EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC STATE NARRATIVES AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has beset global populations, reordered the priorities of nations and disrupted international cooperation. Taking advantage of the crisis, the Islamic State (IS) has produced and disseminated propaganda content that has evolved from emphasising certain narratives to calling for action. In February 2020, as COVID-19 infections mounted in China and Iran, IS proclaimed the epidemic to be 'divine retribution' for the two nations, China for its treatment of Muslims in the country, and Iran for its apostasy, hypocrisy and ingratitude. Weeks later as the outbreak was declared a pandemic, IS provided further advice and views on the crisis, and called for action in a bid to exploit the disorder and vulnerabilities of its "enemy" and to remain relevant as governments divert their attention to tackling COVID-19. As the pandemic rages on, IS operations in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia persist, as have IS-inspired attacks around the world. Will the terrorist group be able to continue to survive and thrive in this intra-pandemic environment? This article explores the evolution of IS narratives surrounding the pandemic and its impact on IS as a global network and its future.

PRE-COVID-19: A RESURGENT ISLAMIC STATE

The defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Baghuz, Syria, in March 2019 and the loss of its so-called caliphate status were initially believed to be the beginning of the end for the group. Seven months on, the death of IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in a raid by US special forces in October 2019 was a definite setback but not a fatal blow for the group. A few days after his demise, followed by the killing of IS spokesperson Abul Hasan Al-Muhajir in an airstrike, IS appointed Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Qurasyi aka Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman Al-Mawli Al-Salbi as the new "caliph" (Chulov & Rasool, 2020) and Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi to replace Al-Muhajir (Al-Qurasyi, 2019). Despite the various setbacks, IS has proven to be far from defeated. Having adopted a decentralised command structure and networks, the group continues to conduct and claim attacks within and beyond Iraq and Syria.

In the Middle East, the resurgence of IS seems inevitable, thanks to the situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq. Tensions in northern Syria continues; hostilities between Turkey and the Assad regime reached a boiling point when the former announced the launch of a major counteroffensive against the Syrian government (Gall, 2020). The deployment of pro-regime fighters and the Syrian Democratic Forces to the frontlines could be advantageous for IS is it seeks to rebuild its capabilities in other parts of Syria. Meanwhile in Iraq, ongoing popular protests and tensions between Iran and the US may have prompted the redeployment of Hashd Al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilisation Units) militias from northern and western Iraq to the country's central and southern regions. This may allow IS to operate more freely in northern and western Iraq, regions where the group is mostly concentrated in and strongest at (US Department of Defense, 2020). The killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by the US has prompted Iraq to call for the expulsion of about 5,000 U.S. troops from its soil, troops that are leading the coalition fighting IS. While the US has refused to withdraw, arguing that its continued presence in Iraq is imperative to dampen IS efforts

to resurge, there is no guarantee that the US will be able to stay for long; Iraqis want the US to leave (Vanden Heuvel, 2020).

Further underscoring the fact that IS is far from beaten is the group's growing and evolving threat in Africa. IS has had an active presence across the continent, namely in the north, west, and east Africa for years. Moreover, in 2019, the military capability of IS affiliates in west and central Africa and the Sinai Peninsula surpassed that of its residual core in the Levant (Rolbiecki, Van Ostaeyen & Winter, 2020). This has been evident from the activities of IS in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in north-eastern Nigeria, where militants have been engaging in attacks that have exceeded the scale and complexity of those being deployed by their counterparts in Syria and Iraq (Rolbiecki et al., 2020). The ISWAP, which is a splinter group of Boko Haram, has succeeded in taking control of hundreds of square miles of territory, forming its territorial base on the banks and islands of Lake Chad, and waging a guerrilla war across north-eastern Nigeria and elsewhere on the lake's periphery (International Crisis Group, 2019). In addition, IS also formally recognized a new "wilayah" or province known as the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which mainly has presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, in 2019 (Beevor & Berger, 2020). This further underscores IS' growing power and influence in the region.

In South Asia, IS' increasing presence was highlighted by the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings that killed more than 250 people (Dearden, 2019), and the group's subsequent recognition of Wilayah Al-Hind (India) and Wilayah Pakistan in May 2019 (Postings, 2019a), thereby splitting up its Khurasan province in an effort to restructure its "wilayat" and project an unwavering presence and undefeated image. Past IS attacks conducted in Pakistan and India-controlled Kashmir had been attributed to its Khurasan affiliate. Henceforth IS Khurasan activities are to concentrate on Afghanistan. Meanwhile in Southeast Asia, pro-IS groups continue to carry out attacks and inspire others to do so as well. The number of IS fighters, suicide bombers, organised training programmes, and propaganda videos originating from the region has grown steadily in recent years (Abuza & Clarke, 2019). In the Philippines, the IS-linked Abu Sayyaf Group as well as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) are still very active, despite continued military crackdowns. In June 2019, two suicide bombers linked to the IS-aligned faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group struck a checkpoint outside a military camp in Indanan, Sulu, killing the perpetrators, three soldiers and three civilians (Fonbuena, 2019). The BIFF, on the other hand, launched a grenade attack near a Catholic church in December 2019 (Sarmiento, 2019). In Indonesia, while the overall threat of terrorism seems to be lower than that of the Philippines, IS-affiliated group Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) remains a potent threat. In October 2019, a member of JAD stabbed and injured Indonesian Security Minister Wiranto in the city of Pandegland in West Java (Chew, 2019).

As evident in the developments mentioned above, IS as a global terrorist outfit was still considerably active and showing signs of resurgence before the outbreak of COVID-19. It demonstrated its ability to maintain the image of an undefeated and resilient organisation, carrying out attacks and propaganda activities. With the arrival of COVID-19, how is IS sustaining its relevance and ensuring that it will outlast the pandemic?

IS AMID COVID-19: PROMOTING NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE

Propaganda has always played a significant role in IS' effort to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct the behaviour of its audience (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). The messages and narratives propagated by IS offer "an alternative form of rationality deeply rooted in culture, which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action" (Corman, 2011 p. 42). For IS, during its heyday, the narrative of expansion, conquests and utopianism dominated its media output. Propaganda content such as photographic reports and videos depicting military operations, battlefield victories, military parades as well as excerpts from daily life such as public services, education, implementation of hudud punishments and other shariah-based criminal laws, dispensation of zakat (tax) and others related to IS governance on the ground, were regularly and abundantly produced and released daily by IS provincial media entities.

The loss of its physical territory has not diminished IS' determination to corral remnants of its sympathisers worldwide. The group harnesses narratives that assert it will not be defeated; it will

continue to remain and expand. This helps to assure IS supporters and sympathisers of its strength, longevity and continued existence, so that they will not lose hope and continue to support and fight for the group. IS therefore continues to publish its main propaganda materials, i.e. photographic reports, statements, videos and the Al-Naba' weekly newsletter. Although the volume of these materials has decreased, the group still manages to be consistent in its release schedule. While the narratives that showcase IS' resilience persist, the arrival of COVID-19 has led to narratives that are usually overlooked or less relevant.

COVID-19: Divine Retribution

From the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019, the pro-IS community online has been active in sharing news, developments and conspiracies surrounding the disease. These are punctuated by the community's conviction that COVID-19 is divine retribution against China. The narrative of divine retribution can be traced back to the concept of reward and punishment (al-thawab wa al-'iqab) in Islam, whereby when good moral behaviour – the basis of a successful Islamic life – become difficult for a believer to achieve, the motivation of reward and punishment helps (Nazri et al., 2011). It implies reward for pious deeds and punishment for impious actions. However, the concept of reward and punishment that consequently gives rise to the idea of divine retribution is not exclusive to Islam but to other religions such as Christianity and Judaism as well (Saleam & Moustafa, 2016). While some sections of the wider Muslim community that are not necessarily extremist might have also believed COVID-19 to be divine retribution, Islamist jihadists tend to deeply hold the belief that disasters, natural or man-made, are God's retribution upon the kuffar (infidels), apostates, and polytheists more avidly than most Muslims. This is especially so when the infidels, apostates and polytheists are alleged or known to have committed crimes against Muslims.

While IS did not initially comment on the COVID-19 outbreak, news and developments regarding the epidemic were included in the 218th and 219th issues of Al-Naba' weekly newsletter. In February 2020, more than a month after the outbreak, IS finally asserted that COVID-19 was divine retribution against infidels, initially and specifically against China ("Indeed the Vengeance of your Lord is Severe", 2020) and later extended to Iran and the West. In the case of Iran, despite the lack of sympathy shown for Shiite Muslims in the editorial of Al-Naba' ("Lost are those you invoke except for Him", 2020), IS did express hope for repentance, redemption and salvation for Shiites, while also homing in on the perceived hypocrisy and ingratitude of Shiites as the cause for God's retribution. This narrative not only reinforces anti-China and anti-Shiite sentiments, but also targets Muslims whom IS deems to be hypocrites and disbelievers in general, which IS' spokesperson Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi reiterated in an audio speech in May 2020 (Al-Qurasyi, 2020). IS then issued so-called Shariah guidelines for Muslims on dealing with epidemics, emphasising that people should adhere to them. The advisory included "realistic prevention methods and how to avoid diseases", which involved instructions such as covering the mouth when yawning and sneezing, handwashing, and avoiding entering or leaving infected places ("Shar'ii Guidelines to Deal with Epidemics", 2020; Figure 1). Echoing its first commentary on God's retribution upon China, IS also noted that God's torment has mostly struck "idolatrous" nations, praying that God will increase

Figure 1. "Shar'ii Guidelines to Deal with Epidemics"

his torment on the disbelievers and keep the faithful safe ("The Crusaders' Worst Nightmare", 2020). The group advised Muslims not to pity the disbelievers and apostates. It instead urged Muslims to exploit current opportunities to continue working to free Muslim prisoners. IS also called for the intensification of pressure on the enemy with any means possible, asserting that performing jihad is the best guarantee of protection from the epidemic.

Based on the above content released in the few months following the onset of COVID-19, the official line adopted by IS regarding the pandemic is two-fold. The first, highlighted at the start of the outbreak, concerns Muslims in general, advising them to continue exercising measures that will help protect them from the virus. The second concerns the "mujahideen", who are encouraged to exploit current opportunities to continue and intensify operations and put pressure on their enemy. IS, its affiliates and supporters have indeed taken advantage of the pandemic and ramped up attacks across Iraq and Syria (Hanna, 2020), gone on the offensive in Africa (Vines, 2020; Jalloh, 2020) and Southeast Asia (Banlaoi, 2020), and nearly succeeded in carrying out attacks in Germany (Joscelyn, 2020). Although these activities might not be entirely attributed to the pandemic, they demonstrate IS' opportunistic streak and its ability to adapt in a crisis. The wave of attacks in France in October 2020, while not necessarily related to the pandemic, is an example of IS being opportunistic and riding on the incidents to incite more lone-wolf attacks in the West targeting their enemies ("Make it easy and not difficult", 2020; "And Fight the Leaders of the Infidels", 2020).

War of Attrition: Reinforcing 'Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad' (Remaining and Expanding)

One of the narratives that IS continues to stress following the loss of its caliphate and throughout the pandemic, is that it will outlive its enemies through a war of attrition. Deceased IS spokesman Abul Hasan Al-Muhajir, in an audio speech released in March 2019, noted and affirmed the guerilla tactics employed by IS fighters, saying that "if the Islamic State loses some towns and cities in some of its wilayat, Allah grants its conquest in other wilayat in imbalanced hit-and-run battles in which they drag the enemy with all that he owns" (Al-

Muhajir, 2019). This strategy was reinforced by the late "caliph" himself, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, in his April 2019 video appearance. Al-Baghdadi asserted that IS' battle is to bleed the enemy in a long fight, affirming that the mujahidin "have shown their enemies that they are capable of holding the reins of initiative, knowing that the battle today with their enemies is a battle of attrition" (Al-Baghdadi, 2019).

This war of attrition narrative and IS' "reins of initiative" reinforce the group's slogan *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding), which continues to be relevant for the group and its followers, as IS persists in highlighting its unwavering presence. The *baqiyah* part of the slogan continues to be affirmed through IS' consistent production, dissemination, and publicising of operational propaganda by the group's base in Iraq and Syria, and its affiliates around the world. IS' spokesperson Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi, in an audio speech released in January 2020 (Al-Qurasyi, 2020), reiterated the narrative of endurance and resilience in the face of hardship and strategic setbacks. As the group wages a protracted resistance, Al-Qurasyi restated the need for patience and called for a focus on clandestine activity to "spread influence" throughout the Coalition's areas of operation. The statement is in line with the low-level activity under the resurgence model that IS adopted shortly before the fall of the physical caliphate in March 2019 (US Department of Defense, 2020). In May 2020, Al-Qurasyi in his second audio speech that year (Al-Qurasyi, 2020), boasted of IS' staying power, citing the group's offensives in Iraq and Syria, and highlighting its momentum there where the number of attacks doubled in two months ("IS Militants Step Up Attack", 2020).

Further reinforcing and solidifying its *baqiyah* slogan, IS continued to assert its war of attrition narrative with the third and fourth series of its "Battle of Attrition" campaign in May and July 2020 respectively. The self-proclaimed military campaign, which was first launched in June 2019, inspired violence by IS affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Somalia, West Africa and the Philippines. According to IS, the campaign in May saw 228 attacks in 12 'provinces' ("Battle of Attrition 3", 2020; Figure 2), while the one in July saw 136 attacks in 11 'provinces' ("Battle of Attrition 4", 2020). Although IS' fourth 'Battle of Attrition' campaign has ended, operations carried out in various IS "provinces"

Figure 2. Al-Naba' infographics on the third Battle of Attrition campaign

continue to be reported in official statements and Al-Naba' newsletter to supplement and amplify the war of attrition narrative.

While IS has demonstrated through its consistent propaganda that it is *baqiyah* (remaining), the *tatamaddad* (expanding) part of its slogan does not appear to be entirely applicable given the current status of IS. For a time, following its defeat in March 2019, the narrative of expansion did continue to hold true, as could be seen in IS' acknowledgement of new wilayat in statements and other media content. The group has reframed the caliphate as an overarching global state rather than one that is based solely in Iraq and Syria. However, since mid-2019, there has been no acknowledgement of new wilayat. Nevertheless, IS found fertile ground in Africa for its effort to expand its presence across the continent, given that it has been consolidating its African affiliates even before its defeat in Baghuz. IS' recognition of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in April 2019 (Postings, 2019b), and later the inclusion of Mozambique as parts of its Wilayah Central Africa or Islamic State in Central African

Province (ISCAP) shows its expansion efforts (Beevor & Berger, 2019). Since then, IS' media campaign around ISCAP has been extremely active. In April 2020, an infographic released in Al-Naba' newsletter gave statistics on IS operations conducted from late January to early March, with a total of 13 operations conducted in Mozambique and the DRC ("Harvest of the Soldiers of the Caliphate", 2020). ISCAP's alleged successes in Mozambique were even touted in an Al-Naba's editorial in July ("The Crusaders Risked Their Investments", 2020). Although IS does not currently have control of even 1% of African territory, it has continued to provide training, funding, and theological guidance to its so-called wilayat in sub-Saharan Africa, namely the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and ISCAP (Zenn, 2020).

"Set Free the Captives"

Aside from divine retribution, another narrative that IS has highlighted in the past but did not then promote is the narrative of setting captives free, which is usually carried out by attacking prisons and inciting prison riots − cornerstones of jihadi operational strategy. Jihadi groups target prisons as sites for attacks to free operatives and leaders from detention, restore their force size, and to create propaganda wins against their enemies. This narrative persists to this day and has been increasingly highlighted and amplified post IS' territorial defeat and during the ongoing pandemic. The editorial of 226th issue of Al-Naba' heavily implied that the "mujahideen" should focus their jihad on freeing the Uighurs from China's concentration camps and those in the Syrian refugee camps and detention centres ("The Crusaders' Worst Nightmare", 2020).

Meanwhile in August 2020, IS Khurasan launched an attack on Nangarhar central prison in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. It freed hundreds of prisoners after a 20-hour gun battle, leaving 29 people dead and officials scrambling to recapture hundreds of prisoners, including many from the IS and the Taliban ("Islamic State Group Claims Deadly Attack", 2020). Lauded by IS, the attack was highlighted in the 246th issue of Al-Naba's editorial, stressing the importance of freeing prisoners; it also referred to secret deals with and payoffs to prison guards ("O Soldiers of the Caliphate", 2020). The editorial also shared three other methods that

IS employs to release prisoners or relieve them of harsh treatment and punishment. In October, IS also claimed responsibility for an attack on a prison in the DRC that resulted in at least 1,300 prisoners escaping (Ives & Kwai, 2020). IS has repeatedly reminded its followers that their detained "brothers and sisters" should not be forgotten. Prison attacks such as the one in Jalalabad send a clear message to followers who have been captured that their brethren in IS will not abandon them. Such messages are intended to boost morale, especially after the group has suffered multiple setbacks.

Online Jihad: A Way to Maintain Presence

IS, having been moulded into a virtual organisation, knows that its loss of territory does not diminish or even eliminate its presence as long as its online and media jihad efforts persist. In the online sphere, pro-IS online jihadist communities remain resilient, consistent, and persistent in supporting IS media operations, from dissemination of official content to creating various kinds of media products. Given that IS official media arms have produced significantly fewer media contents such as videos and publications, there is now a void that pro-IS media entities and supporters online help to fill. These freelancers produce propaganda content that has a specific focus or cater to the local context of the online community or a target audience instead of merely recycling IS official content. An example of media products produced by such entities is *The Voice of Hind*, an English language monthly magazine series published by a pro-IS media entity called Al-Qitaal Media Centre that focuses on India. One of its notable issues is a "lockdown special" edition that encouraged steps to "annihilate the disbelievers" including stabbing people with scissors and expending "less effort" by spreading COVID-19 ("Down with the Believers, 2020). Another example are posters designed and created by the Al-Battar Media Foundation. The entity creates and disseminates posters that highlight points made in IS official media releases such as audios and videos featuring key IS figures, thus strengthening the echo chamber of the pro-IS community.

Media entities such as Al-Qitaal and Al-Battar have no known formal ties to IS. They have continued to grow, operating within independent network structures and creating presence on various platforms. Meanwhile, there are other media entities such as Ash-Shaff Media and Iqra' Media Foundation that produce a mix of contents based on nationality and language such as Indonesian, English, French, Russian, German, Spanish and Dutch. The contents include regular news updates concerning IS and references to ongoing events and debates in the respective countries. This way, community members can relate more to cultural and national specificity and proximity, rather than ideas of the global caliphate with strong authority leadership (Krona, 2020).

The virtual caliphate has emerged as an amplified version of IS' state-building project through the lens of its propaganda. The online environment, however, is no longer a place for IS to only amplify its brand but for IS followers and supporters to exercise more agency, to form independent entities based on the original concept of the "Islamic State" (Azman, 2021). This is possible with the fragmentation of platforms and a decentralised communication strategy where IS and its followers are active on various online platforms. Since the Europol takedown of terrorist propaganda on Telegram in November 2019 (Europol, 2019), IS and its supporters have further scattered and spread their activities on various other smaller encrypted messaging platforms such as Rocketchat, Hoop, and Threema, possibly due to increased activity, creativity, and persistence among supporters and not necessarily the will of or directed from the leadership of IS (Krona, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, developments in the Levant, Africa, and Asia indicated that IS as a terrorist group was significantly operational and demonstrating signs of resurging. Following the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent drawdown of US forces in Iraq and Syria, as well as the reduction of frontline deployed forces, police and local security patrols, security gaps have been exacerbated, allowing IS to operate more freely, conduct prison breaks, carry out more sophisticated attacks, and smuggle fighters across borders (Dent, 2020). Unsurprisingly, IS attacks in Iraq and Syria have greatly increased in 2020, demonstrating the group's capacity and eagerness to retake territory, populations, and resources. Beyond the Levant, IS affiliates around the world have sustained and even increased

operations, especially in the case of ISCAP and ISWAP. These affiliates' degree of autonomy and presence of sleeper cells in various countries and regions of the world have enabled IS to operate unabated. For Southeast Asia, while the violence perpetrated in the region has been sporadic and uncoordinated, it further drives home that IS has shifted away from its initial preoccupation with state-building to a decentralised, global insurgency strategy.

IS' propaganda will continue to peddle themes and narratives that exhibit its resiliency, adaptability and opportunistic mark, especially in a world still shaken by a pandemic. In the virtual world, the group's propaganda content continues to proliferate despite efforts to combat its spread (Criezis, 2020). The increased usage of social media and encrypted messaging platforms, such as the reported surge in Facebook usage during the pandemic lockdown (Matney, 2020), means that people are spending more time online, which could potentially increase their chances of interacting with terrorist propaganda (Bell, 2020). As the online environment enables IS to continue to recruit, inspire, and instruct, it decreases the need for recruiter boots on the ground and the need to travel to training camps, serving as a force multiplier for IS.

Amidst the pandemic, IS' ability to maintain the image of a resilient organisation has been possible thanks to not only the continued presence of drivers of violence as well as lacunas in security and governance that enable the group's operations to persist, but also its propaganda activities online and the narratives it has been promoting. The detrimental effects of the pandemic would likely fuel and amplify IS' narratives of resilience and endurance, as well as its ideological outreach. COVID-19 has caused increased economic hardship and growing social insecurity throughout the Middle East and Africa, as well as other parts of the world. This could set the stage for significant domestic unrest and broaden the potential for radicalisation, hence the possibility of affected countries and the international community at large facing a COVID-19-driven surge of extremism in the near future (Berman, 2020). With or without the pandemic, IS is far from dying. Regardless of setbacks, as long as drivers and enablers of violence, extremism and radicalisation persist, the threat of IS is here to stay.

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DISRUPTING INDONESIA'S VIOLENT EXTREMISM ONLINE ECOSYSTEM:
BEST PRACTICES FROM RUNNING A COMMUNITY WEBSITE

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ABSTRACT

Extremist groups in Indonesia exploit online communication platforms to create hype about a fantasy that violent armed struggle against the "enemies of Islam" is a "jihad" that requires urgent participation. Manipulative extremist recruiters prey on bored young people, many of whom are stuck indoors, frustrated and worried about their future. These at-risk people tend to spend their time online rather than offline and enjoy being "liked" on Facebook. Preventing their online radicalisation is why I set up a community website – www.ruangobrol.id – as a countering violent extremism (CVE) digital community platform. My experience running ruangobrol.id over the last two years shows that to disrupt the online ecosystem that sustains Indonesia's violent extremism organisations, we have to invest in a systematic initiative by combining three best practices: First, aim high – target the at-risk group that is hardest to persuade because they are motivated to accept extremist narratives both online and offline that serve their personal interests. People searching for love or a specific meaning of manhood, for example, have a tendency "to find arguments in favour of conclusions they want to believe to be stronger than arguments for conclusions they do not want to believe" – a process Kunda (1990) calls "motivated reasoning" – and are often resistant to most CVE efforts. Second, use the right tools – devise personal narratives of "credible voices", such as those of reformed terrorists, that connect with the target audience through emotional appeals rather than narrowly focused rebuttals about ideology that seek only to persuade (Atran, 2015). In other words, create content and provoke constructive discussion around issues related to violent extremism and its prevention with these "credible voices". Third, measure – make sure the campaign is reaching its target audience by using various indicators to measure its constructive impact and making tactical changes as required. In this article, I demonstrate that a coordinated effort between three unlikely parties – 1) content creators who are "credible voices" because they are reformed extremists who have themselves been through CVE communication workshops, 2) tech companies like Facebook, and 3) social enterprise initiatives run by former journalists – can substantially boost the awareness, engagement, and impact of counter-narrative campaigns by non-government organisations.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT IDEOLOGY

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2129 (2013) notes that there is an evolving nexus between terrorism and information and communications technologies, particularly the Internet, and the use of such technologies to commit and facilitate terrorist acts and facilitate such actions through their use to incite, recruit, fund or plan terrorist acts.

In the Indonesian context, since the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, digital media has played an important role in radicalising at-risk groups, especially youths and women. To capture this phenomenon, in 2015, I produced and directed a documentary film, *Jihad Selfie*, about the life of a bright student from Aceh, Tengku Akbar Maulana, who had received a scholarship from the Turkish government to further

his high school studies at Imam Khatib School in Kayseri, Turkey. While pursuing his academic and spiritual development in Turkey, which shares a long border with Syria, Akbar was exposed to daily news about the civil war in Syria from mainstream and social media. Two of his Indonesian friends crossed the border to serve under "the Caliphate" and posted photos online, boasting about their experiences, including handling weapons, donning military garb and eating horse meat. As a teenager, Akbar was attracted to the action and fashion his friends painted online. He started developing a desire to join them, anticipating a fascinating life of manhood and martyrdom. I met him serendipitously at a *kebab* shop in Kayseri, Turkey, while he was waiting for a school friend who had promised to cross the border into Syria with him. In that meeting, I encountered for the first time the dynamic process of online and offline radicalisation.

In another documentary film that I also produced in 2017, *Pengantin* (The Bride), I interviewed two Indonesian domestic helpers in Hong Kong and Taiwan who had been recruited by Indonesian ISIS supporters through social media. Being in foreign lands with a job that offers little opportunities for public interaction and socialisation, loneliness is a normal and natural consequence. Both helpers went online to connect with the outside world, seeking company, comfort and affection. They found "love" online, but were in fact being courted by predatory radicals and extremists in the cyber realm, recruiting and readying them to be suicide bombers. For example, having been radicalised online and chosen a husband from her pro-ISIS Telegram group in 2015, Ika Puspitasari, a radicalised Indonesian helper in Hong Kong, wanted to finance a terrorist operation back home. She identified talented bomb-makers through Facebook and Telegram. Luckily, her plans faltered when her husband was arrested.

The two documentary films demonstrate the following trends:

First, the potential audience for violent extremist propaganda in Indonesia has evolved beyond the traditional recruitment pools such as *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools) and small *pengajian* (study groups). The Internet's accessibility, speed, anonymity, and inexpensiveness have allowed for the decentralisation of extremist preaching.

Second, those with offline psychological issues such as teenagers like Akbar searching for manhood, and female migrant workers in Hong Kong and Taiwan dealing with feelings of loneliness, connect with online violent extremist propaganda because it helps them create an online collective identity through the "echo-chamber" phenomenon, a condition that helps reinforce individual grievances and ideology and provides the intent and capability to commit acts of terrorism.

Third, terrorism is rooted in a belief in an extreme ideology. If we want to prevent acts of terror from happening again, we should strive to prevent the young from being won over by the messages of extremists. However, if we place a heavy emphasis on ideological beliefs, especially ideology derived from overseas, as the primary source of radicalisation and leave out other well-evidenced explanations for behavioural change, such as identification with a group, socialisation and the effect of civil conflicts, we run the risk of missing the opportunity to explore myriad ways of disrupting the violent extremism online ecosystems.

In 2013, a CVE study conducted by a group of former intelligence and counterterrorism officials observed that "while governments across the world have had many notable successes against extremist and terrorist groups, … in one key area they have fallen short: in countering the narratives that inspire individuals to join such groups in the first place. This is costly. For as long as extremist narratives continue to inspire new recruits to join movements, the battle will continue for generations to come" (QIASS, 2013). The extremist narratives have always been online, but the problem has grown. Yet we appear no closer to answering this question — how far and in what ways can government, social media companies and civil society disrupt the violent extremism online ecosystem?

Existing government policies to prevent the further spread of online extremist propaganda are to simply remove or block them (Costa 2015). While this approach helps to reduce the distribution of the propaganda temporarily, it does nothing to address the root causes of demand that is driven by structural and religious grievances and theological exhortations. Is there an alternative way

to disrupt violent extremism online ecosystems by proactively preventing or countering its appeal through engagement with individuals and communities that are flirting with the ideology? Will counter-narratives work with at-risk individuals with "motivated reasoning"? These are individuals who are not just seeking out and interpreting information in a way that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs while ignoring or rejecting information that casts doubt upon their beliefs (what psychologists call "confirmation bias"), but are also able to *reason* their way to conclusions that agree with their worldview, while critiquing information they do not wish to accept. This is a phenomenon known as "motivated reasoning", which Kunda (1990) defines as the "tendency to find arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe to be stronger than arguments for conclusions we do not want to believe." He also notes that "people motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer. They draw the desired conclusion only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it." And yet, in reality, their motivations make them more likely to discredit information they do not wish to believe. Thus Akbar Maulana, a scholarship student in Turkey, fascinated by visions of masculine heroism conjured by friends who had joined ISIS, convinced himself that it would be more noble to die a martyr on the battlefield than to ignore Islamic teaching – that he needed his parents' blessings to go to Syria because, as he told a friend trying to recruit him for ISIS, "the blessings of God depends on the blessings of your parents".

Cases like Akbar and Ika Puspitasari show us that extremist narratives tap into more than ideological beliefs, that they tap into the psychological needs of their target audience and ring true because they offer them something they want and can justify to themselves.

OVERVIEW OF THE RUANGOBROL.ID PROJECT

If extremists have successfully employed social media to spread their messages on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, we should also be countering them on social media. We can look at how creative extremists use technology to spread their ideology by monitoring their videos and reading their tweets and online posts. However, even with credible counter narratives, our interventions will not be effective with at-risk

audiences with "motivated reasoning" if we do not also take into account the significance of offline contact in the radicalisation process. Thus, when I set up the Ruangobrol.id community platform, I decided that it would also hold offline activities to increase the chances that its online content will resonate with the very communities they are meant to influence. The offline engagement with targeted communities also provides a real and intimate intervention with "credible voices".

Reducing the Backlash from Extremists with "Motivated Reasoning"

The idea of having CVE digital ecosystem development is grounded in the social psychological theory of "motivated reasoning" that argues that individuals who are strongly committed to specific causes tend to avoid contact with information or people who can change their commitment. It also means that overtly attacking or denigrating the opposing group in interventions can antagonise individuals who identify with that group, making them less receptive to persuasion, and pushing group supporters to the more extreme fringe. With this understanding in mind, the Ruangobrol.id project tries to reduce the backlash from the target audience who are more likely to confirm their "prior beliefs" in processing information, especially from an outside group. Therefore, Ruangobrol.id employs reformed terrorists as a "credible voice" in anticipation of that backlash. I am mindful that there are burning security questions that must be answered here, such as: How do you find them? What kind of criteria do you use to consider an individual a " credible voice"? Once you find them, how do you ensure they are not just hibernating, biding their time before future involvement in terrorism? While they may not be directly involved in any terrorism, might they be secretly advising recruits to act on their behalf?

Sim (2013) has warned that working with former terrorists is a "delicate art" akin to walking a tightrope. Part of the reason is that terrorist recidivism is still a perennial issue in Indonesia. In a recent report, the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) stated that the recidivism rate for 825 convicted terrorists released between 2002 and the end of May

2020 was 11.39 percent. Their concerns are legitimate. However, I have been helping former terrorists integrate into society peacefully for years through a foundation that I established in 2008, the Institute for International Peace Building. My efforts to integrate them, inspired by Horgan's 2009 accounts of why some terrorists walked away from their groups, is not based on a strict binary division between the radical and the mundane, but on a more fluid and qualitative measure of the extent to which former members of violent groups are prone to re-engage in violence. We have to look at disengagement along a continuum because while someone might disengage in the sense of a reduction or cessation in the use of violence as a method, it does not mean that individual has abandoned his or her violent ideological beliefs and connections with extremist groups.

My first step in dealing with former terrorists is to employ them in my social enterprise, a restaurant called Dapoer Bistik Solo. This "social intervention" aims to get them to interact with people whom they would not typically meet, such as non-Muslim women. These new positive social interactions of meeting and interacting with various people make it harder for the jihadists to lure them back. Gradually, these formers are steered away from violence through their own efforts and the support they receive from others, including the Indonesian government.

With their experiences as former members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), they have the credibility to challenge and debunk narratives that promote terrorism as an honourable and exciting life path. It is in this context that I call the graduates of my integration programme, "credible voices". As the anthropologist Scott Atran (2015) says, "there is no shortage of credible voices ready to engage globally."

Choosing "Credible Voices"

My first credible voices were Mahmudi Hariono alias Yusuf, a JI member from East Java who was recruited for military training with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern Philippines in early 2000 (Romadhoni, 2020), and Jack Harun, the former right-hand man of the late Noordin M Top, a Malaysian JI member

who masterminded several terrorist attacks in Indonesia (Zebua, 2020).

Having two credible voices onboard the Ruangobrol.id project was a good start because they recommended other reformed terrorists to join us. This technique is akin to the Multi-Level Marketing Approach of encouraging members to recruit other members. I also welcomed Arif Tuban when he was released in 2018, to join my workshops (Hadirin, 2019). Arif, who ran one of the first extremist websites in Indonesia, learned about Ruangobrol.id from Kharis Hadirin, a reformed JI member whose main job with the project is to identify and look after newly released terrorist convicts like Arif.

To provide gender balance in the initiative, I asked 19 year old Nurshadrina Khairadhania (also known as Dhania) to work with me. From Batam, Dhania joined ISIS in Syria with her family in early 2015. They managed to escape from ISIS captivity in August 2017. Working closely with the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, I helped them evacuate from Iraq.

In a series of interviews for my documentary film, *Seeking The Imam* (2020), Dhania said that the mundane daily regime of junior high school carved an emptiness in her heart, then "grey-washed" her spirit before creating a vacuum in her soul. Starved of attention and guidance from her parents, she began feeding off cyberspace, following the life stories of other people, when she stumbled across the accounts of girls who had joined ISIS. After her escape from Syria and return to Indonesia, she wanted to be part of the Ruangobrol.id project to teach others not to make the same mistakes as her.

I believe that using the personal stories of these credible voices can be effective in reducing backlash from the "motivated reasoning" audience for the following reasons:

1. As formers, they have some degree of legitimacy because of their connections and understanding of the context of violent extremism. That context includes, among other things, social dynamics and grievances, local means of communication and the recruitment tactics of violent extremist organisations.

2. They can provide insider knowledge of the dynamics inside their former networks, especially the group aesthetics and culture. They can, for example, identify the subtle differences between: 1) those who are attracted to the ISIS narrative which has a strong focus on promoting camaraderie and group identity which appeals to young Muslims largely ignorant of their religion, and 2) Al-Qaeda inspired groups like Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) that tends to portray itself as a more ideologically mature and religiously authoritative group.

3. Their personal stories can generate more emotional appeal than narrowly focused ideological arguments that seek to persuade through rebuttal. In the "post-trust" environment, objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Thus, the use of generic counter-narrative slogans such as "Terrorism is un-Islamic" or "Islam is a religion of peace" do not resonate well, especially among potential recruits such as youths who need authentic personal stories and down-to-earth and realistic references that they can easily relate to.

Some observers often make overgeneralisations, conflating religious piety with religious intolerance and violence. We thus need to get moral support from grassroots Muslim organisations, especially if we are to encourage these credible voices to expose the hypocrisy of extremists who lay claim to true Islamic piety. I therefore invited 10 ustadz (male religious teachers) and 10 ustadzah (female religious teachers) from the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia – Nahdhatul Ulama[1] and Muhammadiyah[2] - to attend a CVE communication workshop I organised in March 2018.

This CVE workshop was designed to teach participants to produce CVE narratives on social media and existing conventional channels of communications such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines, to disrupt the violent extremism online ecosystem. The use of religious teachers and reformed terrorists as credible voices for CVE purposes is driven by the understanding that they have insights and knowledge, but they are often not well trained as effective communicators on social media. More importantly, they often do not have a platform to voice their compelling stories.

STARTING AN INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

Community ownership of CVE issues is vital for maintaining the longevity of a project. Therefore, during the last day of the communication workshop we ran in March 2008, I encouraged all the participants to think about having a platform to stay in touch. Finally, they agreed to create a website called "Ruangobrol", an Indonesian term meaning chat room. The website, they suggested, would serve as an interactive platform for the workshop's graduates to educate those at-risk groups through their personal stories. In addition, the website would be equipped with a chat facility to gather information from the grassroots.

To keep the momentum going, I also asked the participants to upgrade the platform's role as an alternative online platform into an organiser of a series of popular discussions related to issues on radicalism and terrorism. In other words, the project would combine both online and offline strategy in this CVE space. The "Theory of Change" that I urged them to adopt was straightforward:

By publishing engaging content on PVE/CVE issues at least two times in a week, organising offline discussions on PVE/CVE issues at least six times a year, conducting regular research

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[1]Nahdlatul Ulama is a traditionalist Sunni Islam movement in Indonesia that follows the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. NU was established on January 31, 1926 in Surabaya as a response to the rise of Wahabism in Saudi Arabia and Islamic modernism in Indonesia.
[2]Since its establishment in 1912, Muhammadiyah has adopted a reformist platform mixing religious and secular education, primarily as a way to promote the upward mobility of Muslims in a 'modern' community and to purify Indonesian Islam of local syncretic practices.

and analysis on PVE/CVE issues, and producing a short video on PVE/CVE, Ruangobrol.id as community platform will improve public awareness on radicalisation and terrorism which may increase public participation in efforts to prevent radical content in media.

Know Your Audience

In its first strategic move, the Ruangobrol.id project team identified the target audience and its dynamics so that we will know if behaviour change occurs in the targeted group. This behavioural change could be individual, such as in critical thinking, or civic behaviours such as appreciation of differences in views and understanding of the world. Accordingly, the project managers regularly monitor Google Analytics. The result of this monitoring will advise us on the contents or themes that resonate with the target audience.

In the year ending 2020, the audience of the Ruangobrol.id website is as shown in Figure 1. Of the half of viewers whose age is stated, almost 30 per cent are in the 18 to 34 year old range. The number of male and female viewers is roughly similar.

However, as radicalisation is not gender neutral – men and women experience the process of radicalisation differently – the team decided on two approaches:

1. To produce gendered personal and straightforward contents that resonate with millennials and which respond to trending social media issues, such as tips on getting a Korean boyfriend.
2. To insert digital literacy messaging into the stories, such how to do safe online dating.

We anticipated that these two approaches would grab the attention of our young audience.

Content Creation and the Use of Search Engine Optimiser (SEO)

As a community-based website, Ruangobrol.id has to keep evolving. It has to adapt to the development of radicalism issues and the mood of the audience. Hence, in September 2019, the team began to use a new plugin called Yoast SEO (search engine optimiser). SEO is the process of optimising online content that allows the search engine to put the content as a top result for searches of a specific keyword. For this to work, each content creator has to think of a popular topic, modify the title and adjust the first paragraph.

This strategy helped to increase the traffic to Ruangobrol.id, especially from users who search on Google. In addition, using insights from Google Trend (see Figure 2), the team was able to increase its effectiveness in using YOAST.

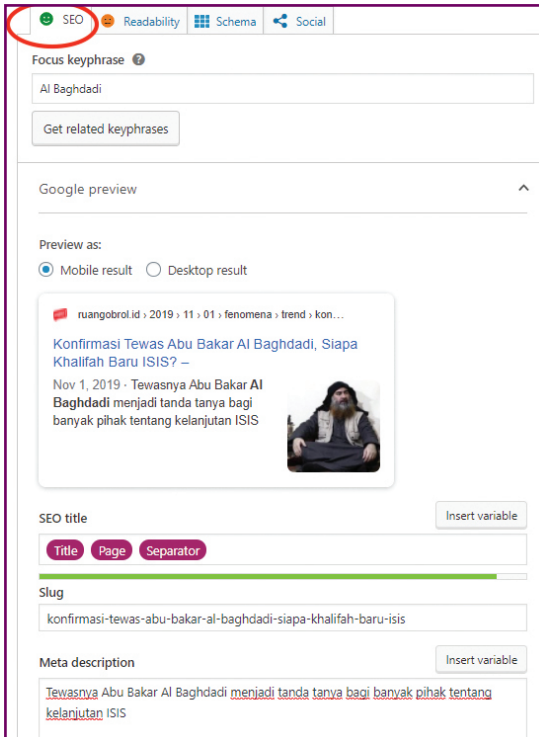Figure 1. Age and Gender of Ruangobrol.id audience
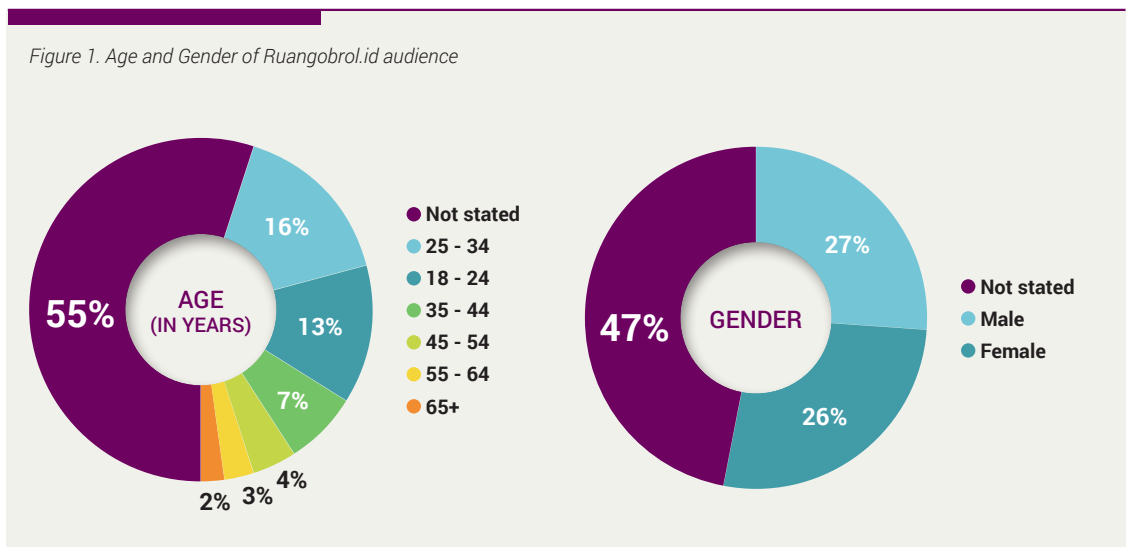
Figure 2. Google Trend Analysis Results from Use of SEO

As a provider of alternative narratives on radicalism and terrorism, it is important to create content that is easy to digest, emphasising the personal narrative of a credible voice. Complicated and "serious" content is not suitable for Ruangobrol's millennial audience. Starting in August 2019, the team developed a specific strategy in content creation. Every week, the team creates a table of simple themes for the week's content production. These themes are the team's interpretations of big and serious themes such as radicalism, peace, conflict, etc. The implementation of this strategy helped Ruangobrol.id produce more than 800 articles in one year. The strategy also boosted the viewership of Ruangobrol.id articles. The consistency of its content production also placed Ruangobrol.id in a better position in Alexa Rank (see Figure 3) than say, the National Counter Terrorism Agency BNPT's website damailahindonesiaku.com, which is not ranked in Alexa because its site traffic is too low.

Use of the Chat Facility

The Ruangobrol.id website is equipped with a chat facility. We use social media to promote the benefits of using it. The number of individuals who reach out to our team each month to discuss their concerns
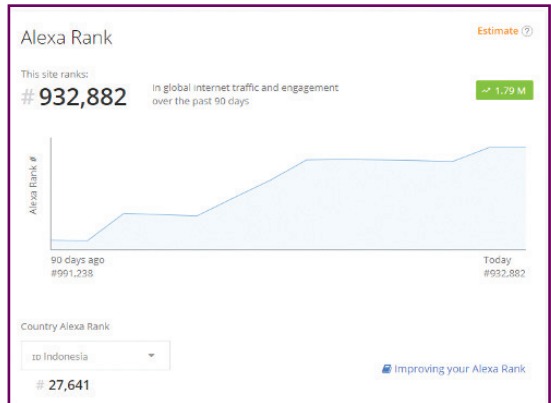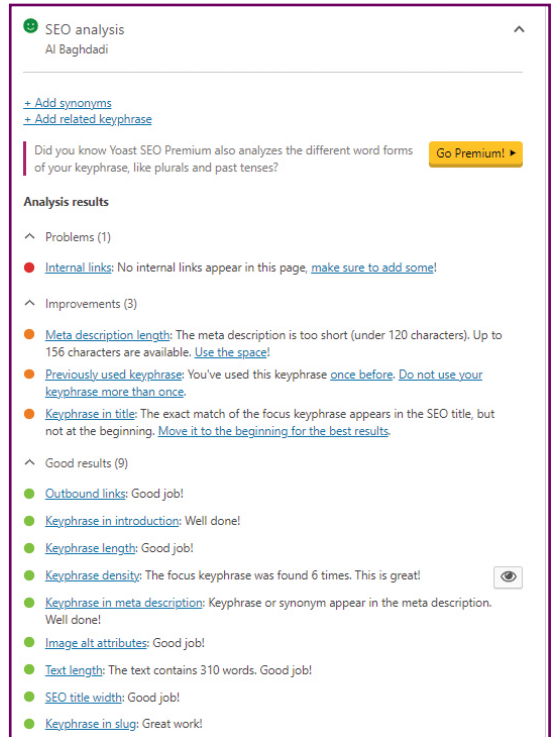

Figure 3. Alexa Rank of Ruangobrol.id over a period of three months (May – June 2020)

have ranged from 2 to 21. Although the numbers seem small, the information gleaned has been interesting and the team has been able to follow up on specific cases. For example, a woman named Yulia Rachmawati complained that the Indonesian Police Counter Terrorism unit Densus 88 had captured her relative and began engaging in conversation with a Ruangobrol team member when he explained the legal process to her (see Figure 4). This chat is concrete evidence that the website can have a direct impact on the targeted audience.
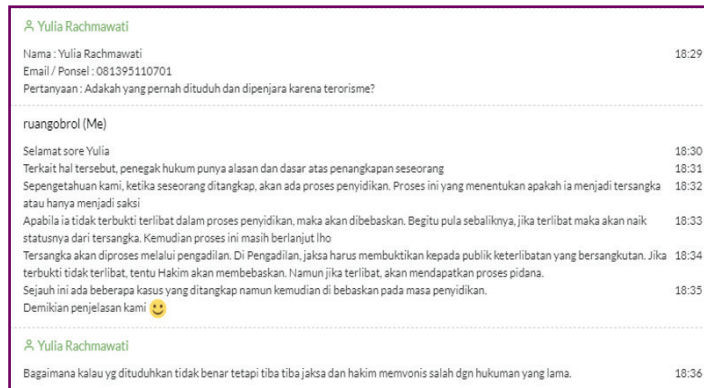
Figure 4. Extract of Chat between Yulia Rachmawati and Ruangobrol team member
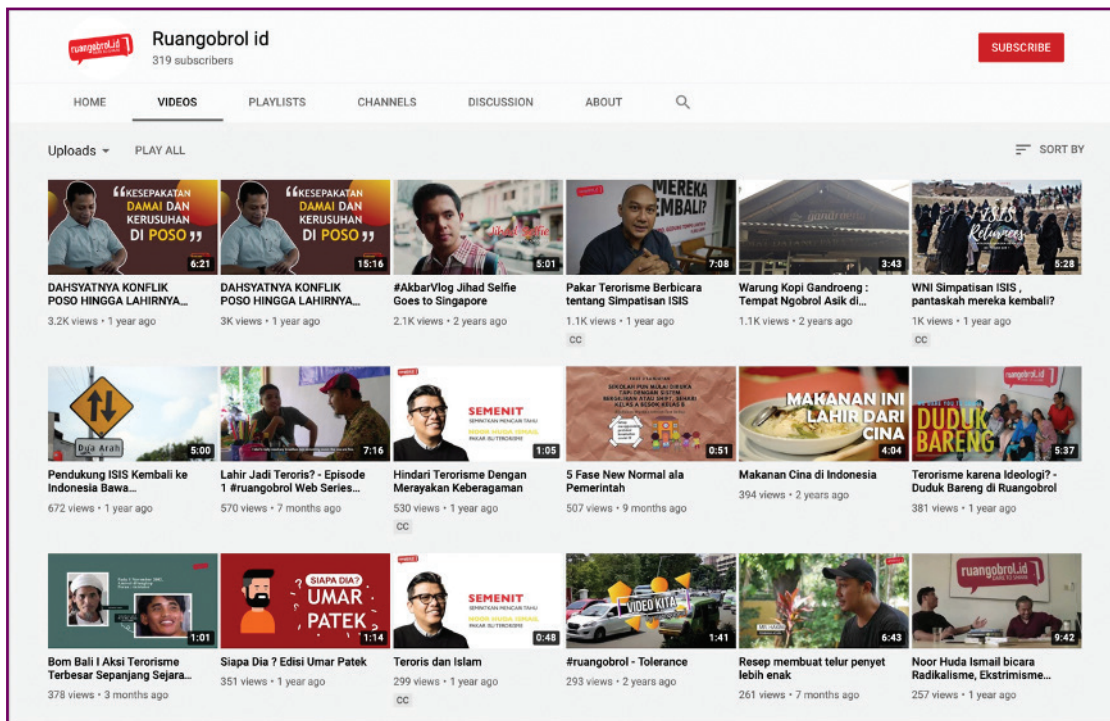

Figure 5. Partial List of Most Popular Videos on the Ruangobrol.id Channel on YouTube

Ruangobrol's chat facility also received private messages from an Indonesian woman in a Syrian refugee camp. Through this direct contact, we managed to earn her trust and gained much useful engagement, including her willingness to write for our website. Our website was also contacted by three families of other Indonesians now in a camp in Idlib, Syria. A family member asked us for advice because his family was accused of associating with terrorists. A father shared his concern that his daughter, who always locked herself in her room, was becoming radicalised. This father had read articles on Ruangobrol.id written by one of our reformed terrorists.

A Dedicated YouTube Channel

To widen our outreach, we also started a Ruangobrol.id YouTube channel to which we add new content every week. Creating videos has the advantage of allowing the team to discuss radicalism in a more detailed manner while being more 'entertaining'. In its first year, Ruangobrol.id uploaded over 90 videos on YouTube, using various formats to maximise available resources and our network. One of our top videos is a video-log made by Akbar Maulana while in Singapore in 2019 to take part in a discussion on *Jihad Selfie* (see Figure 5).

In producing videos for YouTube, the team includes three important groups of people: local communities, credible voices, and experts. The interactions with and appreciation of the local community is important to show the public that civil society is concerned and can play an important role in promoting peace and in CVE efforts. We also hope that such videos will lead to new collaborations.

The involvement of credible voices is crucial. They are the messengers of our alternative narratives, to which their first-hand experiences add credibility. Ruangobrol.id therefore creates space for them to speak up and share their experiences, especially about the lies of ISIS. Videos featuring former terrorists are thus promoted on social media to increase audience interaction. The Ruangobrol team also conducts research and experimentation on message delivery to maximise the impact of the credible voices.

Last but not least, the experts, like Indonesian researcher Nava Nuraniah who has studied and can explain how extremist groups exploit social media, play a vital role in giving weight to our messaging. Their analysis helps the audience to understand the core issues. The objective of the Ruangobrol.id YouTube channel is to give a proper and fair explanation of radicalism. The experts help us achieve this objective.

PROMOTING RUANGOBROL.ID ON SOCIAL MEDIA

More than half of the population of Indonesia (around 150 million people out of over 260 million) are on social media. The average Indonesian spends 3 hours and 26 minutes logged on to social media every day compared to the global average of 2 hours and 22 minutes (Kemp, 2021). We thus decided that social media platforms should be the primary vehicle to promote Ruangobrol.id as a website and its contents. Through Facebook and other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, the team interacts with our target audience. To strengthen the Ruangobrol.id presence, we also paid for promotion.

Promotion is always useful in increasing traffic, whether on social media or to the website. Figure 6 shows the impact of paid promotion on traffic to the Ruangobrol.id website – the spikes in June and October 2019 followed paid promotions on Facebook for specific Ruangobrol.id events at a cost of $5-10 per event. Since the website was then still not well known, we followed up with paid promotions from January to October 2020 and saw spikes in viewership in March and April 2020.

However, advertising comes with a price. The more we pay to promote the website, the more visitors we get. However, it is not an organic process. We therefore decided not to be dependent on paid promotion, but to use it strategically. In 2020, the team created a persona to post exciting articles from Ruangobrol.id on Facebook, along with engaging captions. As Figures 6 and 7 show, organic traffic to Ruangobrol.id began spiking in February 2020, indicating that the Facebook persona was having an impact soon after its introduction. It also indicates that the team's consistency in posting high quality content on social media is attracting viewers.

FACEBOOK'S "REDIRECT INITIATIVE"

On 9 October 2020, Facebook selected Ruangobrol.id for the tech company's "Redirect Initiative". This initiative seeks to "combat violent extremism by redirecting hate and violence- related search terms towards resources, education and outreach groups that can help" (Facebook Counterspeech website). What it means is that when people search on Facebook for terms related to jihadism in Indonesia, they are directed to Ruangobrol.id. As shown in Figure 8, when someone searches for "thagut", a term commonly used by Indonesian extremist organisations to refer to the government and police as evil oppressors, that person is directed to Ruangobrol.id with the message: "Keep our community safe. Some of these keywords can sometimes be linked to dangerous individuals or groups. Facebook works with organizations that can help prevent the spread of hatred and violence in the real world. Learn more at ruangobrol.id."
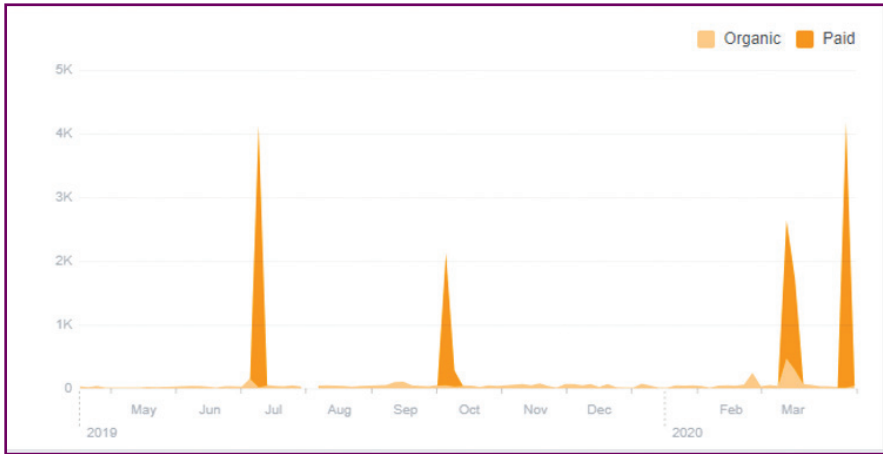
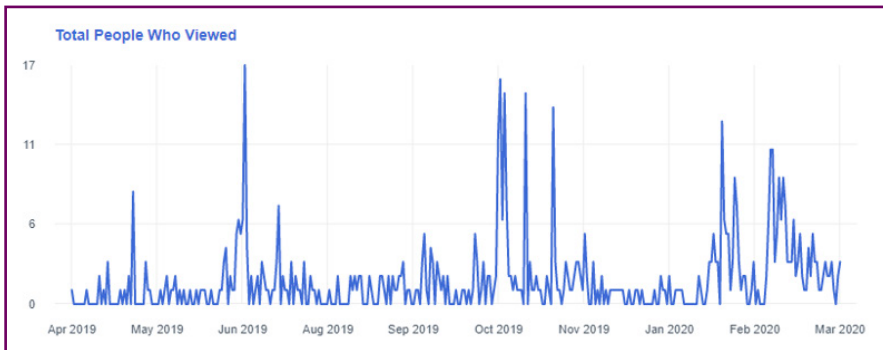*Figure 6. Impact of Paid Promotion on Traffic to Ruangobrol.id*

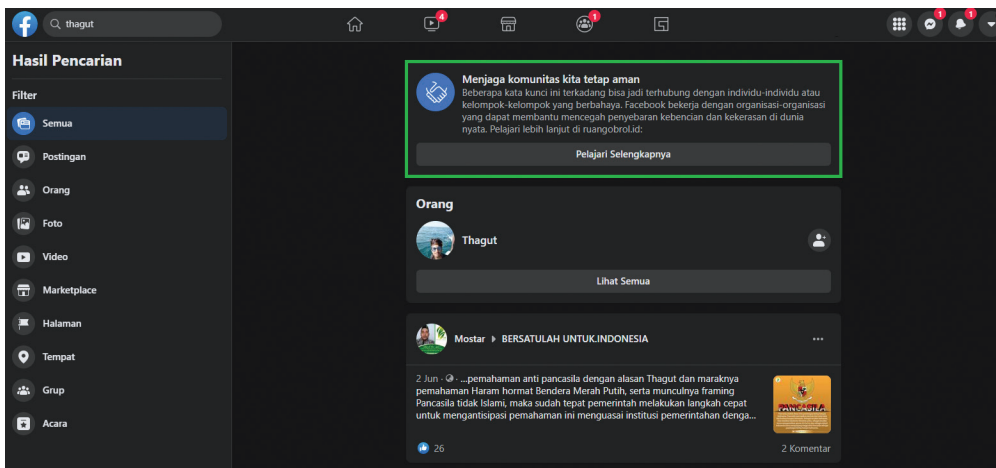*Figure 7. Ruangobrol.id Viewership numbers from April 2019 to March 2020*

Figure 8. Search Results on Facebook for "thagut"

As part of our collaboration with Facebook, we provided a list of keywords used by Indonesian jihadists. Facebook informed us two weeks later that 48,000 people had searched for the keywords during that two-week span.

Facebook is hugely popular in Indonesia, and while the company's mechanisms have become better at spotting and removing extremist accounts, the platform remains, for the Ruangobrol.id project, a productive environment for identifying potential 'clients'. Our team at Ruangobrol looks at a combination of what an individual posts, their friend lists and the way they engage with discussions on other posts. Referencing an ISIS magazine or video is considered solid evidence of extremist views.

We classify such individuals into four categories: Red (potentially dangerous); Orange (already quite extreme); Yellow (becoming more involved); and Green (mostly just curious). We then attempt to connect with those who are between green and a darkish yellow, initiating contact by praising an argument they made, or asking to learn from them.

STRENGTHENING ONLINE IMPACT THROUGH OFFLINE ACTIVITIES

To maintain and to strengthen the online presence of Ruangobrol.id, we also carried out discussions offline. At such events, Ruangobrol.id would invite various stakeholders to provide feedback on issues that are topical and relevant to the public's interest. For example, in July 2019, Ruangobrol, in collaboration with *Tempo Magazine*, a well-respected and national magazine in Indonesia, organised an event in the *Tempo* office to discuss the repatriation of Indonesian citizens from Syria (see photo below). Speakers included the Head of BNPT, politicians from Commission I of the Indonesian Parliament, and officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and the Coordinating Ministry of Politics, Law and Security, and *Tempo* journalist, Hussein Abri, who had covered the issue in Syria. In the audience were students, the general public, researchers and journalists.

Given the importance of the topic, Ruangobrol.id also used paid promotion to boost awareness of the event on YouTube. It resulted in thousands of viewers tuning in, as well as extensive coverage by the national media. The Ruangobrol team also live tweeted the event. As Figure 9 shows, engagement with Ruangobrol on Twitter increases whenever it stages physical events, such as in May 2019, July 2019, and March 2020.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF RUANGOBROL.ID

When we set up Ruangobrol.id, we established benchmarks for visitors and views, our KPIs so to speak. Since April 2019, there has been a gradual increase in visitors and views as the team used

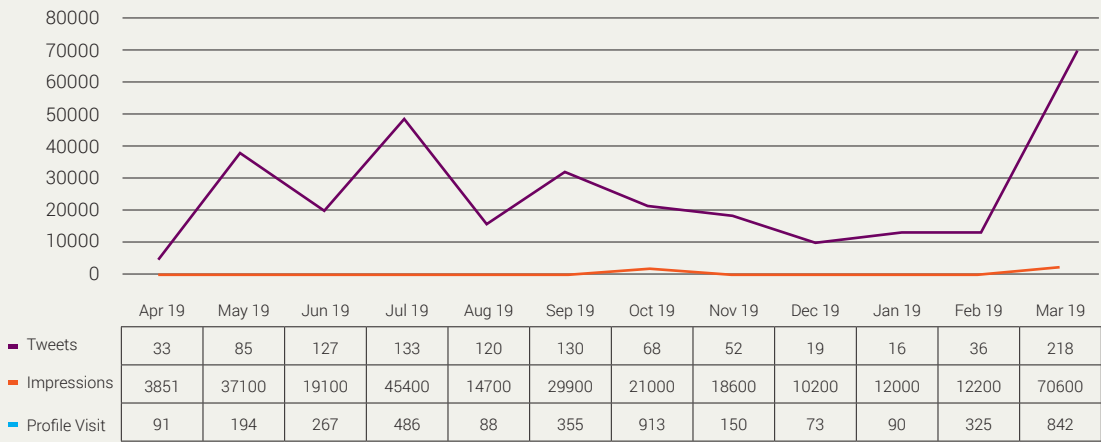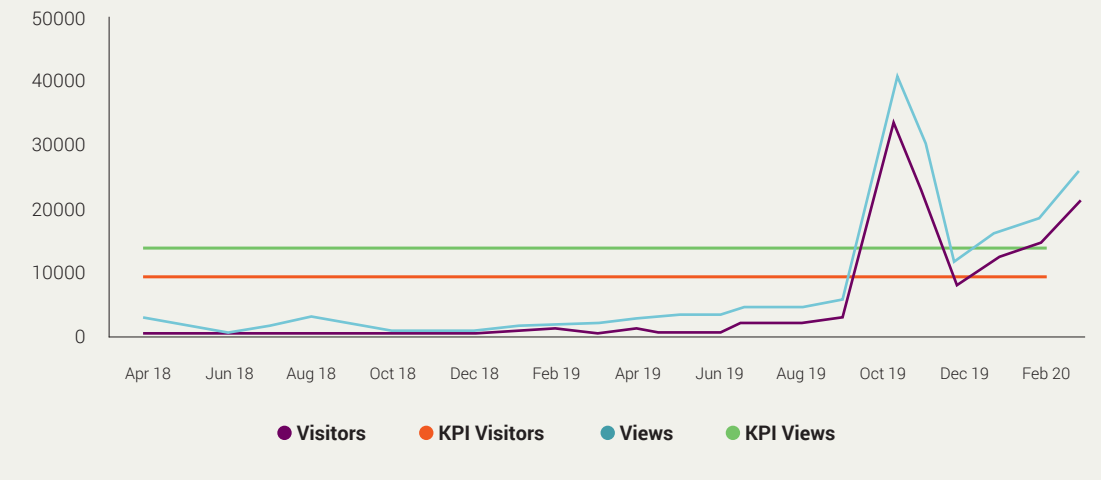Figure 9. Engagements with Ruangobrol.id on Twitter

	Apr 19	May 19	Jun 19	Jul 19	Aug 19	Sep 19	Oct 19	Nov 19	Dec 19	Jan 19	Feb 19	Mar 19
■ Tweets	33	85	127	133	120	130	68	52	19	16	36	218
■ Impressions	3851	37100	19100	45400	14700	29900	21000	18600	10200	12000	12200	70600
■ Profile Visit	91	194	267	486	88	355	913	150	73	90	325	842

Figure 10. Traffic to Ruangobrol.id
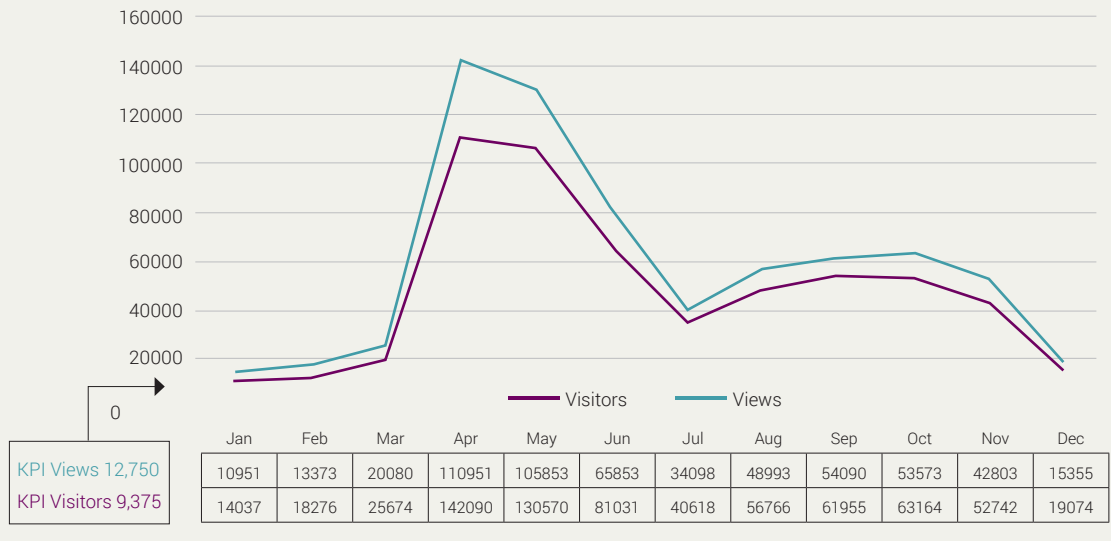
● Visitors ● KPI Visitors ● Views ● KPI Views

search engine optimiser to develop content themes based on Google trends. In September 2019, we exceeded our KPIs of 9,375 visitors and 12,750 views. As Figure 10 shows, there was also a significant spike in visitors and views in October 2019, when the number of visitors shot up to almost 35,000.

By monitoring traffic, the team also found an interesting development. One article, *Vagabond Episode 16: Bin dan Kepentingan Politik yang Belum Selesai* ("Vagabond Episode 16: Intelligence Agency and Unfinished Political Interests"), has been attracting new visitors to Ruangobrol.id

long after its original publication in November 2019. The article does not directly discuss the issue of radicalisation; it is a review of a Korean drama series. The team had decided to create contents featuring Korea because we know that most millennials are fans of Korean culture. In the Google search engine, this Vagabond article remains in fourth place when people search for information on this Korean drama series.

Tapping into trending discussions and popular culture (K-Pop or K-Drama) is thus an effective way to attract traffic to Ruangobrol.id. In November 2019, when a story suggesting a

Figure 11. Ruangobrol.id Viewership Statistics in 2020

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Visitors	10951	13373	20080	110951	105853	65853	34098	48993	54090	53573	42803	15355
Views	14037	18276	25674	142090	130570	81031	40618	56766	61955	63164	52742	19074

KPI Views 12,750
KPI Visitors 9,375

scandal involving the owner of Ammar TV, a popular Indonesian da'wah channel on YouTube, went viral, the Ruangobrol team produced an article titled *Layangan Putus Bikin Ammar TV Hilang 11 Juta Subscriber* ("Ammar TV lost 11 million subscribers due to Broken Kite"). It attracted more than 4,000 viewers to Ruangobrol.id.
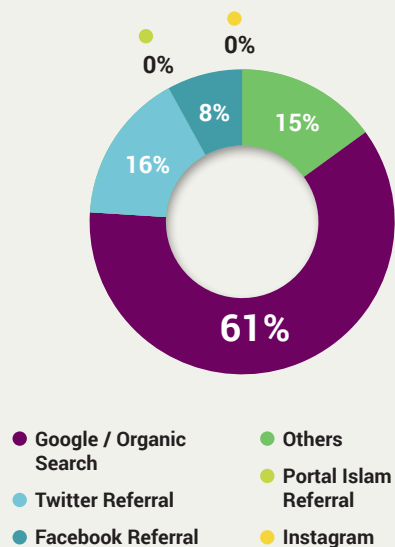
These findings suggest that a community website like Ruangobrol.id can keep traction through three major themes: Terrorism (mostly when an incident happens), K-pop or K-Culture, and whatever is trending on Google.

Since then our viewership numbers in 2020 have exceeded all our KPIs, as Figure 11 shows.

Source of Visitors

This has become increasingly apparent in the second year of Ruangobrol.id, when the majority of visitors to the website arrived via Google search as opposed to a 'referral' from Facebook or Twitter, as Figure 12 shows. Regular uploading of a new article every day helps the website to be visible in Google search. In addition, several viral articles from Ruangobrol.id are also helping the public to find the website.

Figure 12. Source of Visitors to Ruangobrol.id in 2020 by Search Engines

- Google / Organic Search
- Twitter Referral
- Facebook Referral
- Others
- Portal Islam Referral
- Instagram

Monitoring by Google Analytics also shows us that visitors to Ruangobrol.id come from all over Indonesia, as well as from abroad (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Locations of Ruangobrol.id Visitors

JAKARTA	SURABAYA	BANDUNG	MEDAN	DEPOK	MAKASSAR
45.291	23.455	7.529	6.495	5.408	5.346
(NOT SET)	SURAKARTA	SEMARANG	PALEMBANG	BEKASI	PEKANBARU
12.536	2.683	2.369	2.320	1.851	1.544
BATAM	DENPASAR	YOGYAKARTA	TANGERANG	SOUTH TANGERANG	MALANG
1.382	1.340	1.143	1.083	1.074	1.073
SAMARINDA	UNITED STATES	SINGAPORE	MALAYSIA	AUSTRALIA	JAPAN
1.004	2.897	788	785	332	176
GERMANY	INDIA	TAIWAN	UK	NETHERLANDS	HONGKONG
171	156	139	136	128	123
SAUDI ARABIA	SYRIA	THAILAND	VIETNAM	TURKEY	SOUTH KOREA
87	85	85	60	56	53

CONCLUSION

Running a community website in Indonesia for over two years has shown me that there is an opportunity to deal with the problem of online radicalisation, and that the solution may come from an unlikely community – reformed terrorists and even disenchanted ISIS fighters. They can also be valuable sources of intelligence, some having returned disillusioned from jihad elsewhere. These former fighters should be encouraged to deter others from joining jihad abroad, to share their stories through the same media that others are using to promote ISIS.

History has shown that purely hard-line approaches to returning jihadis fighters usually backfire. Many of al-Qaeda's leaders found themselves in Egyptian prisons after returning from Afghanistan in the 1990s. The tough treatment of fundamentalists by Arab dictators and monarchs in the past set the stage for future security threats.

In the end, there are few good solutions. But the worst would be a hard-line response that compromises the principles of justice and human rights that mark a free society. If that happens, we will only be providing the likes of ISIS with the jihadists' dream vision of an ongoing fight between the global soldiers of their so-called caliphate, and a hypocritical, avenging West.

Having "credible voices" alone is not enough. We must be able to curate a narrative that will be appealing to youths who spend most of their time online on social media. Through the Ruangobrol.id initiative, we learned that each social media platform has different strengths and weaknesses for disseminating content to particular at-risk audiences across the radicalisation spectrum, from upstream (with

almost no signs of radicalisation) to downstream (more signs of radicalisation).

More can be done to scale this pilot initiative by generating more data to help understand the impact and explore the possibility of identifying and redirecting at-risk audiences searching for toxic materials online. The initiative shows that this resource intensive experiment can make headway, but due to the nature of the work, progress is piecemeal – especially when you are learning as you go.

Initiatives like ruangobrol.id that push the boundaries should be encouraged. "Say-no-to-terrorism" memes usually do not disrupt the flow of recruitment online. Thus, a combination of online and offline social interventions needs to be implemented with a more rigorous monitoring and evaluation programme, but the field remains fundamentally experimental.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noor Huda Ismail
joined the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University as a Visiting Fellow after completing his PhD at Monash University, Melbourne, on an Australian Award Scholarship. In 2005, he was awarded the United Kingdom's Chevening Scholarship to pursue a Master's degree at St Andrew's University, Scotland. While conducting fieldwork in Northern Ireland, he had an epiphany after meeting with a local activist trying to integrate former terrorists into society. On his return to Indonesia in 2008, he established the Institute for International Peace Building to help the social rehabilitation and re-integration of convicted Indonesian terrorists by employing them upon their release in social enterprises such as Dapoer Bistik Solo, a cafe he set up in Central Java. In 2013, he was elected an Ashoka Fellow by the Washington DC-based Ashoka foundation for being a leading social entrepreneur championing innovative new ideas that transform society. A writer and former journalist who has written several books and commentaries for leading newspapers, Ismail is also a documentary producer whose works include *Jihad Selfie, Pengantin* (The Bride), *Seeking The Imam*, and *Cubs of the Caliphate*.

Ismail's work has been informed by a personal background that allows him to obtain an insider-outsider perspective. Born in Yogyakarta in Indonesia, and brought up by a Muslim father who was raised in a Catholic family, and a mother whose father was a puppet master and told him Hindu stories, Ismail was sent to the al-Mukmin Islamic boarding school in Solo, Central Java, when he was 12 to become a 'good Muslim'. His parents did not know then that since its founding in 1972, the school, better known as Ngruki, had become an important fount for the cultural formation of militants and promoted the radical ideology of Darul Islam (DI) espoused by two of its founders, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. After graduating from Ngruki, Ismail remained affiliated with DI but left the movement when an internal split in 1993 led to the birth of Jamaah Islamiyah. He continued his studies at Gadjah Mada University and the State Islamic University in Yogjakarta, Central Java. Working as a special correspondent for the *Washington Post* from 2002-2005, he was shocked to discover that his Ngruki roommate was one of the Bali bombers. Since then, the question of why a regular individual and Indonesian citizen would become involved in terrorism has been a very personal one for him.

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