi) will descend in Khorasan, prophesized to be Central Asia, to defeat the enemies of Islam and restore justice. The prophecy, allegedly based on several hadith (sayings or deeds of the Prophet) that refer to “black banners” in Khorasan, is popularized to suggest divine justification, although its authenticity is questioned by scholars.<sup>33</sup> After the fall of Kabul, militants across a broad spectrum in Indonesia and Malaysia drew on the prophecy to circulate videos and posters depicting the Taliban on horseback waving black banners (see Image 6).



Image 6: Extremist propaganda with topline text reading “Today we seize Afghanistan, tomorrow we free Palestine.”<sup>34</sup>

32 Telegram, September 2021.

33 Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, RSIS, September 2014, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CTTA-September14.pdf>.

34 Telegram, August 2021.

Jemaah Islamiyah, the Southeast Asian group most closely aligned with Al-Qaeda, also cheered the Taliban's return to power. In Jemaah Islamiyah-linked Telegram groups and its online journal, Al Bunyaan, the events in Afghanistan were prominently featured and described as "end-times justice." In its October 2021 edition, Al Bunyaan magazine informed readers of the late Taliban leader Mullah Omar's prediction following the US invasion in 2001 that the Taliban would reverse the occupation eventually. Omar was quoted as preparing for a "long-term" fight.<sup>35</sup> The coverage of the Taliban's fortunes on Jemaah Islamiyah-linked social media implicitly supported Jemaah Islamiyah's central strategic doctrine of patiently building its strength before initiating a confrontation with the Indonesian government.

## Taliban as Apostates

Pro-Daesh militants in Southeast Asia also expressed enthusiasm for the overturn of the status quo in Afghanistan – however, they used the tumultuous events to press their claims against the Taliban and to support the regional Daesh affiliate, IS-Khorasan. Initially, many Southeast Asian militants seemed uncertain of how to react to the rise of the Taliban. Posts on Daesh Telegram chats sought information about the Taliban and evidence of their "deviance." These were answered by accounts posting memes, and comments by Jamaah Anshorut Daulah and pro-Daesh supporters in Indonesia that characterized the Taliban as apostates who had collaborated with the US persecuted Daesh fighters and partnered with China (see Image 7).

The Daesh attack on US soldiers and Afghan civilians at Kabul airport on August 26, 2021, which killed 13 troops and as many as 170 civilians, was widely celebrated by Daesh Telegram accounts.<sup>36</sup> The same accounts highlighted the Taliban execution of former IS-Khorasan leader (emir), Abu Omar Khorasani, who was killed on August 17, 2021: two days after the Taliban took control of Kabul.<sup>37</sup>

Clashes between the Taliban and IS-Khorasan intensified following the Taliban's rise to power, a development followed closely by members of Daesh Telegram groups in Southeast Asia.<sup>38</sup> Daesh news reports of attacks on Taliban targets were regularly translated and disseminated across Southeast Asian Telegram channels.<sup>39</sup>

With its broad appeal to multiple extremist groups, the conflict in Afghanistan risks becoming a key source of inspiration for violent extremists in the region.

35 ARK Telegram Data, 2020-2021.

36 "Lone ISIS Bomber Carried Out Attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon Says," *New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/kabul-airport-attack-report.html>

37 "Taliban confirm they killed ISKP chief Khorasani," *Samaa*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2021/09/taliban-confirm-they-killed-iskp-chief-khorasani/>.

38 "ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, November 3, 2021.

39 ARK Telegram Data, 2020-2021.



Image 7: Text in Bahasa Indonesian reading “They Are Apostates,” a Daesh anti-Taliban meme.<sup>40</sup>

## Daesh Resurgence in Afghanistan

As the conflict between the Taliban and IS-Khorasan escalated in Afghanistan, discussions and posts on Telegram in Southeast Asia began to highlight this development.<sup>41</sup> Drifting away from COVID-19 coverage and disinformation as in 2020, prominent coverage on Telegram included posts and commentary celebrating the suicide bombings of Shiite mosques in Afghanistan. These included the October 8, 2021, attack in Kunduz that claimed the lives of at least 50 people and the October 15 attack in Kandahar, which resulted in over 63 deaths.<sup>42</sup> Both attacks were claimed locally by IS-Khorasan, reported by Amaq News Agency, and then translated into Bahasa Indonesian for wider dissemination on Telegram and online platforms.<sup>43</sup>

Indonesian Daesh commentary on Telegram often explained to local audiences the reason for Daesh’s attacks against the Taliban. On November 5, for example, an account posted a report and images depicting an IS-Khorasan attack on a Taliban military hospital in Kabul. The post explained, “the Islamic State targets the Taliban because they are apostates, allies of regional tyrannies, and they attack the Caliphate.”<sup>44</sup> In one popular chat group, an Indonesian Daesh account wrote, “the Taliban have retreated. IS is still on the battlefield, the only defender of Islam and now with an exclusive monopoly on jihad.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Telegram, November 2021.

<sup>41</sup> ARK Telegram Data, 2020–2021.

<sup>42</sup> “Afghanistan: Surge in Islamic State Attacks on Shia,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/25/afghani-stan-surge-islamic-state-attacks-shia#>.

<sup>43</sup> Oved Lobel, “The Taliban are losing the fight against Islamic State,” *ASPI Strategist*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-taliban-are-losing-the-fight-against-islamic-state/>.

<sup>44</sup> Telegram, November 5, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Telegram, November 9, 2021.

# COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

2021 marked several changes in the use of online communication platforms by violent extremist actors, with innovation driven by the incentive to avoid account bans and content moderation. There was an overall acceleration in the movement of violent extremist activities from physical to online spaces – a trend noted in the 2020 report as one accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet there was also a dramatic reduction in the capacity of pro-Daesh actors to operate freely on Telegram – their primary communication platform.<sup>46</sup> Spurred in part by the widespread adoption of the platform during the pandemic, early in the year, rolling mass takedowns targeted Daesh accounts on Telegram because of collaboration between Southeast Asian authorities and the platform. Almost all pro-Daesh groups and channels were banned over the course of several weeks in January and then again in April. Accounts and channels by the group’s adherents nonetheless reemerged over time. However, in this stricter environment, violent extremist actors became more security-conscious and muted in their online activities, posting less frequently. Chat groups struggled to establish a critical mass before they were banned, and many Telegram groups remained dormant or were only able to reach a maximum of 100-200 subscribers.<sup>47</sup>

Daesh Telegram groups adopted higher levels of operational security in response to the crackdown, and some actors shifted to alternative platforms. On Telegram, users educated each other about evading security through sharing information about how to migrate from one platform to another gave instructions not to engage in private chats and advised against sharing invite links with other parties. Some channels and chat groups posted notices of dormancy in an apparent attempt to survive the mass takedowns.<sup>48</sup>

Amid the disruption on Telegram, Instagram became a more prominent platform for violent extremists in Southeast Asia in 2021. Although pro-Daesh Instagram accounts were typically more muted in tone, contained less explicit content, and kept a more mainstream aesthetic typical of the platform, some extreme content was circulated on the platform and even evaded Instagram’s automatic detection, such as gory images of battle in West Africa.<sup>49</sup> Violent extremist accounts on Instagram typically had low follower counts and survived by maintaining a low profile and avoiding the mass following they had commonly accrued in the past on Telegram.

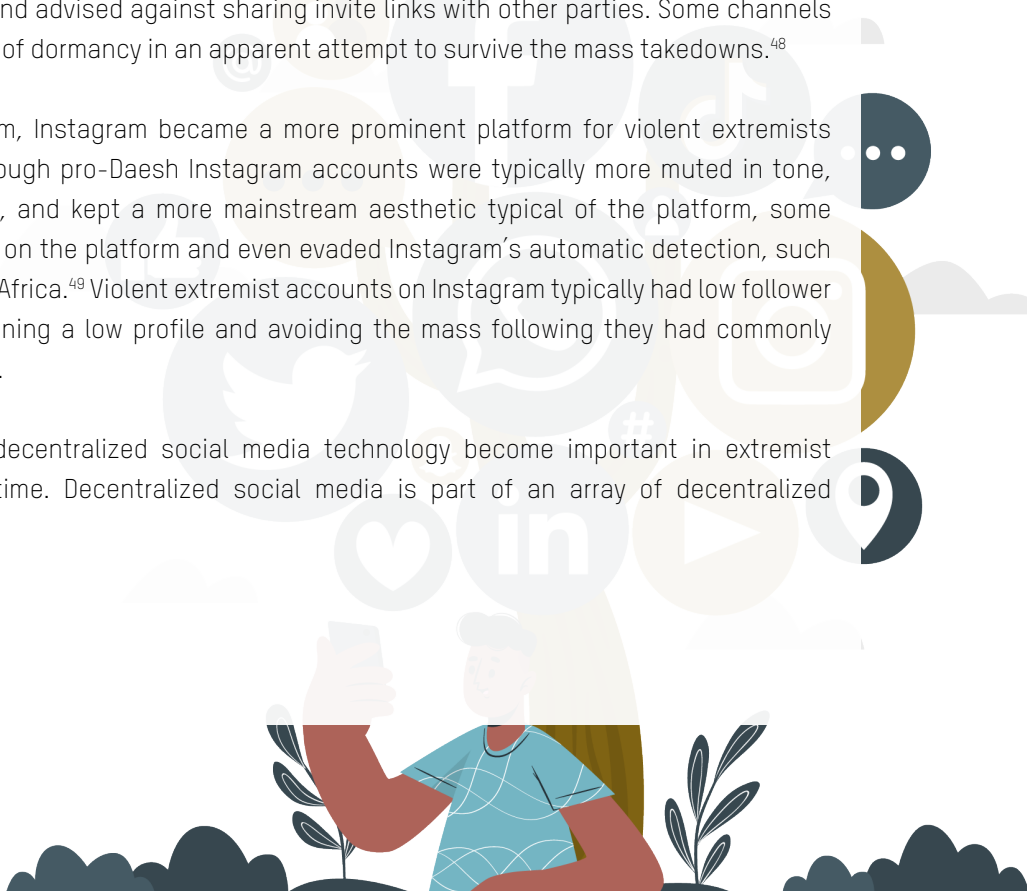
In 2021, Southeast Asia saw decentralized social media technology become important in extremist communications for the first time. Decentralized social media is part of an array of decentralized

46 ARK Telegram Data, 2020-2021.

47 ARK Telegram Data, 2020-2021.

48 Telegram, January-April, 2021.

49 Instagram, April 2021.



technologies that promise to challenge the power of governments and large, centralized web platforms.<sup>50</sup> The Indonesian Daesh propaganda outlet, Annajiyah Media Center, which mostly posts official Daesh statements and posters from An-Naba and Amaq news agencies, was the first in the region to adopt decentralized social media as a key part of its communications strategy.

In 2020, the group established its own server on the Matrix chat protocol, a decentralized end-to-end encrypted communications protocol accessible by various chat clients, notably the Element app.<sup>51</sup> Element and Matrix are open source, non-profit projects that facilitate decentralized communications in which users own their own social networks.<sup>52</sup> Element is just one embryonic rival to the large, established social media platforms that dominate the field today. But it also can be exploited by malicious actors to build channels that are resistant to law enforcement operations. Annajiyah maintains a small but resilient presence on Matrix, where it is able to direct followers to further material on other platforms. Meanwhile, on Telegram, Annajiyah circulates posters and instructions on accessing its Element chat group (see Image 8).



Image 8: Annajiyah poster urging followers to use the Element chat app.<sup>53</sup>

50 Decentralized social media often relies upon Web3 technology, which is a contested concept that captures a range of competing projects and protocols, many based on blockchain technology, that proponents hope will circumvent the capture of internet monopolies. The projects mentioned in this report are in early stages of development, and none have gained mass adoption.

51 For the background and context, see Jay Graber, "Ecosystem Review", Twitter (Blue Sky), January 2021, <https://t.co/U5DczWX1qb>.

52 <https://matrix.org/>

53 Telegram, October 2021.

In further signs of digital experimentation, in October Annajiyah advertised a streaming service billed as “JihadFlix,” which the group promoted on its Matrix server and across its Telegram accounts (see Image 9). The JihadFlix poster was accompanied with a call to ‘request’ or ‘add’ videos, suggesting the content would be crowdsourced from pro-Daesh accounts. Links related to the project quickly expired, and it appears the JihadFlix platform never materialized. However, short video trailers from the same accounts emerged later, such as one dramatizing the conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi, suggesting that the JihadFlix project may be ongoing.<sup>54</sup>



*Image 9: Annajiyah poster for “JihadFlix”, Element, October 2021*

<sup>54</sup> Author analysis based on primary data from platform.



# PUBLIC SERVICES

In 2021, as in 2020, much of the violent extremist ecosystem in Southeast Asia continued to provide various forms of charity and assistance for the families of fighters killed, along with general parishioners or community members. Options for mass activation remained limited by social distancing and movement restrictions during much of the year, though transnational mobility gradually reopened for many countries – albeit with long quarantine periods through most of 2021. As in the prior year, “one of the five pillars of Islam, almsgiving (zakat) [continued] to be exploited by violent extremist organizations in Southeast Asia as a cover for charities that specifically mobilize resources for militant communities.”<sup>55</sup>

The pandemic combined with strong counter-terrorism efforts across Southeast Asia continued to restrict the tactical use of public service provision by violent extremists. Yet there were several new developments in the region worth noting. Daesh families in camps in Syria remained active online and connected with pro-Daesh charities in Indonesia. Simultaneously, Indonesian-based charities expanded their operations in 2021 to fill a service gap left by government agencies in managing former combatants and their families abroad. The Daesh-linked Anfiq Center, for example, posted a video (see Image 10) of an almsgiving event that showed a crowd of children receiving aid at the charity’s office.



Image 10: Anfiq Center video, “Free Food Charity”.<sup>56</sup>

The plight of Daesh families stranded in camps – estimated by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict to number at least 555 Indonesians in Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) “camps and prisons, including 367 children”<sup>57</sup> – continues to be of concern to the extremist community. At the same time, a significant portion

55 Hedayah and ARK Group, “2020 Southeast Asia: The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism and Extremism Narratives,” p. 16, *Hedayah – The Center for Excellent in Countering Extremism*, 2022.

56 Telegram, September 2021.

57 “Extricating Indonesian Children From ISIS Influence Abroad,” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, June 30, 2021, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/104/EXTRICATING-INDONESIAN-CHILDREN-FROM-ISIS-INFLUENCE-ABROAD>.

of extremist-linked charitable activity in Indonesia seeks to support the families and orphans of militants in Indonesia.<sup>58</sup> Information on local illicit fundraising and charity is limited, owing to a lack of timely and publicly accessible research, yet it appears that as the pandemic hit in Indonesia, charities focused on mitigating the local economic impact on their constituencies.<sup>59</sup>

On another front, the Daesh rival organization Jemaah Islamiyah further expanded its network of donation boxes at mosques and other sites across Indonesia. In November, units from the Indonesian Densus 88 counter-terrorism police confiscated hundreds of donation boxes in Java and Sumatera.<sup>60</sup> According to Indonesian police, donations were intended to fund Jemaah Islamiyah recruitment of fighters to send to military training in Afghanistan and Syria.<sup>61</sup>

In 2021, former Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) followers continued the organization's tradition of public service provision as a recruitment tool, now operating under the re-branded Islamic Brotherhood Front (FPI) (see Image 11). While all older FPI attributes and signs have been banned in Indonesia, photos of FPI activists wearing the group's rebranded uniforms in public circulated on Telegram.



Image 11: FPI East Kalimantan charity drive.<sup>62</sup>

58 "Extremist Charities And Terrorist Fund-Raising In Indonesia," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, March 31, 2022, p. 14, <http://www.understanding-conflict.org/en/conflict/read/108/Extremist-Charities-and-Terrorist-Fund-raising-in-Indonesia>.

59 Ibid., p. 11.

60 "Densus Sita 791 Kotak Amal dalam Penangkapan Teroris Ji di Lampung", *CNN Indonesia*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasion-al/20211103223616-12-716310/densus-sita-791-kotak-amal-dalam-penangkapan-teroris-ji-di-lampung>.

61 "Polri Sebut Dana Jihad Ji untuk Kirim Kader ke Suriah hingga Afghanistan", *Tribuna News*, Indonesian National Police, November 2, 2021, <https://tribuna-news.polri.go.id/read/14620/39/polri-sebut-dana-jihad-ji-untuk-kirim-kader-ke-suriah-hingga-afghanistan-1636085491>.

62 Telegram, August 2021.



# MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION TACTICS

Violent extremists in Southeast Asia demonstrated a flexible and adaptive approach to spreading mis- and disinformation online in 2021. As analyzed in depth in the 2020 version of this report, much of the false material circulated by violent extremist networks recycled and adopted COVID-19-related tropes and misinformation from elsewhere, such as Western anti-vaccination disinformation. Such content was also blended with apocalyptic messaging celebrating the supposedly imminent and desired end times resulting from the battlefields of Africa and Afghanistan.

Following the mass takedowns on Telegram in early 2021, violent extremist actors in the region adopted a lower profile approach to strategic communications. This shift was particularly noticeable on Instagram, where militants pursued smaller followings with innocuous Instagram-friendly imagery. As a result, a large and resilient network of pro-Daesh and Jemaah Islamiyah accounts with small followings have survived on the platform. Although their Instagram posts often appear innocuous, violent extremist accounts typically use automatically expiring “Instagram Stories” (posts disappear in 24 hours) to post more radical material while reducing the risk of detection (see Image 12).



Image 12: Pro-Daesh content endorsing the imprisoned Indonesian Jamaah Anshorut Daulah-leader previously responsible for Daesh-propaganda, Abu Qutaibah, Instagram Story.<sup>63</sup>

63 Instagram, October 2021.

# RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

Radicalization and recruitment strategies remain heavily tied to online spaces – a trend accelerated during the pandemic and which has become a long-term trend, a notable legacy of COVID-19. This was particularly the case in Daesh recruitment, where individuals are typically indoctrinated into small chat groups on WhatsApp or Telegram, or they are self-radicalized online, as in the case of the Jakarta police headquarters shooting.<sup>64</sup> The pandemic-period shift to largely online interactions as public mobility was restricted was a major driver of this trend. It is too early to tell whether Daesh-linked charities are facilitating face-to-face recruitment into violent extremism. However, they are seemingly used to “maintain ideological conformity by denying support to those who cooperated with Indonesian authorities.”<sup>65</sup> Prior research with Indonesians has indicated that individuals’ donations to such charities may not be inherently linked their desire to join a group and are often altruistically motivated or based on misleading information from the charity.<sup>66</sup>

Face-to-face radicalization and recruitment appear more important in Jemaah Islamiyah networks. In 2021, Indonesian counter-terrorism police conducted large-scale arrests of Jemaah Islamiyah militants, indicating that the organization had a much more substantial underground structure than previously realized. In August and September, police arrested dozens of Jemaah Islamiyah suspects, including the group’s former acting emir, or leader, Abu Rusdan.<sup>67</sup> Despite the arrests of individuals with connections to Jemaah Islamiyah in December,<sup>68</sup> with its broader structure and stronger face-to-face recruitment, the group stands to emerge from the pandemic in a stronger position than its Daesh rivals. Increasing evidence suggests that Jemaah Islamiyah has in recent years expanded into legitimate business activities.<sup>69</sup> Aside from a source of funding, Jemaah Islamiyah businesses present an opportunity for recruitment.

64 “Terror threat to S’pore remains high, self-radicalised individuals the primary domestic threat: ISD report,” *Straits Times*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/terror-threat-to-spore-remains-high-self-radicalised-individuals-the-primary-domestic>.

65 “Extremist Charities And Terrorist Fund-Raising In Indonesia,” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, March 31, 2022, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/108/Extremist-Charities-and-Terrorist-Fund-raising-in-Indonesia>.

66 “Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: A study into the challenges and opportunities for building resilience to online threats,” *USAID Harmoni and Love Frankie*, 2020, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tKr\\_KxYaB1F5xckx6QINMYPkQ4QVJFST/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tKr_KxYaB1F5xckx6QINMYPkQ4QVJFST/view).

67 “Indonesian officials arrest suspected key figure in Jemaah Islamiyah, group behind the Bali bombings,” *ABC News*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-14/indonesia-arrests-key-jemaah-islamiyah-leader-abu-rusdan/100458974>.

68 Leonard C. Sebastian, Syed Huzairah Bin Othman Alkaff, “The Infiltration of Jemaah Islamiyah into Indonesian State and Society,” *RSIS, IDSS Paper*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip21025-the-infiltration-of-jemaah-islamiyah-into-indonesian-state-and-society/#.YfcRj31BzDF>.

69 “External terrorism threats to region include Islamist and far-right extremists: ISD,” *Straits Times*, June 23, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/external-terrorism-threats-to-region-include-islamist-and-far-right-extremists-isd>

# COUNTRY SUMMARIES

## PHILIPPINES

The year saw some uptick in violence along with continued impacts from COVID-19. Following a decline in 2020, sporadic violence in the South rebounded in 2021, much of it fueled by fighting between the Philippine armed forces and Daesh-aligned militants who rejected the peace process in the Southern Philippines. Clashes between the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and government forces in Maguindanao on mainland Mindanao, flared in March, displacing thousands of civilians.<sup>70</sup> This occurred in a context of ongoing COVID-19 cases, which according to analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, stood at 34,880 per million people as of February 28, 2022, with a death rate of 533 per million<sup>71</sup> and a full vaccination rate of 60.1% by the same date.<sup>72</sup> From August to October 2021, the country saw a sharp increase in COVID-19 mortality and cases amid a third wave only surpassed in cases numbers in January, 2022.

In the Sulu archipelago, government troops launched regular raids on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a group embedded in local institutions and kinship networks. Despite these incidents of violence, the overall influence of Daesh and foreign fighters remains limited, especially since the killing of the local Daesh-linked militant leader Salahuddin Hassan in October 2021.<sup>73</sup> The Philippines has Southeast Asia's highest incidence of violent extremism, typically ranking in the top ten on the Global Terrorism Index.<sup>74</sup>

In October, President Duterte authorized an extension of the transitional government of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), pushing back the first elections for the new region to 2025 and thus avoiding a potential political flashpoint. The BARMM continues to contribute to peace in the south, and to keeping the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) within the terms of the peace agreement.<sup>75</sup>

These delays risk alienating a local population vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization into violent extremism. Alienated youth in and around Marawi is a common recruitment target of Daesh-aligned extremists.<sup>76</sup>

The fifty-year communist insurgency in the Philippines persists during the period of analysis, with small-scale attacks by the New People's Army carried out regularly in rural Central and Southern Philippines.

70 "Crisis Watch," International Crisis Group, Philippines, March 2021. [https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=46&date\\_range=custom&from\\_month=03&from\\_year=2021&to\\_month=01&to\\_year=2022](https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5B%5D=46&date_range=custom&from_month=03&from_year=2021&to_month=01&to_year=2022) (end of page)

71 "Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Southeast Asia Program, based on data from Johns Hopkins University and Southeast Asian Country Health Ministries, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/past-projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker>.

72 Ibid.

73 "Philippine Govt Forces Kill Top IS Militant, Wife in Mindanao Raid," *Benar News*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/militant-killed-10292021134428.html>

74 Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," November 2020, *Vision of Humanity*, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>.

75 "Duterte signs law extending transition period in BARMM until 2025," *Bangsamoro Information Office*, October 29, 2021, <https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/news/latest-news/duterte-signs-law-extending-transition-period-in-barmm-until-2025/>.

76 Quinton Temby, "Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 1, p. 117.

## INDONESIA

In 2021, as violent extremist activity rebounded in Indonesia with small-scale attacks and suicide bombings notably in Makassar and an abortive attack in Jakarta, the country saw cases up to 20,365 per million people, with a death rate of 556 per million,<sup>77</sup> and only 53.6% of the population fully vaccinated.<sup>78</sup> However, the comparatively low level of attacks reflects the dominance of the security services, the near-total defeat or arrest of key violent extremist actors, and continued pandemic-related restrictions to varying degrees during the entire year. From June to August 2021, after a loosening of public health restrictions, the country saw a sharp increase in COVID-19 mortality and cases amid a third wave only surpassed in case numbers in February 2022. The arrest of former Jemaah Islamiyah leader (emir) Abu Rusdan and the killing of East Indonesia Mujahidin leader Ali Kallora were key impactful victories for counter-terrorism efforts during the reporting period.<sup>79</sup>

Hundreds of Indonesian Daesh sympathizers that remain in Syria and Iraq pose a repatriation and rehabilitation challenge for Indonesia and other countries to which they may travel. This cohort of mostly women and children remains in limbo after the Joko Widodo government announced in 2020 that their Indonesian citizenship would not be acknowledged and that they would not be repatriated.<sup>80</sup> The likelihood that some of these sympathizers will return to Indonesia or travel to other locations to become involved in militant activity once travel is normalized. This will likely contribute to a post-COVID-19 rebound in violent extremist activity.

## MALAYSIA

While Malaysia was much less affected by violent extremism than its neighbors in 2021, it experienced a surge in COVID-19 during 2021, after very few cases recorded in 2020. According to analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, COVID-19 cases up to February 28, 2022, in Malaysia stood at 107,945 per million people, among the highest in the region, with a death rate of 1027 per million.<sup>81</sup> The mortality rate was the highest in Southeast Asia and nearly double that of neighbouring Indonesia. 82.5% of the population was fully vaccinated by the same date.<sup>82</sup> From July to October 2021, after a loosening of public health restrictions, the country saw a sharp increase in COVID-19 mortality and cases amid a third wave only surpassed in cases numbers in February 2022.

The comparably low incidence of violent extremism-related attacks is due in large part to ongoing counter-terrorism efforts, and also to the tradition of militants reserving Malaysia as a safe haven or transit point, rather than a zone of operations. Most transit activity occurs on the tri-border with the Philippines and Indonesia, where

77 "Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Southeast Asia Program*, based on data from Johns Hopkins University and Southeast Asian Country Health Ministries, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/past-projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker>.

78 Ibid.

79 "Menumpas Jaringan Terorisme," *Media Indonesia*, September 20, 2021, [https://mediaindonesia.com/editorials/detail\\_editorials/2437-](https://mediaindonesia.com/editorials/detail_editorials/2437-)

80 "Dasar Hukum Pencabutan Kewarganegaraan Eks ISIS," *Republika*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/q5n69p409/dasar-hukum-pencabutan-kewarganegaraan-eks-isis>

81 "Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Southeast Asia Program*, based on data from Johns Hopkins University and Southeast Asian Country Health Ministries, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/past-projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker>.

82 Ibid.

ASG, Darul Islam, and other militants exploit porous borders to support attacks outside of Malaysia. However, violent extremist activity that occurred included sporadic arrests and occasional police shootings of Abu Sayyaf suspects, led by the Malaysian police Eastern Sabah Security Command. In May 2021, eight ASG men suspected of involvement in kidnap-for-ransom operations were arrested at an encampment on the Sabah-Sarawak border on the island of Borneo. This is a concerning indication that ASG militants may be shifting their territorial focus further into Malaysia.<sup>83</sup> To date, sixteen Malaysian Daesh returnees have returned from Syria via a government repatriation process.<sup>84</sup>

## THAILAND

The long-running insurgency on Thailand's Southern border with Malaysia remained at a low ebb, despite occasional small-scale attacks,<sup>85</sup> while COVID cases rose sharply in July 2021, after a loosening of public health restrictions amid a third wave that slowly tapered through the end of the year. COVID-19 cases up to February 28, 2022, in Thailand stood at 40,624 per million people with a death rate of 328 per million.<sup>86</sup> 71.5% of the population was fully vaccinated by the same date.<sup>87</sup>

The ceasefire between the separatist Barisan Revolusi Nasional and the Thai government largely held during 2021. However, peace negotiations, also hampered by the pandemic, failed to make any significant progress towards a political settlement.<sup>88</sup> Muslim Pattani separatists are fighting for autonomy or independence against a Nationalist-Buddhist central government dominated by the Thai military. The insurgents, fractious and disunited, pose a risk that any negotiated agreement struck with the Thai military would cause elements of the insurgency movement to splinter into a more militant faction.

Although the overall level of violence in the Deep South has receded due to the ceasefire and the pandemic, in September and October 2021 several militants were killed in extended conflict with the Thai military amid an operation to flush Pattani separatists out of marshland in the Narathiwat province.<sup>89</sup> It is unclear at this stage if the easing of the pandemic might facilitate the peace process, allowing negotiators to meet in person, or whether conflict will return to pre-pandemic levels.

83 "8 suspected Abu Sayyaf men, including 2 wanted by Philippines, nabbed in Beaufort," *Daily Express*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/171131/nabbed-eight-suspected-abu-sayyaf-men-including-two-wanted-by-philippines/>.

84 "Terrorism And Counterterrorism In Southeast Asia: Emerging Trends and Dynamics," The Soufan Center, June 2021, [https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TSC-Report\\_Terrorism-and-Counterterrorism-in-Southeast-Asia\\_June-2021.pdf](https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TSC-Report_Terrorism-and-Counterterrorism-in-Southeast-Asia_June-2021.pdf)

85 "Thailand Ends 17-Day Security Op in Deep South Swamp," *Benar News*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/deep-south-marsh-operation-10152021150959.html>

86 "Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Southeast Asia Program*, based on data from Johns Hopkins University and Southeast Asian Country Health Ministries, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/past-projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker>.

87 Ibid.

88 "Thai Deep South Residents Don't Expect Much from Next Week's Peace Talks," *Benar News*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/deep-south-residents-not-hopeful-about-peace-talks-01072022133307.html>

89 "Thailand Ends 17-Day Security Op in Deep South Swamp," *Benar News*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/deep-south-marsh-operation-10152021150959.html>.



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