

REACHING OUT TO THOSE WHO WERE ONCE LOST: REFLECTIVE PERSONAL DAKWAH BY A RELIGIOUS COUNSELOR WITHIN A CIRCLE OF FORMER TERRORISM CONVICTS IN POHUWATO

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the process of reflective personal dakwah in efforts toward deradicalization and the social reintegration of former terrorism convicts (ex-napiter) in Pohuwato Regency, Gorontalo Province, as carried out by a religious counselor (hereinafter referred to by the pseudonym Ustadz Wisno) toward seven ex-napiter. This approach emphasizes empathetic communication, spiritual accompaniment, and a humanizing space for reflection. The method used is reflective-participatory ethnography, in which the researcher acts as an insider-adjacent observer who follows, documents, and reflects upon the dakwah process carried out by the religious counselor, rather than as a direct practitioner of that dakwah. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and field notes over the period 2023–2025. The findings show that reflective personal dakwah contributed to the building of trust, verbal statements of ideological transformation, and the strengthening of social participation among the ex-napiter within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). This research explicitly distinguishes between disengagement (changes in behavior and social involvement, which are observed more strongly in this study) and deradicalization (profound changes in ideological attitudes and beliefs, the verbal expressions of which need to be read with caution given the methodological limitations in verifying their depth). In conclusion, reflective personal dakwah is a promising humanity-based approach in supporting disengagement and post-sentence social reintegration, with certain elements that have the potential to be replicated by other religious counselors, although the sustainability and depth of ideological transformation require further, more systematic study.

Keywords: *Reflective Personal Dakwah, Deradicalization, Disengagement, Social Reintegration, Religious Moderation, Former Terrorism Convicts*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji proses dakwah personal reflektif dalam upaya deradikalisasi dan reintegrasi sosial eks-narapidana kasus terorisme (eks-napiter) di Kabupaten Pohuwato, Provinsi Gorontalo, sebagaimana dijalankan oleh seorang penyuluh agama (selanjutnya disebut dengan nama samaran Ustadz Wisno) terhadap tujuh eks-napiter. Pendekatan ini menitikberatkan pada komunikasi empatik, pendampingan spiritual, dan ruang refleksi yang memanusiakan. Metode yang digunakan adalah etnografi reflektif-partisipatif, di mana peneliti berperan sebagai pengamat dekat (insider-adjacent observer) yang mengikuti, mendokumentasikan, dan merefleksikan proses dakwah yang dijalankan oleh penyuluh agama, bukan sebagai pelaku langsung dakwah tersebut. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan catatan lapangan selama 2023–2025. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dakwah personal reflektif berkontribusi pada terbangunnya

kepercayaan, pernyataan verbal transformasi ideologis, dan penguatan partisipasi sosial para eks-napiter dalam bingkai NKRI. Penelitian ini secara eksplisit membedakan antara disengagement (perubahan perilaku dan keterlibatan sosial, yang teramati secara lebih kuat dalam temuan ini) dan deradicalization (perubahan sikap dan keyakinan ideologis secara mendalam, yang ekspresi verbalnya perlu dibaca secara hati-hati mengingat keterbatasan metode dalam memverifikasi kedalamannya). Kesimpulannya, dakwah personal reflektif merupakan pendekatan berbasis kemanusiaan yang menjanjikan dalam mendukung disengagement dan reintegrasi sosial pasca-hukuman, dengan elemen-elemen tertentu yang berpotensi direplikasi oleh penyuluh agama lain, meski keberlanjutan dan kedalaman transformasi ideologisnya memerlukan kajian lanjutan yang lebih sistematis.

Kata kunci: *dakwah personal reflektif; deradikalisasi; disengagement; reintegrasi sosial; moderasi beragama; eks-napiter*

INTRODUCTION

The return of former convicts of terrorism offenses (napiter) to society often leaves a void that is invisible, yet felt in the social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. On paper, they have served their sentences, declared their allegiance to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), and even present a face of Islam that appears more peaceful and moderate. Yet behind this formality, a question continues to echo: have they truly recovered from an ideology of violence, or have they merely shifted to a different space while still harboring old embers?

Pohuwato, a quiet region in Gorontalo Province that nonetheless harbors complex social dynamics, has become a witness to a group of ex-napiter attempting to rebuild their lives. Amid a climate of community acceptance that remains conditional with collective trauma not yet fully healed and suspicions that are sometimes left unspoken the existence of ex-napiter is like walking between two worlds: the old world they wish to leave behind, and the new world that has not yet fully accepted them.

It is within this context that the role of the religious counselor becomes vital. In this research, the religious counselor who is the focus of observation hereinafter referred to by the pseudonym Ustadz Wisno to protect his identity is present as a fellow servant of God who reaches out to the inner wounds of the ex-napiter with empathy. His approach is rooted in a human relationship: being present to listen before advising, to understand before guiding. The dakwah he carries out is not about one-way sermons, but a dialogue from heart to heart, since the greatest concern among ex-napiter is a void of values and spirituality that could be filled by anyone including by the ideology they previously followed. This Pohuwato case occupies a particular position within the broader landscape of deradicalization and post-sentence reintegration studies in Indonesia, which will be discussed further in the discussion section with reference to comparative cases such as Poso (Solahudin & Mietzner, 2012) and Aceh (Husin, 2017).

This reflective personal dakwah approach aims to gradually rebuild the foundation of religious moderation, nurture the ex-napiter's belief in an Islam that is rahmatan lil-'alamin, and ensure that their recognition of NKRI is not merely a formality to free themselves from legal status, but represents a new, whole, and rooted form of ideological consciousness a claim that, as will be discussed further, needs to be carefully

distinguished between indications of behavioral disengagement and deeper ideological deradicalization.

This research aims to describe in depth the process of personal dakwah toward ex-napiter in Pohuwato Regency as one strategy for strengthening religious moderation at the grassroots level in the post-sentence period. Stemming from concern over the weaknesses of formal and uniform deradicalization approaches, this research presents an alternative narrative that is more contextual, humanistic, and transformative. Theoretically, this research broadens the horizon of dakwah and deradicalization studies with a perspective from below; practically, its results can serve as a reference for stakeholders in designing social reintegration programs that are oriented not only toward security, but also toward spiritual and social sustainability.

METHOD

This research employs a reflective-participatory ethnographic approach as its main method an approach that combines the power of field-experience narrative with the rigor of social analysis. The researcher acts as an insider-adjacent observer: following, witnessing, and reflecting upon the dakwah process carried out by the religious counselor (Ustadz Wisno) toward the ex-napiter, without becoming a direct practitioner of that dakwah. This position allows for an in-depth exploration of psychosocial, spiritual, and ideological dynamics that cannot be fully captured by more distanced quantitative or qualitative methods.

Reflexivity statement: the researcher's relational closeness to Ustadz Wisno and to the community of ex-napiter he accompanies is a prerequisite for the rich data access in this research, but this closeness also carries a risk of interpretive bias. The researcher acknowledges the possibility of a tendency to read the ex-napiter's statements as evidence of the success of Ustadz Wisno's dakwah, given the good relationship that has been built among the researcher, the counselor, and the ex-napiter throughout the accompaniment process. To mitigate this risk, the researcher deliberately distinguishes in the analysis between (a) the ex-napiter's verbal statements regarding acceptance of NKRI and religious moderation, and (b) independently observed behavioral changes (social participation, involvement in mosque activities, patterns of interaction with the community). This distinction is important because, as shown in the disengagement literature (Horgan, 2009), verbal expressions of acceptance toward the state and moderate religious views are not automatically equivalent to a deep ideological transformation; such expressions could also be a form of strategic compliance a rational adjustment of behavior in the context of post-sentence supervision and the need for social acceptance, without being accompanied by a full change in core beliefs. This research is thus better able to document indications of disengagement (observable changes in behavior and social involvement) more strongly than it is able to deeply verify deradicalization (changes in ideological attitudes and beliefs) a limitation that will be discussed further in the discussion and conclusion sections.

This research involved seven ex-napiter who had returned to society after serving their sentences and settled in various sub-districts within Pohuwato Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and field notes during the accompaniment process between 2023 and 2025. Interviews were conducted in informal settings home porches, coffee stalls, small mosques that allowed trust and openness to emerge. Observation encompassed verbal behavior, expressions, gestures, pauses, and silences, as silence often contains experiences that go unspoken.

All experiences were documented in field notes, which were then analyzed using thematic narrative analysis an approach that allows for the extraction of meaning from experiential narratives while preserving the context and emotions that accompany them. In the analysis process, triangulation was used between narrative data, the researcher's reflections, and the local socio-cultural context of Pohuwato. Data validity was maintained through repeated reflection, discussion with fellow counselors, and re-interpretation based on academic literature on dakwah, the psychology of religion, and deradicalization. This approach aligns with the emic principle in ethnography namely, understanding the world from the insider's point of view while still maintaining an adequate analytical distance, as outlined in the reflexivity statement above.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Reflective Dialogue in Dakwah

Dakwah cannot simply be understood as the verbal delivery of Islamic teachings, but as a process of communication of the heart that touches the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the human being. In the context of ex-napiter, top-down dakwah can in fact trigger resistance, as they often experience fatigue with normative discourse that fails to touch the roots of their lived experience. The reflective personal dakwah approach presupposes a humane encounter built on a foundation of empathy and equality. Nurcholish Madjid emphasized that dakwah should be "a revival of a deep and enlightening religious consciousness."

This model of empathetic communication in dakwah is also in line with Carl Rogers' theory of non-directive counseling, which emphasizes the importance of unconditional acceptance, empathy, and full presence as the foundation of psychological transformation. This means the religious counselor acts not as a sole preacher, but as an active listener who creates a reflective space. In the context of ex-napiter, this presence is important for rebuilding trust that has long been broken toward others, toward religion, and toward the state. It must be noted, however, that Rogers' non-directive approach was originally formulated within a therapeutic context with clear ethical boundaries and clinical supervision. Religious counselors who carry out similar reflective accompaniment, without formal psychological training, may potentially face situations beyond their competence for example, if an ex-napiter shows symptoms indicating severe trauma or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Therefore, the reflective personal dakwah framework proposed in this research ideally should be accompanied by a clear referral mechanism to mental health professionals whether through community

health centers (puskesmas), regional psychiatric hospitals, or psychological services in cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs whenever a counselor identifies signs that fall outside the capacity of spiritual accompaniment alone. This aspect will be elaborated further in the recommendations section.

Deradicalization as a Process of Identity and Spiritual Recovery

Deradicalization cannot be understood merely as a one-directional process of re-ideologization, but as the recovery of identity and spirituality. Studies by the RAND Corporation emphasize that effective deradicalization always involves personal and spiritual dimensions, not merely security rhetoric. Ex-napiter generally experience a loss of self after leaving their extremist group they feel empty, uprooted from their belief system, and experience a void of life's meaning.

Social identity theory, from Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains that a person tends to seek protection within a group that can give them a sense of belonging and meaning. When someone leaves their former ideological group, they do not automatically become "neutral," but rather find themselves in a dangerous void. Viktor Frankl referred to this condition as an "existential vacuum," one that is vulnerable to infiltration by a new ideology if it is not quickly filled with positive meaning.

Within an Islamic framework, the existential vacuum and the need for group identity described by Frankl, Tajfel, and Turner have a strong conceptual resonance with two central ideas: fitrah and ummah. Fitrah, in Islamic understanding, refers to the basic human inclination toward truth, balance, and longing for God an inherent "space" within the human being that, if not filled with healthy belief, can be filled by ideological distortions. In this sense, Frankl's "existential vacuum" can be read as a condition in which a person's fitrah has been diverted or covered over by a deviant ideological construct, and the process of reflective personal dakwah functions to help the individual "return" to their fitrah. Meanwhile, the need for a sense of group belonging described by Tajfel-Turner's social identity theory finds its conceptual counterpart in the concept of ummah an inclusive community of faith that is not exclusivist-militant in nature. When an ex-napiter leaves their extreme ideological group, the void of belonging left behind should ideally be filled not by a new ideological group that is equally exclusive, but by an awareness of membership in a broader and more inclusive ummah the Muslim community of Pohuwato in general, mosque congregations, and moderate religious social networks. Thus, reflective personal dakwah can be understood not merely as the application of Western psychological techniques within an Islamic vessel, but as a process that conceptually directs the individual to return to their fitrah while also finding their place within the ummah two processes that, within the Frankl and Tajfel-Turner frameworks, are explained separately as the filling of existential meaning and the fulfillment of group identity needs, but which, in the Islamic view, are two sides of a single, whole process of recovery.

This understanding also raises an important question about the sustainability of this process of filling in new meaning. To the extent that the process of "returning to fitrah" and "finding a place within the ummah" remains highly dependent on the personal

presence of Ustadz Wisno as the accompanying figure, there is a risk that this filling of meaning has not yet been fully internalized independently a concern relevant to the concept of dependency in counseling psychology. Ideally, the long-term success of this approach is marked by a shift in the source of meaning and belonging from an individual figure (Ustadz Wisno) toward a broader and more permanent community structure mosque congregations, study groups, and the social network of ex-napiter who have themselves transformed into agents of moderation (such as FK and AHM). In this reading, a stronger indicator of the success of reflective personal dakwah is not continued dependence on the figure of the accompanying counselor, but the extent to which the individual has built independent anchors of meaning and social anchors within the local ummah structure a dimension that cannot yet be fully ascertained from this research's data and requires long-term monitoring as an agenda for further research.

Religious Moderation: Humanizing the Subject of Dakwah from Within

Religious moderation, as developed by Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs, is not merely a policy discourse, but a religious approach that balances textuality and contextuality, religious commitment and respect for diversity. In the context of ex-napiter, religious moderation needs to be instilled not merely through formal sermons, but through interactions that awaken a new consciousness.

The reflective-participatory ethnographic approach is an appropriate method for recording this process, as it is able to combine the researcher's field experience with scientific analysis. Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner explain that the reflective approach in ethnography is not merely a method of writing about experience, but a medium for understanding social complexity through reflective and in-depth experience. With this approach, the experience of the religious counselor directly involved in accompanying the ex-napiter as documented and reflected upon by the researcher becomes not merely a story, but data; the narratives of dakwah are no longer separated from social reality, but rather become a mirror of transformation for the counselor, for the researcher observing it, and for the subjects of the dakwah.

Literature Review

Research on dakwah for the deradicalization of ex-napiter continues to receive widespread attention in academia, particularly since the rise of religion-based violent threats in various regions of Indonesia. Solahudin and Marcus Mietzner explored the dynamics of deradicalization in Indonesia through the Poso case and highlighted that the government's approach tends to be technocratic and fails to reach the psychosocial roots of radicalism. M. Imdadun Rahmat, in his dissertation, showed that deradicalization programs that focus only on formal aspects are unable to penetrate the deepest inner space of ex-napiter, and suggested a more communicative, participatory, and personal approach.

Noor Huda Ismail ethnographically described how genuine, empathy-based friendships can serve as a powerful entry point for changing extreme beliefs. Nur Rofiah emphasized that a narrative of Islam full of compassion is essential in the process of

ideological rehabilitation, reminding us that religion is often misused not because of its texts, but because of human experiences that have not found a spiritual way home. Asna Husin studied a rehabilitation program for ex-napiter in Aceh and found that the participation of local religious leaders and an approach based on cultural values were very helpful in rebuilding the peaceful identity of ex-napiter. Meanwhile, Lies Marcoes and the Rumah KitaB team reinforced the argument that personal approaches by religious figures can touch the deepest psychological side of former perpetrators of violence through the role of a “spiritual listener” who is present without judgment.

From these six previous studies, it appears that there remains wide room for a reflective ethnographic approach that closely narrates the process of personal dakwah. None has explicitly narrated and positioned the experience of a religious counselor in personally reaching out to and accompanying ex-napiter while also discussing the position of such findings relative to other regional cases such as Poso and Aceh. This research attempts to make a distinctive contribution: presenting a humane, spiritual, and emotional narrative often missing from ordinary academic reports, while positioning the Pohuwato case within the broader constellation of regional deradicalization studies in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narratives of Personal Dakwah: Seven Stories from Pohuwato

In the accompaniment referred to in this research as reflective personal dakwah, the interaction between Ustadz Wisno and seven ex-napiter from Pohuwato as observed and documented by the researcher opens up a space for humane encounter that cannot be replaced by any formal program. The following names are presented using initials only, to protect the confidentiality of identities.

SA

SA was arrested in 2020 and served a sentence of two years and two months out of a three-year verdict, from the Mako Brimob Cikeas before being transferred to Gunung Sindur Prison. He spoke with tearful eyes when met at his home porch:

“After I was released in 2023, I thought I would be rejected by society. But what I encountered was actually a warm welcome. Open hands. Alhamdulillah.”

Through cross-themed conversations with Ustadz Wisno that did not always lead to formal religious sermons, SA gradually discovered an inclusive Islam. He then stated:

“From Ustadz Wisno I learned that Islam does not reject difference. Islam is moderate. I used to be harsh, but now I am more at peace. We have already acknowledged NKRI. We are no longer people who want to fight against it. We want to be part of this nation.”

ZK

ZK, currently 31 years old, served one year in prison at Cikeas and one year and three months at Gunung Sindur. He was a hard-natured and initially quite closed-off person. But one afternoon, after a conversation with Ustadz Wisno about the importance of tasamuh (tolerance) in Islam, he said:

“I am more grateful now living in Pohuwato. In prison, my body was confined. But after I got out, my soul was actually freed.”

He admitted that he had previously lived in suspicion and an exclusivist doctrine that fortified him against the outside world. Through gentle dialogue with Ustadz Wisno, he began to lay down that shield, affirming:

“Ustadz Wisno never forced anything. But from the way he spoke and listened, I came to know that Islam does not teach hostility. I used to want to die as a fighter. But now I want to live as a bridge of peace.”

ZL

ZL served a three-year sentence. When met, his words carried wounds not yet fully healed:

“When I first got out of prison, the community accepted me. But I know that sometimes they still talk behind my back. I'm not angry. I understand. Forgiving isn't easy.”

What stands out about ZL is his honesty in reflecting on his own change. He does not hide his past, but neither does he let it bind him:

“I've come to realize it. In the past, my understanding of Islam was narrow. Now I understand that religion must not be excessive. Especially after often receiving enlightenment on religious moderation from Ustadz Wisno, I feel my heart's eyes have been opened.”

JY

JY is one of the clearest examples of successful social reintegration. He was very well received by the community and is now a role model for his peers:

“I have never heard a bad word from the community since I got out. They treat me normally. That makes me want to truly change. What I know now is that Islam is full of love.”

FK

FK has a remarkable enthusiasm for learning and often jots down points from Ustadz Wisno's dakwah in his small notebook. One principle he remembers most is wasathiyah:

“Islam is in the middle. Not harsh, not lax. Not excessive.”

He is now involved in mosque activities and serves as a bridge between young expatriates and local community figures, affirming:

"In the past I distanced myself from society. Now I want to be close. I want Islam to be seen as a religion that is friendly, not angry."

MZL and AHM

Unlike the five ex-*napiter* above, MZL and AHM find it more difficult to speak up verbally. However, their presence at every forum, their active participation in social activities, and their openness in accepting invitations to gather from Ustadz Wisno show that change does not always need to be expressed in words. MZL is a loyal listener, while AHM, who lives in Duhia^{daa} Sub-district, has become an important link between the group of ex-*napiter* and local religious figures.

Stakeholder Responses

Ustadz Wisno's accompaniment efforts have resonated widely across various circles. The Regent of Pohuwato expressed appreciation:

"For me, what Ustadz Wisno is doing is a very urgent mission. His way of doing *dakwah* is the best Ustadz Wisno is present right among them, conveying that Islam is peaceful and harmonious."

The Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Pohuwato Regency also gave an assessment:

"This accompaniment is authentic *dakwah*, grounded *dakwah*. Ustadz Wisno has proven that great change can begin from a small, sincere touch. And that is special."

The Chairperson of the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) of Pohuwato Regency affirmed:

"Ustadz Wisno is indeed quite consistent in voicing a moderate and peaceful Islam. He doesn't just talk he goes directly into the field, and that's what makes his *dakwah* resonate."

These three statements from the Regent, the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office, and the Chairperson of the FKUB above need to be read proportionally, in accordance with their position within the argumentative structure of this research. These statements constitute a form of social-institutional recognition and legitimacy for Ustadz Wisno's approach and reputation as a religious counselor in general namely, that his approach is viewed as authentic, consistent, and beneficial for harmony in Pohuwato. However, none of the three were intended, nor can they be treated, as an independent assessment of the ideological transformation outcomes of the seven ex-*napiter* who are the specific subjects of this research; none of the three stakeholders conducted a direct assessment of SA, ZK, ZL, JY, FK, MZL, or AHM individually. Thus, these quotations function as indicators of the overall social legitimacy of the accompaniment program, not as external validation of the claims of ideological transformation narrated in the previous section.

Discussion: Reflective Personal *Dakwah* as a Humanistic Model of Deradicalization

The findings of this research show that reflective personal dakwah reaches emotional and existential layers that were previously locked away. Unlike formal approaches that tend to be one-directional, this approach positions the ex-napiter as sovereign subjects over their own life narratives. From equal, non-judgmental conversations, dakwah becomes a safe space for reconstructing a faith that is friendly, inclusive, and full of compassion.

Table 1. Reflective Qualitative Analysis of Personal Dakwah Toward Ex-Napiter

Name	Emotional and Spiritual Reflection	Narrative of Ideological Transformation	Indications of Psychological Change (Observational)
SA	"I thought I would be rejected. But instead I was welcomed warmly."	From an ideology of resistance to a spirit of nationalism and peace; ideologically acknowledges NKRI.	Shift in locus of control from external (blaming circumstances/environment) to internal (positioning oneself as an agent of change); religiosity appears to be moving toward a more intrinsic form (personal appreciation, not group compliance).
ZK	"In prison my body was confined, but my soul only became free after I got out."	From a desire to die as a fighter to a longing to become a bridge of peace.	A decrease in suspicion toward outsiders (out-group), observed through his openness in dialogue; resilience is evident in his ability to reflect on his past without becoming defensive.
ZL	"I'm not angry even though sometimes people talk behind my back. Forgiving isn't easy."	Awareness of the narrowness of his past understanding of Islam, now open to moderation.	Tolerance of remaining social stigma indicates emotional resilience; a shift from an exclusive-rigid religious understanding toward one that is more reflective and open to other interpretations.
JY	"I want to truly change. Islam is full of love."	Full success of social reintegration; has become a role model within the community.	Strengthening of a sense of social acceptance (sense of belonging) that appears to correlate with motivation to change; expressed religiosity leans intrinsic and is oriented toward values of compassion.
FK	"Islam is in the middle. Not harsh, not lax."	Adopting wasathiyah; now active as a bridge between ex-napiter and the community.	Internalization of the principle of moderation appears consistent in speech and action (note-taking on dakwah points, social bridging role); strong indication of internal locus of control through his own role initiative.
MZL	Speaks little, but always present and open to invitations to gather.	Change is demonstrated through consistent social participation.	Change is observed more in the behavioral dimension (presence, participation) than the verbal; observational data are not yet

			sufficient to specifically map locus of control or religiosity orientation.
AHM	Has become a link between the group of ex-napiter and religious figures in Duhiadaa.	Transformation is visible through involvement in cross-social and religious work.	The bridging role indicates a shift in social identity from a marginalized position toward one trusted by the community; however, as with MZL, further psychological mapping requires a more structured instrument.

Source: researcher's field notes and interviews, 2023–2025. The fourth column is observational-descriptive, based on the researcher's observations during accompaniment, not the result of standardized psychometric measurement; it is presented as an initial mapping that can serve as a basis for more structured instrumentation in further research.

Theoretically, this approach affirms the importance of integrating pastoral care with locally grounded disengagement support, in which dakwah functions as a space of recovery that helps restore a person's relationship with God, with society, and with themselves. Through this approach, an exclusive and confrontational narrative of Islam is gradually transformed into a narrative of Islam that is dialogical, calm, and grounded. An important question that arises from these findings is the extent to which this model can be developed and replicated by other religious counselors outside Pohuwato, given its highly personal nature and its reliance on the individual relationships built by Ustadz Wisno over 2023–2025.

Disaggregating the elements of this approach, there are several components that can conceptually be separated from the person of Ustadz Wisno and are therefore more likely to be replicable: (a) communication principles listening before advising, avoiding one-way sermons, and positioning ex-napiter as sovereign subjects over their own narratives which can be formulated into an empathetic communication training curriculum for religious counselors in general; (b) the conceptual framework of wasathiyah as substantive dakwah material, which does not depend on who delivers it; and (c) the structure of informal accompaniment meetings in non-formal spaces such as home porches, coffee stalls, and small mosques as a format that other counselors can adopt. By contrast, there are elements more difficult to separate from the person of Ustadz Wisno: the trust that has been gradually built since 2023 is a form of social capital that is cumulative and personal, and cannot simply be “transferred” to other counselors without a similar trust-building process from the beginning. Ustadz Wisno's reputation in Pohuwato as reflected in the recognition from the Regent, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the FKUB is also a contextual asset specific to him and to that region. The implication is that replicating this model elsewhere will likely require a comparable amount of trust-building time (on the order of years, not months), and initial success may not be instant even if the communication principles and substantive material have been appropriately adopted.

Compared to the Poso case studied by Solahudin and Mietzner (2012), in which the government's deradicalization approach was deemed to be technocratic and insufficiently reaching the psychosocial roots of radicalism, the Pohuwato case

demonstrates a different direction: a highly personal approach based on an individual relationship between counselor and ex-napiter. If the weakness of the Poso approach lay in its disconnection from the psychosocial dimension, then the challenge in the Pohuwato model lies in the opposite direction dependence on intensive personal relationships that may be difficult to scale institutionally. Meanwhile, compared to Husin's (2017) findings in Aceh, which emphasized the role of local religious figures and a culturally value-based approach, the Pohuwato case reinforces a similar pattern but with a narrower unit of analysis (seven individuals, one counselor, one regency) and a more limited observation period (2023–2025) compared to Aceh's rehabilitation program, which involved a broader institutional structure. The contribution of the Pohuwato case within this constellation is thus that of a micro case study enriching our understanding of relational mechanisms in disengagement not as a regency/province-scale program model as in the Aceh case, nor as a critique of national-scale technocratic policy as in the Poso case.

The ex-napiter in Pohuwato have now become active participants in religious moderation efforts and local peacebuilders a behavioral observation that is relatively verifiable (participation in mosque activities, role as social bridges) and whose data are consistently stronger than claims about the depth of their ideological transformation. A transformation of this magnitude, at the level of behavior and social involvement, could not have been achieved solely through uniform institutional sermon programs a contribution that stands on its own, independent of the question of the extent to which it also represents full ideological deradicalization.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This research affirms that the reflective personal dakwah approach makes a real contribution to supporting disengagement changes in behavior and social involvement as well as the social reintegration process of ex-napiter in Pohuwato Regency, Gorontalo Province. This approach is not built on one-way sermons or formal institutional pressure, but on warm human relationships, active empathy, and respect for individual spiritual autonomy.

The seven ex-napiter who are the subjects of observation show that the process of change is not linear. Each individual has their own unique way of re-interpreting religion, nation, and life in society. From SA, who experienced a warm welcome after his release, to AHM, who has become an important link within the community, it is clear that change does not begin solely from understanding, but also from the experience of being accepted as a whole human being. At the same time, this research affirms the important distinction between disengagement (whose findings are stronger observationally) and deradicalization (whose verbal expressions are promising but require further verification through longitudinal studies and, ideally, more structured psychological instruments).

Reflective personal dakwah penetrates the emotional and existential layers of the ex-napiter, reaching experiences often untouched by formal approaches. By integrating the concept of pastoral care in Islam which, within an Islamic framework, can be

understood as the process of helping individuals return to their fitrah and find their place within the ummah this dakwah becomes a vehicle for recovery and for nurturing renewed love for a friendly Islam, for NKRI, and for a peaceful life.

Recommendations

First, the capacity of religious counselors needs to be strengthened through training that is theological, psychosocial, and interdisciplinary in nature encompassing empathetic communication skills, trauma awareness, and locally based deradicalization approaches. This training should ideally also include a module on the limits of counselors' competence and referral mechanisms to mental health professionals such as psychologists at community health centers or regional psychiatric hospitals for cases showing indications of severe trauma or PTSD symptoms that fall outside the capacity of spiritual accompaniment.

Second, the success of dakwah requires close collaboration among the Ministry of Religious Affairs, law enforcement officials, community leaders, religious organizations, and correctional institutions, in a spirit of humanity.

Third, it is important to create a safe, open, and stigma-free space for spiritual dialogue, as a place for ex-napiter to rebuild self-confidence and repair social relationships.

Fourth, personal accompaniment must be planned and sustainable, involving figures trusted by ex-napiter from both religious and community circles, with attention to a sustainability strategy: long-term accompaniment should ideally gradually shift the ex-napiter's anchors of meaning and social belonging from an individual accompanying figure toward a broader and more permanent community (ummah) structure mosque congregations, study groups, and the social network of ex-napiter who have themselves transformed into agents of moderation in order to reduce the risk of dependency on a single figure.

Fifth, given that intensive accompaniment of ex-napiter over several years (2023–2025) has the potential to cause emotional fatigue, burnout, or secondary traumatic stress in the religious counselors themselves which, if not managed, could affect the quality and sustainability of dakwah relevant institutions (the Ministry of Religious Affairs, religious organizations) need to provide psychological support and self-care mechanisms for religious counselors carrying out this type of accompaniment, for example through regular supervision sessions, peer support groups among counselors, or periodic access to psychological consultation.

Finally, field experiences such as this need to be documented and disseminated as best practices, accompanied by further longitudinal studies to monitor the sustainability of the ex-napiter's transformation and to assess the extent to which the indications of disengagement observed in this research develop into a deeper ideological deradicalization that is independent of the accompanying figure. Stories of successful social reintegration through reflective dakwah are a valuable legacy that can inspire many

parties and build hope that change is possible while maintaining academic caution in interpreting the extent to which such change has truly taken root.

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