



International Migration and Terrorism in Indonesia: Security Challenges and Government Policy

Machya Astuti Dewi*, Melaty Anggraini, Yuseptia Angretnowati, Herlina Jayadianti
Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Received : September 15,
2025

Revised : September 23,
2025

Accepted : September 25,
2025

Online : October 15,
2025

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of international migration on the spread of terrorism in Indonesia. It also analyzes how Indonesia manages international migration while addressing terrorism and fulfilling its humanitarian and security responsibilities. The study uses qualitative methods and in-depth analysis to explore migration trends, terrorist incidents, and government policies. The results indicate that migration poses both a security risk and a vital part of the economy. The study highlights how Indonesia addresses this issue by implementing coordinated plans and collaborating with other countries. The study also shows that weak migration pathways and screening systems allow individuals with links to terrorism to move from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines through regional networks. Regarding the problem, Indonesia faces challenges in implementing security policies due to the lack of technology, the weak governance system, and challenges in balancing national security with human rights and the economic benefits of international migration.

Keywords *International Migration, Terrorism, Security Challenge, Regional Cooperation, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

The strategic location of Indonesia, situated between the Indian and Pacific Ocean maritime routes, and its archipelagic nature, with 17,000 islands, create difficulties for managing international migration and counterterrorism operations. As the world's fourth most populous nation, Indonesia serves as a migration hub because it receives and sends out international migrants through labour migration, refugee movements, and illegal border crossings. Furthermore, the September 11th attacks in 2001 established a new direction for worldwide counter terrorism operations. Indonesia has faced multiple terrorist attacks throughout its history starting with the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings followed by the 2003 JW Marriott Hotel bombing and the 2009 JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotel bombings in Jakarta and the 2016 Thamrin Jakarta bombing and subsequent ISIS-affiliated attacks including the 2018 Surabaya church bombing and the 2019 Medan bombing and the 2021 Makassar church bombing (Harruma & Nailufar, 2022). The terrorist attacks in Indonesia have created essential inquiries about how international migration patterns contribute to terrorism growth in the country.

Indonesia obtains substantial remittances from millions of migrant workers who work abroad. The number of migrant workers abroad reached 297,434 in 2024, according to the Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement and Complaints Data. The migrant worker population abroad increased by 0.11% from the previous year. According to BP2MI (2025), the majority of Indonesian migrant workers work in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore. There are two types of foreign arrivals: asylum seekers and human trafficking victims who come from conflict zones. The changing migration patterns in Indonesia create ongoing governance challenges, as they

Copyright Holder:

© Machya, Melaty, Yuseptia, & Herlina. (2025)

Corresponding author's email: machya@upnyk.ac.id

This Article is Licensed Under:



require the government to balance both humanitarian duties and national security measures. This paper investigates two essential questions regarding international migration and terrorism in Indonesia. The first question examines the relationship between international migration and the spread of terrorism in Indonesia, and the second question analyzes the strategies Indonesia uses to address this situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Security studies focus on the intricate relationship between migration and terrorism because of its complex nature. Research evidence demonstrates that Western nations experience no substantial increase in terrorist activities when their migration numbers rise (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022; Mavrakou et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Rudolph (2006), the majority of international migrants do not create security risks, although migration enables terrorist groups to establish their networks.

The occurrence of terrorist attacks creates negative public reactions, which generate anti-immigrant prejudice, while governments adopt stricter migration rules that prove ineffective at stopping terrorist activities (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022). Adamson (2006) emphasizes that terrorist groups may exploit migration to recruit members, secure financial resources, and establish operational bases; however, he cautions against generalizing migrants themselves as terrorists. The occurrence of transnational terrorism drives governments to establish tighter migration controls (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022). The connection between migration and terrorism produces simplistic political narratives that produce flawed immigration and counterterrorism strategies (Demuyne & Renard, 2025) and also favorable opinions about migrant minority groups (Ullah et al., 2020).

Migration and terrorism create a dynamic system that requires policymakers to create balanced strategies for migration and counterterrorism (Novikova, 2022). Research on government strategies to reduce terrorism through migration control shows complex patterns. Open migration policies with weak regulatory systems enable countries to control the spread of terrorism (Böhmelt & Bove, 2017). The connection between migration and terrorism becomes oversimplified through political ideologies and reductive narratives, which produce ineffective immigration and counterterrorism strategies (Demuyne & Renard, 2025). The research indicates that security-focused policies work better than general security restrictions.

The solution to transnational threats requires international cooperation between nations through coordinated national efforts under international frameworks (Zhanysova, 2024). While Warsono (2022) states that international cooperation is essential for stopping illegal Indonesian migrant worker flows to Malaysia, the involved parties lack proper coordination. According to Acharya (2006) and Chalk (2008), the combination of porous borders and limited state capacities in Southeast Asia facilitates illegal migration activities. However, as Jones (2007) notes, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is constrained in addressing transnational security issues due to its principle of non-intervention.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research uses qualitative methods to obtain information from these data sources:

- a. The data from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights regarding migration and the National Counter-Terrorism Agency for the terrorism data.
- b. Terrorism incident database from the Global Terrorism.
- c. Immigration and counter-terrorism policy documents.

The authors of this study examine the connection between international migration and

terrorist attacks, yet recognize that establishing direct causation remains challenging because terrorism involves various complex elements.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Migration and Terrorism Incidents

Data from [BPS \(2025\)](#) show that Indonesian migration patterns are characterized by the outflow of migrant workers to destinations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and several other countries. Currently, around nine million Indonesian migrant workers are employed abroad, while Indonesia itself also serves as a host country for foreign workers, refugees, and asylum seekers ([Romadhona et al., 2025](#); [UNHCR Indonesia, 2025](#)).

The analysis of migration and terrorism data reveals that migration can create a connection to terrorist activities ([Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024](#)). In Indonesia, terrorist incidents demonstrate a direct association with migration patterns, particularly involving movements between Indonesia and its neighboring countries, Malaysia and the Philippines ([Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024](#); [Kassim, 2021](#); [National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2024](#)). The 2002 Bali bombings further illustrate this connection, as the perpetrators relied on regional migration networks for training and operational planning ([International Crisis Group, 2021](#)). While the 2016 Jakarta terrorist attacks became evidence of how perpetrators used labor migration routes to move between countries within the region ([Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, 2025](#)), the cases show how migration systems become vulnerable to terrorist activities because they provide opportunities for illicit activities.

The phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) shows how migration connects to terrorism ([Holmer & Shtuni, 2017](#)) because many Indonesian citizens joined ISIS in Syria ([Vidino, 2019](#)). The decline of ISIS territorial control has not eliminated radicalization and reintegration risks from returning refugees and remaining sympathizers throughout Indonesia ([National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2024](#); [Widhi & Hananto, 2021](#)). FTF recruitment and international migration stem from three main macro factors, which include poor governance, extensive radical networks, and socioeconomic instability. The existing conditions in Indonesia allow extremist beliefs to establish themselves and expand throughout the country. Terrorist organizations have the ability to use official migration programs to enter countries through migrant worker programs, student exchange programs, and religious pilgrimage routes ([Congressional Research Service, 2017](#); [Ramakrishna, 2009](#)).

The extensive migration networks and maritime routes across the Asia-Pacific area present high risks for international terrorist organizations to use for their operations ([Platt et al., 2022](#)). The networks utilize established migration routes to facilitate illegal activities, making migration control more difficult and generating significant security challenges. The ability of terrorist organizations to adapt requires governments to develop adaptable security strategies that target fundamental system weaknesses ([Demuynck & Renard, 2025](#)). The international nature of terrorist threats necessitates international organizations collaborating for the effective protection of essential transit areas ([Congressional Research Service, 2017](#); [Ramakrishna, 2021](#)).

International migration creates complex conditions for the spread of terrorism in Indonesia, which supports previous academic findings ([Helbling & Meierrieke, 2022](#)). The evidence shows that terrorist organizations use migration systems as their advantage when governments have weak control, the borders are open, and the agencies lack proper coordination ([Chalk, 2008](#)). The government of Indonesia needs to improve security measures, but must also defend its essential migration streams that support economic and social development ([Romadhona et al., 2025](#)). The overseas worker diaspora produces substantial remittances while overseas migration supports multiple economic industries. Remittances from Indonesian migrant workers in 2024

reached USD 15.7 billion (BP2MI, 2025). According to Kassim (2021), migration restrictions that are too strict might encourage people to use illegal migration methods, which terrorist organizations can more easily target. A proper solution must exist to strengthen security protocols while keeping official migration routes open for legal entry (Croissant & Barlow, 2007). In line with this need for balanced security measures, the Indonesia-Australia Sub-Regional Meeting on counter-terrorism serves as a vital tool for regional cooperation to combat the cross-border threat. The platform enables member countries to share intelligence while collaborating on security operations, which focus on preventing irregular migrant returns and stopping future migration flows. A complete solution to transnational terrorism needs the active participation of multiple countries through collaborative efforts.

Government Policy

The Indonesian government has developed new strategies to handle international migration security threats since 2002. The National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) was established in 2010 to direct counter-terrorism operations through better information sharing with immigration agencies (Congressional Research Service, 2017). While immigration regulations were established by the Indonesian government in Law No. 6 of 2011, which governs the procedures for imposing immigration sanctions. In 2024, the Indonesian government amended this law by issuing Law No. 63 of 2024 (JDIH, 2024; Kementerian Imigrasi dan Pemasyarakatan, 2025). However, the government faces an internal conflict between its duty to protect international law and regional agreements and its need to safeguard national security through humanitarian protection measures.

The Indonesian government works to enhance border security and immigration control by integrating the INTERPOL database for terrorist screening at entry points. Nevertheless, the implementation of these security measures faces technical and administrative barriers because different provinces and agencies operate separate platforms. The lack of proper intelligence sharing between agencies creates obstacles for successful screening operations and border control activities (INTERPOL, 2016). The 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law enables security forces to extend their authority in capturing and prosecuting terrorism suspects. The current legal framework offers better protection, but the average prison sentence remains below three years, which creates ongoing security risks. The current lack of sufficient deradicalization programs after release creates additional security risks because it fails to stop former combatants from returning to their previous activities.

The operational effectiveness of Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88) and US law enforcement has improved through their joint work and capacity-building initiatives. The government faces ongoing challenges because different departments show resistance to information exchange. The security sector needs to resolve this information-sharing problem to achieve maximum results from capacity-building initiatives and establish unified national security operations. The development of Indonesia's migration management institutions needs sustained funding to enhance technological systems and training programs and improve interagency cooperation. The government should focus on acquiring three essential systems to enhance migration management: a biometric system for migrant registration, a migration flow tracking database, and an advanced communication network between border control points and central authorities.

The training programs for immigration and security personnel now focus on teaching both technical verification methods and cultural competencies needed to work with different migrant groups. Immigration forces, police, and military units should participate in recurring joint training exercises to enhance their operational coordination and readiness for emergency responses (Romadhona et al., 2025). Security measures adopt a risk-based strategy, which directs resources

toward dangerous migration routes while enabling authorized travel. The system needs to use advanced profiling methods that analyze more than immigration status and religious background to detect security threats.

The legal system establishes specific rules for migration security operations, which safeguard the rights of migrants and asylum seekers. The migration system will gain public trust when it implements clear procedures and robust oversight systems that prevent abuse from occurring. Security agencies require collaboration between migrant communities and residents to achieve successful counterterrorism operations. Security agencies establish trust with local communities because this relationship enables them to obtain vital intelligence while addressing issues of discrimination and harassment. The implementation of integration programs and economic development initiatives for migrants will decrease their exposure to radicalization while fostering social unity between different groups. The government needs to work with civil society organizations and community leaders to achieve these integration goals.

Regional Cooperation Mechanisms

The transnational character of terrorism and migration leads Indonesia to participate in international and regional cooperation efforts. The countries have maintained cooperation through maritime patrol coordination and the exchange of intelligence information, focusing on strategic waterways, including the Sulu and Celebes Seas. The combined efforts between nations serve as a vital mechanism to stop various illegal operations, which include kidnappings and human trafficking, and terrorist movements.

Indonesia has joined multiple international forums to tackle terrorism and migration issues through its participation in the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism and the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons, and Related Transnational Crimes (Acharya, 2006). However, operational cooperation faces challenges due to sovereignty issues and differing national priorities among member states (Jones, 2007). The 2017 Marawi siege in the Philippines led to enhanced trilateral cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines through joint maritime patrols and intelligence-sharing agreements (International Crisis Group, 2021). The Indonesia-Australia Sub-Regional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism serves as an ongoing bilateral partnership between the two nations. The platform serves as a vital platform to establish trust between nations while unifying counter-terrorism strategies to fight Foreign Terrorist Fighters who operate in the Asia-Pacific region. The dialogue serves to establish mutual awareness about the threat while creating a unified approach to fight terrorism.

International cooperation remains essential despite the diplomatic obstacles and different national interests. The framework enables countries to address various international aspects of migration and terrorism through collective efforts, thereby preventing any single nation from facing these challenges independently (Blumenau & Müller, 2023; Hugo, 2019; UNODC, n.d.). Indonesia needs to enhance operational partnerships with its neighboring countries, especially Malaysia and the Philippines, to handle common migration and security issues. Indonesia enhances its information exchange systems while unifying border protection efforts and building capabilities to fight transnational terrorist threats.

The regional cooperation system should unite public authorities with civil society groups, academic institutions, and private organizations that manage migration processes. The involvement of multiple stakeholders enables a better understanding of migration patterns and more successful intervention methods. The pentahelix model, which Indonesia established within its framework, serves as a successful approach to fighting terrorism (Subagyo, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

International migration in Indonesia creates multiple interconnected factors that lead to the spread of terrorism throughout the country. International migration serves as a security risk for Indonesia only in specific instances when terrorist organizations use these opportunities, but most migration movements do not threaten national security. An effective solution needs multiple essential elements, which include border control systems for entry, and stands as the essential factor for achieving enduring success. The Indonesian government needs to create a security system that includes exit management, targeted counterterrorism operations, migrant protection programs, and community-based Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE) initiatives. A complete strategy protects national borders while delivering social and economic advantages from migration. The security needs of Indonesia must be balanced with its position as both a significant source and destination country for migration.

The policy needs to address weaknesses in the migration management system, but must avoid excessive control measures, as these can create additional security risks. A complete strategy to handle migration-terrorism connections requires three fundamental elements, which include regional cooperation, institutional development, and community participation. The Indonesian experience offers essential insights to other nations navigating the migration-security relationship. The successful resolution of these security challenges depends on enduring political backing, along with sufficient funding and continuous cooperation between multiple stakeholders operating at different levels of government and internationally.

The management of Indonesia's national correlates with sustained technological development and improved interagency cooperation, enhanced international and regional partnerships. Furthermore, the national security of Indonesia depends on these essential initiatives, which also support its migration obligations within an unstable global environment. The way Indonesia handles the complex relationship between migration and security will be determined by its commitment to these specific areas. Future research needs to evaluate current policy results while tracking changes in migration patterns and terrorism security threats. The changing global migration patterns, combined with terrorist operational methods, necessitate that Indonesia develop flexible security approaches to address these emerging threats.

REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2006). The myth of the second front: Localizing the "War on Terror". *The Washington Quarterly*, 30(4), 75–90.
- Adamson, F. B. (2006). Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security. *International Security*, 31(1), 165–199.
- Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme. (2025). *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme*. Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme.
- Blumenau, B., & Müller, J. A. (2023). International Organisations and Terrorism: Multilateral Antiterrorism Efforts, 1960–1990. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 35(2), 433–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1938002>.
- Böhmelt, T., & Bove, V. (2017). How migration policies moderate the diffusion of terrorism. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(1), 160–181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12339>.
- BP2MI. (2025, February 5). *Data Penempatan dan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia Periode Januari 2025*. BP2MI.
- BPS. (2025). *Population and Labor Mobility Statistics 2024*. BPS.
- Chalk, P. (2008). *Security Terrorism, Piracy, and Challenges for the United States*. RAND Corporation.
- Congressional Research Service. (2017). *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*.

- <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.
- Croissant, A., & Barlow, D. (2007). Following the Money Trail: Terrorist Financing and Government Responses in Southeast Asia. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30(2), 131–156.
- Demuynck, M., & Renard, T. (2025). *Conceptualising and Addressing the Migration-Terrorism Nexus: Literature Review, Case Studies, and Policy Recommendations*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). <https://doi.org/10.19165/2025.6672>.
- Harruma, I., & Nailufar, N. N. (2022, April 28). 7 Kasus Terorisme Terbesar di Indonesia. Kompas.Com.
- Helbling, M., & Meierrieks, D. (2022). Terrorism and Migration: An Overview. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(2), 977–996. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000587>.
- Holmer, G., & Shtuni, A. (2017). *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/03/returning-foreign-fighters-and-reintegration-imperative>.
- Hugo, G. (2019). International Labour Migration and Migration Policies in Southeast Asia. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 47(4–5), 398–422.
- Institute for Economics & Peace. (2024). *Global Terrorism Index 2024*.
- International Crisis Group. (2021). *Southern Philippines: Tackling clan politics in the Bangsamoro*.
- INTERPOL. (2016, June 13). *Interpol Border Operation in Southeast Asia Targets Crime Suspects*. <https://www.interpol.int/fr/Actualites-et-evenements/Actualites/2016/INTERPOL-border-operation-in-southeast-asia-targets-crime-suspects>.
- JDIH. (2024). *Perubahan Ketiga atas Undang Undang Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 tentang Keimigrasian*. JDIH.
- Jones, J. (2007). *Negotiating Change: The New Politics of the Middle East* (Vol. 58). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kassim, A. (2021). Recent Trends in Transnational Population Inflows into Malaysia: Policy, Issues and Challenges. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies*, 51(1).
- Kementerian Imigrasi dan Pemasarakatan. (2025). *UU Keimigrasian*. Kementerian Imigrasi Dan Pemasarakatan.
- Mavrakou, S., Chace-Donahue, E., Oluanaigh, R., & Conroy, M. (2022). The Climate Change–Terrorism Nexus: A Critical Literature Review. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(5), 894–913.
- National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. (2024). *Global Terrorism Database (2024) Terrorism incidents in Indonesia 2000–2024*.
- Novikova, O. (2022). Migration and Terrorism: Dynamic Interaction. *Istoriya*, 13(9).
- Platt, M., Baey, G., Yeoh, B., & Khoo, C. Y. (2022). *The Invisible Workforce: Migration, Communities and Social Change in Southeast Asia*. NUS Press.
- Ramakrishna, K. (2009). *Radical pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia* (1st ed.). Praeger Security International.
- Ramakrishna, K. (2021). The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Assessment. *Asian Security*, 17(2), 149–167.
- Romadhona, M. K., Kinasih, S. E., & Oktafenanda, R. D. (2025). Labor Migration Policy in ASEAN States. *International Law Discourse in Southeast Asia*, 4(1), 81–128. <https://doi.org/10.15294/ildisea.v4i1.23485>.
- Rudolph, C. (2006). *National Security and Immigration Policy Development in the United States and Western Europe Since 1945*. Stanford University Press.
- Subagyo, A. (2021). The implementation of the pentahelix model for the terrorism deradicalization program in Indonesia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1964720>.

- Ullah, A. A., Hasan, N. H., & Chattoraj, D. (2020). Migration and Security: Implications for Minority Migrant Groups. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 76(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928419901199>.
- UNHCR Indonesia. (2025). *Publications and Fact Sheets*. UNHCR Indonesia.
- UNODC. (n.d.). *International Cooperation*.
- Vidino, L. (2019). The Security Implications of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(6), 472–482.
- Warsono, H., Hanura, M., & Hanani, R. (2022). International Collaborative Governance in Preventing Irregular Indonesian Migrant Workers to Malaysia. *JURNAL ILMU SOSIAL*, 21(2), 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jis.21.2.2022.223-249>.
- Widhi, P., & Hananto, H. (2021). The Legality of Ex-ISIS Citizenship from Indonesia in Iraq and Syria. In *Diponegoro Law Review* (Vol. 06).
- Zhanyssova, K. N. (2024). Transnational Threats and The Nation-State: A Literature Review. *Журнал «Международные Отношения и Регионоведение»*, 58(4). <https://doi.org/10.48371/ismo.2024.58.4.006>.