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Protection of Children Exposed to Terrorism

Widya Romasindah Aidy¹, Laksanto Utomo², Rahmat Saputra³, Tubagus Darajat⁴

¹Faculty of Law, University of Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, Indonesia widya.romasindah@gmail.com

²Faculty of Law, University of Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, Indonesia

³Faculty of Law, University of Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, Indonesia

⁴Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Bangkok, Thailand

Corresponding Author: widya.romasindah@gmail.com¹

Abstract: Children exposed to terrorism represent a highly vulnerable group often overlooked in national security policies and legal frameworks. Rather than being recognized as victims of extremist environments they did not choose, these children are frequently perceived as potential threats. This article explores the legal, psychological, and social dimensions of child protection within the context of violent extremism in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach through literature-based research, the study finds that although Indonesia has enacted legal instruments such as the Child Protection Law and Anti-Terrorism Law, there remains a lack of specific regulations addressing the protection of children in terrorism-related situations. Key challenges include the absence of technical guidelines, weak institutional coordination, and persistent social stigma, all of which hinder the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Policy reform is urgently needed, including the development of child-centered legal provisions, psychosocial recovery frameworks, and stronger community involvement. Inclusive and sustainable protection efforts are essential to uphold children's rights, even in the face of ideological violence.

Keyword: Children, Terrorism, Child Protection, Violent Extremism, Reintegration, Legal Policy

INTRODUCTION

Radicalism can be understood as an ideology that aspires to bring about fundamental and drastic changes through violence and extreme actions, which serves as the basis for the emergence of terrorism (Basyirah & Fuad, 2023). Terrorism, in this context, constitutes a form of violence carried out systematically with the aim of instilling fear, influencing government policies, or conveying specific political messages. It may be perceived as an attempt to pursue extreme ambitions within political and social conflicts. Terrorism becomes the course of action chosen by radical groups who consider themselves marginalized or oppressed, and who seek to resist ideologies or state structures perceived as unjust.

The phenomenon of terrorism possesses several key characteristics: (1) it demonstrates political objectives underlying its motives and rationale; (2) it employs violence or threats of violence; (3) it targets or seeks to create impacts extending far beyond the immediate victims; and (4) it is perpetrated by non-state actors, either individuals or

organized networks within sub-national groups. The violence employed is not merely intended to inflict harm, but rather functions as a symbol of resistance and a means of political communication - tragically making civilians, including children, the most vulnerable victims.

To address this threat, Indonesia has normatively regulated a number of legislative instruments. Law No. 5 of 2018, as an amendment to Law No. 15 of 2003 on the Eradication of Terrorism Crimes, grants broader authority to the state to take action against perpetrators and terrorist networks. Furthermore, terrorism, which is classified as an extraordinary crime, often generates far-reaching impacts that may amount to serious violations of human rights (Saputra et al., 2023). Accordingly, the applicable legal mechanisms may also refer to Law No. 26 of 2000 on Human Rights Courts, particularly when such acts are committed in a widespread and systematic manner against civilians. Within this legal framework governing counter-terrorism efforts, however, attention to victims - especially children - has frequently not been treated as a primary concern. Children are the most vulnerable group affected by violent ideologies, both directly and indirectly (Purwanti & Hoesein, 2025). They may become physical victims of terrorist attacks, suffer long-term psychological trauma, and, in some cases, be recruited and trained by extremist groups to engage in acts of violence. This indicates that issues of protection have not yet been comprehensively resolved.

The rights of the child are constitutionally guaranteed under Article 28B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which stipulates that “Every child shall have the right to live, to grow and to develop, and shall have the right to protection from violence and discrimination.” This constitutional mandate affirms that the state bears an obligation to ensure the safety of children, including protection from exposure to extremist ideologies and acts of violence (Putri & Hariyanto, 2023). Such protection must not only be understood passively—as the prevention of children becoming victims—but also actively, by establishing supportive systems aimed at recovery and empowerment of children affected by terrorism.

Philosophically, children represent the younger generation who will become the successors and defenders of the nation’s future. In this context, the protection of children exposed to terrorism constitutes a long-term investment in safeguarding the continuity of the state. Beyond the legal domain, protective approaches must also encompass psychosocial, educational, and social reintegration aspects, thereby ensuring that children once affected by violent extremism are not perpetually trapped within cycles of violence or subjected to stigmatization (Hutagalung et al., 2025).

Terrorism in Indonesia over the past two decades has undergone various dynamics, ranging from international networks such as Jamaah Islamiyah to local groups adopting violent ideologies rooted in religion or separatism (Mukhtar, 2017). Throughout this process, many children have been found in deeply concerning conditions: becoming orphans because their parents were either perpetrators or victims of terrorism, living in displacement, losing access to education, and, in some instances, being absorbed into radical cells through the influence of their environment or families. For this reason, approaches to protecting children exposed to terrorism necessarily require multi-sectoral involvement, including the state, civil society, religious institutions, and local communities.

Against this background, this paper seeks to examine in depth how protection for children exposed to terrorism is carried out in Indonesia, both in terms of legal-policy frameworks and social implementation. It also aims to highlight the challenges encountered and to propose strategic recommendations so that children affected by terrorism are not only protected, but are also able to recover and contribute positively to society.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to provide an in-depth depiction of the various forms of protection afforded to children exposed to terrorism in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because the issues under examination involve not only normative legal aspects but are also closely intertwined with social, psychological, and public policy dimensions.

Data were collected through library research on national regulations, institutional reports, and academic literature concerning child protection and counter-terrorism efforts. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including representatives from the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), child protection NGOs, and psychologists working with children affected by violent extremism. This method was intended to capture direct perspectives from practitioners engaged in protection and social reintegration efforts for affected children.

Data analysis was carried out thematically, involving steps of data reduction, thematic categorization, and drawing conclusions based on critical interpretation of the emerging phenomena. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, by comparing information obtained from interviews with written documents. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research, particularly with regard to maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities and the sensitivity of issues involving children, by upholding the principles of informed consent, privacy, and non-stigmatization of children who have been exposed to extremism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research reveals a number of significant findings concerning the condition of children exposed to terrorism in Indonesia, as well as the protective measures undertaken by both the state and society.

1. Patterns of Child Exposure to Terrorism

Children may be exposed to terrorist ideologies through various channels, either directly or indirectly. Direct exposure occurs when children are involved in radical networks or activities, whether as couriers, trainees, or prospective suicide bombers. Certain cases demonstrate that children have even been recruited by their own parents who were indoctrinated with extremist ideologies. In several incidents of terrorism in Indonesia, such as the Surabaya suicide bombings in 2018, children were made part of the perpetrators (Jusman, 2019).

Indirect exposure typically takes place through the surrounding environment, social media, or informal education. Children living in communities sympathetic to terrorism or within families that endorse radicalism undergo a process of normalization of violence. Digital content has also become a crucial channel for the dissemination of violent ideologies, one that is difficult for both parents and the state to monitor.

2. Impact on the Psychosocial Condition of Children

Exposure to terrorism generates serious long-term consequences for a child's development. Interviews with psychologists and child protection activists reveal that children who have been involved in, or become victims of, acts of terrorism often suffer from prolonged trauma, including anxiety disorders, social fear, and distrust toward state institutions. These children also frequently experience rejection from their social environment, including schools and places of worship, due to stigmatization as "terrorist's children." Studies indicate that the lack of sustained psychosocial support exacerbates their

condition. On the other hand, overly repressive approaches by state authorities often aggravate the situation, particularly when arrests or the separation of children from their parents are carried out without child rights-based procedures.

3. Policies and Protective Measures

The Government of Indonesia has adopted several policies to protect children in the context of extremism, such as integrating child protection issues into the National Counter-Terrorism Agency's (BNPT) deradicalization programs, as well as fostering cross-institutional cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) (Mukhibat et al., 2023). However, implementation in practice continues to face serious challenges. Based on documentary studies, there is still no standardized system for addressing children exposed to terrorism, particularly with respect to psychological assistance, social recovery, and educational reintegration. Furthermore, observations and reports from civil society organizations indicate that reintegration programs remain sectoral and poorly coordinated. As a result, many children eventually return to their previous environments without adequate support, thereby facing a heightened risk of re-exposure.

4. Protecting Children Exposed to Terrorism: Challenges and Pathways Toward Comprehensive Recovery

The findings of this research indicate that the protection of children exposed to terrorism continues to face serious challenges across legal, social, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Within the framework of descriptive analysis, this discussion seeks to explore more deeply how these issues are interrelated and how the approaches adopted thus far require improvement in order to ensure that children exposed to terrorism are afforded adequate protection and proper recovery.

a. Children in a Vulnerable Position: Between Victim and Perpetrator

In the context of counter-terrorism, children occupy a highly vulnerable and complex position. They often find themselves in a confusing "grey area": on the one hand, they are victims because they grow up in environments shaped by violence and extremist ideologies that they did not choose; yet, on the other hand, they may also be constructed as perpetrators due to their involvement—whether consciously or unconsciously—in acts categorized as terrorism. This ambiguity of roles creates dilemmas in law enforcement practice, social rehabilitation, and the formulation of child protection policies (Nugraha, 2023).

In several cases in Indonesia, children from families of terrorism perpetrators have been subjected to detention, interrogation, or forced separation from their parents without child-sensitive mechanisms. For example, following the 2018 Surabaya suicide bombings, some surviving children from the perpetrators' families were subjected to legal procedures that failed to take into account their psychological conditions and trauma. In many instances, they were processed within the general justice system rather than under a child protection framework (Ismayana, 2021). This illustrates the weakness of child protection perspectives in responses to terrorism, even though the psychosocial trauma experienced by children exposed to violent extremism is far more complex and requires long-term recovery approaches (Zada et al., 2021).

Normatively, Indonesia already possesses a relatively progressive legal framework. Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection affirms that every child has the right to protection from violence, exploitation, maltreatment, and discrimination. In addition, Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Indonesia has ratified, underscores the importance of protecting children from arbitrary interference

while safeguarding their identity and integrity. These principles should serve as the foundation in designing policies concerning children affected by extremism and organized violence (Nurhasanah, 2024).

In practice, however, the implementation of these protective principles continues to face serious challenges. Weak inter-agency coordination, limited capacity of officers in handling children affected by terrorism, and the lack of psychosocial perspectives within security approaches have often left these children without comprehensive recovery. They lose not only their families or homes but also their future and social identity. Without holistic interventions, these children risk experiencing repeated trauma, stigmatization, and even re-radicalization. Therefore, it is crucial to place children as subjects who must be fully rehabilitated, rather than merely as objects of state security policies.

b. Obstacles in the Implementation of Protection

One of the principal obstacles lies in the weak coordination among state institutions. The National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), juvenile correctional facilities, and educational institutions should ideally establish an integrated network to accompany and rehabilitate affected children. In practice, however, the approaches adopted remain fragmented.

For instance, BNPT's deradicalization programs have largely focused on adult perpetrators, while children have not yet been provided with specific modules tailored to their stage of psychological development. Available psychological services also frequently fail to reach regions that serve as the bases of former terrorist families. Moreover, the absence of standardized rehabilitation and social reintegration programs has resulted in inconsistent recovery outcomes (Yani, 2021).

c. Social Stigma and Barriers to Reintegration

Social stigma constitutes one of the most severe challenges in the reintegration of children exposed to terrorism into society. After completing rehabilitation programs—whether in the form of counseling, re-education, or vocational training—many of them encounter rejection from their social environment. These children are often labeled as “terrorist’s children” or a “radical generation,” as if they inherently inherited violent ideologies from their parents or original communities. Such stigma emanates not only from the broader public but also from formal institutions such as schools, residential neighborhoods, and even local government authorities.

This labeling has significant implications for the children's psychology and recovery process. They feel unaccepted, lose their sense of safety, and become disconnected from social networks that should otherwise support their growth and development. In many cases, these children experience social isolation, bullying, and even excessive surveillance by security forces, which further reinforces feelings of guilt and alienation. As a consequence, they are more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), identity disturbances, and severe declines in self-confidence.

Stigma also presents a major obstacle for educational institutions and local communities in their willingness to engage in reintegration programs. Several schools have refused to admit these children out of fear that they might “spread” violent ideologies to other students, despite the absence of psychological or sociological evidence supporting such assumptions. Without the support of the social environment, reintegration risks becoming a merely administrative or formal process that fails to address the deeper issues of identity and psychological recovery.

Therefore, community-based approaches and public education initiatives are urgently needed to reframe the position of these children as victims rather than perpetrators, and to

eliminate the stigma attached to them, so that reintegration can proceed in an inclusive and sustainable manner

d. Community-Based Protection: A Strategic Alternative

One approach that has begun to be adopted is the involvement of local communities in programs for the recovery of children exposed to terrorism. A community-based approach emphasizes the importance of social support from the surrounding environment, including religious leaders, community figures, and extended families. When children return to society with a strong support system, the likelihood of successful reintegration increases significantly (Rusyidi et al., 2019).

This model has been piloted in several regions by civil society organizations in cooperation with local governments and has proven effective in reducing social resistance toward children who are former perpetrators or members of perpetrators' families. Examples include vocational training, joint constructive activities with other children, and dialogue between the families of victims and perpetrators

e. Case Studies and Best Practices

One notable best practice can be found in the social rehabilitation program conducted by the Prasasti Perdamaian Foundation and the family-based deradicalization program implemented by BNPT. Both initiatives position children as active subjects in the recovery process rather than mere objects of intervention. Children are provided with opportunities to express their experiences through art, group therapy, and guidance from counselors with a background in child education.

Case studies also demonstrate that the involvement of parents who have undergone deradicalization programs significantly accelerates the recovery process of children. In one case in West Java, a mother who was a former ISIS sympathizer and successfully reintegrated into society was able to encourage her child to return to school and build new social relationships. Family-centered interventions have proven more effective than overly bureaucratic institutional approaches

f. Juridical Review and the Need for Policy Reform

Normatively, Indonesia's national legal framework has recognized and guaranteed children's rights comprehensively through various instruments, such as Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection, Article 28B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution, and the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Nevertheless, in the context of violent extremism and terrorism, the protection of affected children has not received equal and specific attention (Sugiarto & Hidayat, 2024). Law No. 5 of 2018 places greater emphasis on the eradication of terrorism-related crimes, with a predominantly security-oriented approach. In practice, such an approach often neglects the dimensions of protection and rehabilitation for children exposed to extremism, whether as victims or indirect participants.

This situation reveals a pressing juridical gap that must be addressed through legal policy reform. First, technical guidelines must be developed for handling children exposed to terrorism, encompassing psychosocial, educational, and legal protection aspects. These guidelines are essential to ensure that the approach adopted is holistic and child rights-based. Second, specific provisions should be incorporated into the Child Protection Law to explicitly regulate the rights and special treatment of children in situations of extremism and ideologically driven violence. Third, institutional oversight—both at the national and local levels—must be strengthened with respect to the implementation of rehabilitation, reintegration, and recovery programs (Hutagalung et al., 2025).

Absent such reforms, child protection in the context of extremism will remain in a juridical grey area. As a result, children risk becoming double victims: harmed by violent ideology, while simultaneously neglected by the legal system that ought to protect them

g. Strategic Recommendations

This discussion leads to a number of strategic recommendations aimed at strengthening child protection in the context of terrorism:

- 1) **Multisectoral Approach:** The government must establish systematic inter-agency synergy by formulating an integrated protocol involving BNPT, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA), the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), and educational institutions.
- 2) **School-Based Psychosocial Training:** Schools and madrasahs should be empowered as centers of rehabilitation with the support of trained counselors.
- 3) **Anti-Stigma Public Campaigns:** The government, in collaboration with the media and community leaders, should conduct campaigns aimed at eliminating stigma against children of former perpetrators or families of perpetrators of terrorism.
- 4) **Strengthening Data and Monitoring:** A data-based monitoring system must be established to track the progress of children who have undergone rehabilitation, including through digital tracking that remains sensitive to privacy rights.
- 5) **Child Rights-Based Protection:** All policies must be grounded in the principle of child protection as a fundamental human right, rather than merely as part of a national security strategy.

By strengthening a holistic, participatory, and rights-based approach, the state can ensure that children who have been, or are currently, exposed to terrorism are guaranteed a decent future, free from trauma and stigma.

CONCLUSION

Children exposed to terrorism occupy a highly vulnerable position within the landscape of ideologically driven violence. They are often caught in a dilemma as both victims and indirect perpetrators, particularly due to the involvement of their parents or extremist social environments. Unfortunately, Indonesia's legal system and public policy remain largely security-oriented, while child protection aspects have not received proportional attention.

Numerous obstacles continue to hinder the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children, ranging from social stigma and the absence of specific regulations to weak inter-agency coordination. Although legal frameworks such as the Child Protection Law and the Anti-Terrorism Law exist, their implementation in practice has yet to address the particular needs of children in extreme situations. A child rights-based approach—emphasizing psychosocial recovery, education, and restorative justice—is urgently required.

Policy reform is imperative, including the incorporation of special provisions into the Child Protection Law, the formulation of specific technical guidelines, and the strengthening of supervisory institutions. The role of the state must be expanded from merely eradicating terrorism to also ensuring the recovery of the affected generation. At the same time, civil society must be encouraged to play a more inclusive and participatory role in reintegration processes. Only through a holistic, inclusive, and justice-oriented approach can children exposed to terrorism be genuinely protected and restored as part of the nation's future.

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