

# Ongoing IS Radical Ideology in Malaysia: Factors and Counter Strategies

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## Abstract

Malaysia has long been recognized for its ability to manage threats from Islamic radical movements by overcoming significant obstacles and major challenges to national security. Although many movements have been banned and appropriate actions taken, Islamic radicalism nevertheless persists and appears on the rise. This study identifies factors associated with its persistence despite years of efforts to hinder or eradicate Islamic radicalism. Using qualitative historical sociology, the author used several resources for this analysis, including interviews and literature. Findings reveal four major factors that allow *Salafi Jihadi* ideology to prosper: a false reading of *jihad*, personal inclinations, political pressure, and globalization. Government actions countering this threat include declaring Malaysia an Islamic state; deradicalization and rehabilitation programs; national think tanks, prohibiting *fatwas*; introducing the concept of *wasatiyyah*; and implementation of counter narratives. Although the ideology cannot be completely eradicated, actions taken have managed to contain the contagion and also prevent major threats to national security.

*Keywords:* Ideology, National Security, Radical Islam, *Salafi Jihadi*, *Takfiri*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Thus far, the 21st century has shown dramatic growth in Islamic radicalism, not only in West Asia but also across East Asia and Europe. Daesh eclipsed Al Qaeda as the most feared movement and is known to have large numbers of supporters in SE Asia, including Malaysia. After initial arrests in 2013, the government confirmed that its main supporters include former members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM).

JI was established in 1993 by former leaders of Darul Islam Indonesia (DII) who relocated and formed a new group in Malaysia. JI included members returned from the Afghanistan War who then funded and provided military training for new JI recruits as a result of cooperation with Al Qaeda and KMM, another Malaysian movement with veterans from the Afghan war against Russia in 1989. KMM sprung up two years after JI, in 1995, mostly comprising Malaysians who had gone to Pakistan as students and then entered the Russo-Afghan conflict. KMM member military experience was jointly employed by both groups, although each group had its own modus operandi for the realization of independent goals. The long-term plan for both groups was to form an Islamic region (*Daulah Islamiyah*) in SE Asia including Indonesia, Southern Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Southern Thailand. They believed the radical ideology of *Salafi Jihadi* would guide their success and thus collaborated. However, the 9/11 incident caused the Malaysian government to take concerted steps to detect and intervene all Islamic radical movements. Both groups were subsequently routed and banned.

This paper discusses current factors that affect sustained support for the *Salafi Jihadi* ideology in Malaysia, as well as steps taken by the government to halt this and similar ideological threats in the interest of national security, to include the *aqidah* of Muslims.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study's qualitative approach combines historical and sociological methods of data collection as the most appropriate approach to clarify phenomena drawn from a global Muslim society (Kuntowijoyo, 1993). A discursive route is taken through document analysis, interviews and literature to better clarify the increasing radicalism of Muslim militants (Kartodirdjo, 1992). Findings are arranged in chronological order and presented in narrative form to obtain a more comprehensive discussion.

## 3.0 SALAFI JIHADI: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

From ~1970s to ~1990s, *Salafi Jihadi* ideology was popularized during a global renaissance of Islamic revivalism (Dekmejian, 1995) and became an ideology of choice for radical movements (As-Suri, 2009: 30). The term emphasizes *Salafiyah* teachings introduced by Ibn Taimiyah and later revived by the Wahhabi movement. The term *jihadi* is representative of a concept called *jihad qital* by Sayyid Qutb (Sariburaja, 2013). Both terms were merged and reintroduced by Abdus Salam Faraj (As-Suri, 2009), a man who influenced many Muslim leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Osama Ben Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri (Esposito, 2010).

*Salafi* thought demands a return to the practice of Muslim scholars who lived during the first 300 after the death of Muhammad (Zulkarnain, 2017b). Its ideology forbids new changes in doctrine and demands that Muslims act as true believers by adhering to elements of *al wala' wa al bara'* — i.e., loyalty to Allah SWT (as One God) and by avoiding anything contrary to His law (al-Qahthani, 2013). They also adhere to *Tawhid al-Hakimiyah*, which is (i) obedience to Allah as the

only Owner/Author of Nature and Natural Law, and (ii) the struggle to make this specific approach to monotheism a tool that identifies enemies of Islam as either infidels or contrary Muslims (Azh-Zhawahiri, 2008). *Jihad qital* (war) is therefore permitted against ‘contrary Muslims’, specifically, any Muslim who fails to agree with this ideology. These are considered sufficiently infidel to legalize their murder.

At the dawn of the 21st century, *takfiri* became a label for Muslims who were ideologically aligned with Islamic radical movements, especially Daesh. The term *Salafi Takfiri* then replaced *Salafi Jihadi* and was initiated by Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi, a man who rearranged *Salafiyah* teachings and Sayyid Qutb’s definition of *jihad* (Syaiikh Ali, 2015). The rebranding was then passed to Daesh by its founder, Abu Mus'ab Al Zarqawi (Wagemakers, 2012). This group adheres to the idea of *takfiri* labelling of infidels, as a modified Sayyid Qutb position, whose *jihad qital* was to be applied, not only to opponents who qualify as infidels but also to any and all administrative and government systems that do not admit *Tawhid al-Hakimiyah*. Such governments are called *taghut* (Bakashmar, 2008). Hence, Muslims other than the new cult’s supporters became infidels, whereupon principles of *jihad* required their blood as well as that of ordinary non-Muslim infidels.

In Malaysia, this radical ideology evolved by way of *dakwah* (Maszlee, 2017; Mohd Roslan & Wan Mohd Tarmizi, 2011). From pre-independence days, Islamic radical movements were highly influenced by West Asian figures such as Jamaludin Al Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Sayyid Abu A'la Al Mawdudi, Hassan Al Banna, and Sayyid Qutb (Kamarulnizam, 2003). This ideological set became deeply rooted in educational venues and likely reflects influence from students returned from abroad as civil servants, in addition to improved public education systems and the *madrasah* system; not to mention preachers and traders who regularly visit SE Asia (Suffian, 2010). Presently, radical ideology survives and even thrives in increasingly diverse and complex ways.

## 4.0 COMPETITIVE FACTORS AFFECTING THE SPREAD OF ISLAMIC RADICAL IDEOLOGY IN MALAYSIA

Our discussion on competitiveness between JI, KMM and Daesh has been combined due to their shared dynamics and means. Four major factors influence the survival of Islamic radical ideology in Malaysia. The first concerns *jihadi* parallels; the second, political pressure; the third, individual inclinations; the fourth, globalization.

### 4.1 The *Jihadi* Struggle

The most significant factor leading to direct or indirect participation by Malaysians is attraction to the radical ideology of *jihad* (Samuel, 2016; Ahmad, 2016; Muhamad Sade, 2016; Ayob Khan, 2016; Mohd Mizan *et al.*, 2016; Wan Mohd Zaki, 2015). Differences between terms—*Salafi Jihadi* per JI and KMM, and *Salafi Takfiri* per Daesh supporters—are not a problem (Zulkarnain and Nordin, 2013; Mohd Mizan, 2009a) because the ideological struggle is the same for all groups (Ramakrishna, 2016). They believe *jihad* is fardhu ain (Ahmad, 2016) because the need for *jihad* has been mentioned for more than forty times in Al-Qur'an. Hence, it is powerful motivation, especially martyrdom’s promise of immediate admission to heaven (Hanif, 2015).

Nonetheless, the concept of *jihad* has been grossly misconstrued and horribly reconstructed by these radical movements (Hamzah, 2017; Mohd Basri, 2016; Kamaruzaman *et al.*, 2010b). This followed the integration of *Salafiyah* elements regarding *jihad* as demanded by *Shari'ah* (Wan Mohd Zaki, 2015; Kamarulnizam & Mohd Affandi, 2015); a handful of people who sought out religious teachers to boost its support (Abdul Aziz, 2009). These doctrinal innovations were introduced to

ustaz and kiyai of much influence and high credibility, who then conveyed and even endorsed the radical thinking (Kamarulnizam, 2009). Moreover, radical groups are very genial, supportive and accommodating. They establish tight-knit communities (IYRES, 2017) and alluringly encourage participation. Most recruits are influenced by subtle doctrines (propaganda) and the lure of martyrdom's rewards (Mohd Hizam & Zamihan, 2016; JPM, 2014). Couple this with the fact that many Muslims seek true Islam in lieu of predominantly corrupt governance, such persuasiveness purchased ongoing support (Mohd Mizan, 2009b).

## 4.2 Political Pressure

Many radicals consider Malaysia taghut because its government does not fully implement *Shari'ah* (Ayob Khan, 2016; Ahmad, 2016; Samuel, 2016; Muhamad Sade, 2016; Mohd Mizan, 2009a; IYRES 2017; Zulkarnain, 2017a; Kamarulnizam, 2009). They therefore doubt the government's ability and desire to manage Malaysia as an Islamic state (Kamaruzaman. *et al.*, 2010b) especially because current praxis does not draw on concepts of *al wala' wa al bara'* (Abdul Aziz, 2009). To complicate matters, Malay rulers hold critical differences on matters concerning modernization and also appear to tolerate secularism and generic attacks by globalists on religious values associated with governance (Zulkarnain, 2014).

Radicals argue the Malaysian government has failed to formulate clear Islamic policies that implement Islamic governance, which, in turn, has encouraged the dominion of Western ideology since independence (Kamaruzaman, *et al.*, 2010a). Malaysia's position is certainly contrary to "Islamic rule" as supposedly practiced by Daesh (Mohd Hizam & Zamihan, 2016). Consequently, radicals feel obliged to militantly rise in *jihad* and establish their brand of *Daulah Islamiyah* (JPM, 2014; Wan Abdul Hamid, 2006; Nasir, 2006; IYRES, 2017).

## 4.3 Personal Inclinations

Personal inclinations are influenced by individuals, families and social conditions. The most critical of these several factors include the following: loneliness, failure to achieve personal ambitions, inability to marry, a sense of inferiority, and not being appreciated by the community (Ahmad, 2017; Hanif, 2015). Depression due to a lack of support causes a kind of self-exile (Kamaruzaman, *et al.*, 2010b; Abdul Aziz, 2009). Personal and social disappointments thus open doors for radical movement recruiters (Zulkarnain, 2017a). Some join radical movements out of a fragile sense of self-esteem and profound ignorance. They entertain extremist positions (Samuel, 2016) in a kind of delirium that subconsciously accepts violence and terrorism as rational (Wan Mohd Zaki, 2015), and with deep sympathy for the fate of Muslims persecuted by the West (Ahmad, 2017; Samuel, 2016; Hanif, 2015).

Family influences are no less important (Mohd Mizan, *et al.*, 2016). Some are influenced by family members who struggled against past occupation (Respondent A1, 2017). Others admit they feel neglected by their families or were raised in dysfunctional households (Ahmad, 2017). Some are victims of divorce with issues regarding child custody (Mohd Basri, 2016). Others come from reclusive families that failed to mingle with the community at large; thus causing constricted, narrow-minded home environments (Kamarulnizam, 2009). Economic status is also a contributing factor (Samuel, 2016; Bakashmar, 2008). Those from poor families are more susceptible to promises of rewards when joining radical groups (Mohd Hizam & Zamihan, 2016).

Social factors and milieus adversely affected by modernization can cause communal turmoil (Mohd Mizan, *et al.*, 2016; Zulkarnain, 2014). These, along with peer pressure, significantly

influence recruits to radicalism (Hanif, 2015; Kamaruzaman, *et al.*, 2010b). On their own initiative, some individual recruit students who studied in Pakistan and became involved in the Afghanistan war (Respondent A2, 2016). Such individuals lead many others to support the idea of establishing *Daulah Islamiyah* (Nasir, 2011; Mohd Mizan, 2009a). Malaysia's relations with West Asian countries, particularly in educational sectors, have allowed a small number of students to access military training and enter the Afghan conflict, after which they return home, hot with ideology and military skills (Mohd Mizan, 2009b). This element goes far to inspire local support for radicalism.

#### 4.4 Globalization

Globalization implies technological sophistication, demographic changes, population growth, and degrees of international economic and political continuity. Radical Islamic movements have grown in parallel. Globalization allows Malaysians access to detailed international developments. Many observers and political analysts say that radical movements of the new millennium focus on religious motivation (Zulkarnain and Lailatul, 2016) because Muslims are globally oppressed (IYRES, 2017; Zulkarnain and Nordin, 2013) and with no end in sight (Samuel, 2016). Thus, sympathy with conflicts in West Asia (Hanif, 2015) creates solidarity in Malaysian Muslim communities based on *ukhwwah Islamiyah* (Ahmad, 2016). Thereby, local supporters of radicalism feel responsible to defend the global Muslim ummah.

In addition, online social media especially permits recruiters easy access to naïve youth (Mohd Mizan *et al.*, 2016). Radical ideology disseminates via blogs, Facebook, Surespot, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and Skype, and is far more difficult to detect and track compared to the old modus operandi of organized usrahs (Ayob Khan, 2016). Propaganda masters have developed new coding and various applications to upload songs and videos on Youtube that promote their strength while encouraging new recruits to migrate to Islamic State of Daesh (Mohd Hizam & Zamihan, 2016). They influence people who do not understand regional or international politics. Globalization via the internet, has easily and effectively obtained the support of many unwary Muslims.

## 5.0 MALAYSIA'S RESPONSES TO THE THREAT OF RADICAL IDEOLOGY

The Malaysian government has taken a number of integrated measures to counter radical ideological threats. These include declaring Malaysia an Islamic state; programs for the rehabilitation of detainees; national think tanks; an official *fatwa* proclamation; the promotion of Islamic *Wasatiyyah*; and the dissemination of counter narratives.

### 5.1 Declaring Malaysia An Islamic State

In the wake of 9/11, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared Malaysia an Islamic state, specifically to emphasize the government's position on the irrelevance of establishing an Islamic state, which is the stated *jibadi* goal of radical movements, especially JI and KMM (Mohd Mizan, 2009b; Mahathir, 2002). He also slammed the labelling of Islam a 'religion of violence' because terrorism exists regardless of religion, race or belief system. Hence, blaming Islam for terrorism was a grave injustice (Abdul Rashid, 2003). Nonetheless, the government also believed that a lack of systemic Islamic praxis caused the nation's radicals to feel stressed and even oppressed. To ease this tension, perceived and not, the government provided better ways to



implement Islamic policies (Abuza, 2003). These actions aimed to preemptively reduce antagonism, stressors, radical demands and subsequent acts of terrorism (Mahathir, 2001).

## 5.2 Rehabilitation Program Content

Government-initiated rehabilitation and deradicalization programs for radical detainees attempt to neutralize dangerous ideology. These are implemented by the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) in collaboration with the Prime Minister's Department (JPM), the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), and other experts including experienced counselors and academicians. JI and KMM detainees are examined regarding general knowledge of Islam, *jihad* and views on an Islamic State. A series of corrective talks, classes and *Tafaqqub Fiddin* are then conducted (Rabasa *et al.*, 2010). Critical issues such as *aqidah*, the Islamic state, democracy, obedience to leaders, *jihad*, Islam and the matter of infidels are discussed. Understanding the Qur'an and methods of *ijtihad* and *mursalih mursalah* as well as state priorities and strategic thinking are introduced and discussed so detainees come to a better understanding of authentic Islam that readjusts their perspectives.

Periodically, Daesh detainees are required to review these same modules to focus on self-reflection, discipline, affection, management and social survival skills. PDRM and Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) programs collaborate in the use of select former radicals who share experience and ideas with detainees (Ahmad, 2017, Mohd Mizan, 2009a).

## 5.3 Think Tanks

To ensure the country remains informed of current local and international radical machinations, several think tanks were created to gather data, conduct research, and recommend proactive actions. These groups deal not only with ideological threats but also with actual attacks. They include the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT, 2016) in Kuala Lumpur, organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (KLN) to provide structured training by experts who also share investigative results on regional violence (KLN, 2018). Another is the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) under the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which studies the progress and development of the nation's youth. They direct programs that define theological and political errors in radical ideology, specifically to eradicate misconceptions and manage imminent matters of importance (KBS, 2018).

The Institut Pemantapan dan Pengkaderan Akidah Malaysia (IPHAM), under JAKIM, implements various programs and activities for those who offend *aqidah* based on judicial judgments. This group specifically seeks to build public awareness while assisting state measures to contain and overcome the manipulation of *aqidah*.

## 5.4 Fatwa Proclamation to Ban Daesh

The ideological threat posed by Daesh developed rapidly and quietly, primarily through social media. Malaysia's Fatwa Muzakarah National Committee, under JAKIM, issued a *fatwa* ruling that banned any and all Daesh-style *jihad* activities due to extremist positions considered contrary to *Abli Sunnah Wal Jamaah* (ASWJ), Malaysia's official Islamic school of thought. The committee also declared that the death of anyone who partook in Daesh's struggle did not qualify as martyrdom (JAKIM, 2015; Norliah, 2016). Contradictory elements of Daesh-stye *jihad* include cruel murder methods, mass oppression and the upholding of Khilafah Islamiyah through *qital jihad*. Prohibited

acts include belief-in and spreading Daesh ideology, funding Daesh, and pledging loyalty to Daesh authorities (Mufti Selangor, 2018).

The government's *fatwa* aligns with world scholars like Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh (a Saudi Mufti); Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi (Chairman of World Islamic Scholars); and Sheikh Shawqi Allam, the Egyptian Grand Mufti who condemned Daesh as violators of Islam and *Shari'ah* (JPM, 2016).

### **5.5 Promoting *Wasatiyyah* Islam**

The government's best solution is the concept of *wasatiyyah* which promotes Islam as a moderate religion. Hence, clarification is given to all levels of the Muslim community giving each individual ample reason to reject radical ideology. The concept of *wasatiyyah* corrects general perceptions of Islam by addressing the unwarranted but nevertheless rising global fear of Muslims (Islamophobia) (Noh, 2018).

The government's sincerity manifest as the Malaysian Wasatiyah Institute (IWM, Dec. 2012), an institution that promotes Islam as moderate, balanced, fair and admirable. In parallel, a National Wasatiyyah Policy was enacted to clarify the government's intent to promote this understanding as national Muslim praxis in a concerted effort to overcome extremism in the community (IWM, 2017).

### **5.6 Implementing A Counter Narrative**

The government recognized that ideological attacks by radical movements, particularly Daesh, required the propagation of a counter narrative. Accordingly, under PDRM, the government set up a Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Center (CMC) in 2016 to implement a counter narrative containing select ideological matters (NST, 2018; Muhamad Sade, 2016). Data received is analyzed and directly channeled to Interpol and Aseanpol. Measures are then taken to correct misconceptions of Islam and which emphasize the government's position of *wasatiyyah*. These messages are specially channeled through social media, the preferred method of choice by Daesh members (NST, 2016).

The Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) participate in this counter narrative. Some misunderstandings, such as *jihad* as *fardhu ain*, for example, have no other meaning than war in the mind of radicals. Another is migration as an obligation, meaning Muslims are obliged to complete their faith by relocating to an Islamic state, especially the Daesh state. Another is Daesh's description of their caliphate as the utopian model of a glorious Islamic state; one emulating that of the Prophet's time (Zulkarnain, 2017b). Radicals also teach that Syria and Iraq are the most suitable venues for *jihad*.

Additionally, the Counter Narrative Centre for Countering Violent Ekstremisme (CONCAVE-ISSI) announced academic fellowship appointments in March 2018, specifically to oppose extremism with academic narratives on authentic Islamic thought and tradition. To further a stable flow of knowledge and sense of security in the community, CONCAVE-ISSI raises public awareness by conducting forums, symposia, seminars and course work. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) meanwhile monitors and blocks access to websites promoting sensitive or inappropriate content that ideologically break with authentic Islam and also threaten Malaysia (Ahmad Zahid, 2016). This strict supervisory control (censorship) is also carried out regionally in a cooperative effort with other countries.

## 5.7 National Expert Rehabilitation Panel

In addition to Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA) and Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), the KDN launched a National Expert Rehabilitation or Deradicalization Panel on 30 March 2017. This group collaborates with government agencies such as PDRM, the Prison Department (Penjara), JAKIM, and the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Its experts come from various disciplines including psychologists, security personnel, academicians, social workers and entrepreneurial experts; some with extensive experience handling radical detainees from JI and KMM. Additional collaboration between Penjara and PDRM was strengthened when the original six experts on the panel grew from 5 or 6 to a current level between 40 to 50 members (Gunaratna, 2018). Modules conducted by the panel have structurally increased and now include vocational training, educational programs, social and family counselling, as well as recreational, psychological, creative arts and financial rehabilitation (Ahmad, 2017).

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

According to government reports, by 2011, 95% of 240 detainees, mostly from JI and KMM, had been fully deradicalized. The remaining 5% have since been categorized as hard-core radicals who would readily re-engage with Al Qaeda and Daesh (Mohamad Fuzi, 2016). Another writer reports that from 2013 to 2017 the number of detainees increased from 4 to 95. The highest numbers of arrests (292) were made in 2016 due to the conflict in Aleppo, which directly caused Malaysian militants to join Daesh (Mohd Mizan, 2018).

Various factors have been identified as that sustain Islamic radical ideology and its recruits. *Salafi Jihadi* and *Salafi Takfiri* ideations commonly unite radical supporters with the goal of establishing a *Khilafah Islamiyah*. Research findings show that despite a range of concerted counter measures taken by the government, ideological belief systems are uniquely individual and cannot be measured objectively. Hence, efforts to raise awareness and inform society must be consistently maintained to ensure containment of risk and the reduction of threats to national security.

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