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**THE ROUTE TO RADICALISATION
FOR MALAY-MUSLIM WOMEN
TRACING THE NEXUS BETWEEN UNIVERSALS AND
PARTICULARS IN MALAYSIA**

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Executive Summary

Since the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013, the number of Malaysian women involved in the militant group had gradually grown, and by 2018, the Malaysian police reported a new trend of women being used as suicide bombers in Southeast Asia. While Malaysian women have participated in militant activities in the past, their roles had always been that of supporters and their activities were confined to home soil.

Advancing beyond support roles to leave Malaysia for a conflict zone and proactively seeking to wed ISIS fighters and wage jihad is indeed a new phenomenon. But in moving to Syria and involving themselves with ISIS, these women have not challenged gender norms: they have not abandoned their conservative gender roles. In this study, I highlight some of the main motivations for Malay-Muslim women's involvement with ISIS. I posit that the reasons for these women clinging on to traditional gender norms must be found in the interplay between global and local Islamic revivalism within the socio-cultural and political context of Malaysia.

Many scholars, political analysts, and terrorism experts have argued that the politicisation of Islam and the institutionalisation of Salafism in Malaysia created a conservative religious-socio-political context that is conducive to radicalisation à la ISIS's violent extremism. However, I contend that, given the Malaysian context, the majority of Malay-Muslim women have not been, and are unlikely to be, susceptible to ISIS ideology. ISIS ideology lacks broad appeal with the majority of Malay-Muslims, and this reality cuts across gender.

The structure of the Malaysian state, no doubt, may have inadvertently reinforced the ISIS ideology in some cases. However, for the majority of Malay-Muslims, Malaysia's particular socio-political context diminishes the appeal of ISIS. ISIS has not tailored its recruitment propaganda to take into account the Malaysian socio-political fabric, where Malay-Muslims buy into the state-produced narrative that they are beneficiaries of Malay-Muslim ethno-religious primacy. This reality contradicts ISIS's dominant rhetoric of Muslim oppression. As a result of ISIS's silence and lack of engagement with Malaysian lived realities, its ideology does not take root among most Malay-Muslims.

In addition, Malaysia's state-driven Islamisation efforts have projected the Malaysian state as the key body of authority and Islamic legitimacy, to the detriment of ISIS. State-driven religious forces have also regulated the role of women in the private sphere, which they portray as crucial in ensuring that moral order is upheld in the public sphere. Women's wings of Malaysian political parties, unlike ISIS, have a repertoire of the local socio-cultural particularities and have vast resources at their disposal. As such, they are able to engage with local women and cater to the specificities of their living conditions, rendering their particular ideology more relevant than the abstract "universal" ideology of ISIS, which is not only geographically distant, but also disconnected from the personal.

However, political and economic circumstances are becoming increasingly unstable today, both globally and domestically, and this means discourses at the local and international level will evolve. In Malaysia, although the previous Pakatan Harapan government comprising a large Chinese party collapsed in March 2020 after less than two years in power, it had aroused concerns among some Malay-Muslims that Malay supremacy may be in danger of erosion. This sentiment is one of the reasons why it is imperative to continually monitor the nexus between global and local Muslim narratives to determine whether the ISIS narrative of Muslim oppression, which was once alien to most Malay-Muslims, is beginning to gain traction among them. For counter-terrorism measures to be effective, this contestation for legitimacy between the universals and particulars must be examined to assess the likelihood for radicalisation and violent extremism gaining greater hold in Malaysia.

Introduction

On 9 May 2018, a 51-year-old would-be Malaysian female suicide bomber from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) who had planned to launch a terror attack during the Malaysian general elections was apprehended by the Malaysian police. She had targeted a polling site in a predominantly non-Muslim precinct in Kuala Lumpur, having suggested to senior ISIS leaders that attacking non-Muslim voters would demonstrate that “ISIS is against any form of ‘un-Islamic democracy’”.¹ Her plans included ramming into non-Muslim places of worship with her explosives-rigged vehicle.²

Although her operation was foiled by Malaysian counter-terrorism authorities, she had been communicating with over 600 people through her social media chat groups prior to her arrest. A mother of two, she was noted to be the first Malaysian female leader of a pro-ISIS militant cell. She had robustly urged more local attacks as well as impelled her chat group members to head to Syria to join ISIS.³

The former chief of the Royal Malaysia Police Counter-Terrorist Special Branch, Ayob Khan, noted soon afterwards that the case highlighted ISIS’s new strategy of increasing its recruitment of women, targeting them to join its cause as suicide bombers.⁴ Indeed, the number of women arrested for ISIS links in Malaysia was reported to have increased over the past few years.⁵ Researchers have found that despite the collapse in 2017 of the so-called Islamic Caliphate set up by ISIS, the influence of ISIS remains to date, and its operations across the globe continue to be a threat.⁶ In 2019, Ayob Khan reiterated that there was a new trend of women being used as suicide bombers in Southeast Asia.⁷

Against this background, this study explores the intersection between the dynamic discourses surrounding ISIS and women, Malay-Muslim women in Malaysia, and political Islam in Malaysia. I argue that the multiple discourses at the global, transnational and national levels simultaneously converge and/or diverge on the religio-political institutional level in Malaysia. As the state’s religio-political institutions do not constitute a singular, monolithic entity, they produce various competing discourses. Although the Malaysian government has taken an official stance opposing ISIS, these competing discourses also serve both as a lubricant, albeit inadvertently, as well as a deterrent for ISIS’s ideology.

¹ The Straits Times, "Housewife in Malaysia gave ISIS the polling day attack plan: Source", *The Straits Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/housewife-in-malaysia-gave-isis-the-polling-day-attack-plan-source>

² The Straits Times, "Housewife in Malaysia"

³ The Straits Times, "Housewife in Malaysia"

⁴ Hafidzul Hilmi Mohd Noor, "IS now targeting women to serve as suicide bombers: Police", *NST Online*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/07/391955/now-targeting-women-serve-suicide-bombers-police>

⁵ Serina Rahman, "Should Malaysia Expect an Islamist Backlash?", *ISEAS Perspective*, September 11, 2018, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_54@50.pdf

⁶ Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, "Radicalization of Women in ISIS in Malaysia: Profiling, Causes and Roles", *JATI - Journal Of Southeast Asian Studies*, Special Issue 2018 (Rebranding Southeast Asia): 104-122, <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.sp2018no1.8>

⁷ Bernama, "Women's involvement in suicide bombing worrying, says Bukit Aman", *NST Online*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/08/514845/womens-involvement-suicide-bombing-worrying-says-bukit-aman>.

I contend that in a few cases where the multiple discourses converge at a particular local level and align with (i) a personal impetus and (ii) access to extremist social media echo chambers, the route to violent extremism becomes lubricated. The “universal” ISIS ideology becomes locally “particularised” in these cases and the state inadvertently reinforces ISIS’s ideology.

However, in most cases where the “universal” narratives of ISIS overlap with the local “particular” context, the state often emerges as the more legitimate actor, rendering ISIS’s ideology irrelevant. For the majority of Malay-Muslim women, these various discourses diverge at the particular, local level, where the state deters support for ISIS, and thus the appeal of ISIS diminishes. Despite Malaysia providing an ostensibly conducive context for extremist radicalisation, as argued by several scholars, I posit that ISIS’s vision for a caliphate does not resonate with most Malay-Muslim women. For most of these Malaysian women, what they consider as their own private “universal” religio-political ideology frequently aligns with the “particular”, i.e., the locally dominant state-engineered discourse.

Methodology

The methodology for this qualitative study is content analysis involving open-source news reports and academic literature on ISIS, political Islam in Malaysia, and women’s involvement within these domains. To augment this secondary research, fieldwork was conducted in Malaysia to gather primary data. In-depth interviews and semi-structured focus group sessions were organised with:

- (i) gender and women’s rights experts;⁸
- (ii) political researchers;⁹
- (iii) terrorism and security analysts;¹⁰
- (iv) officials from the Royal Malaysia Police Counter-Terrorism Special Branch;
- (v) divisional and grassroots leaders of political parties;¹¹ and
- (vi) leaders and members of several Malay-Muslim non-governmental religious organisations.¹²

While several scholars have examined the relationship between ISIS and the religio-political context within Malaysia, minimal attention is paid to the role of women and the factors that have influenced their radicalisation. The theory of social movement argues that radicalisation never occurs in a vacuum; it is interwoven with broader collective movements and countercultures. However, in the handful of studies

⁸ Interviews with experts from University of Malaya (UM), University of Science Malaysia (USM), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), and the National University of Malaysia (UKM), February 2020.

⁹ Interviews with researchers from the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), and the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), February 2020.

¹⁰ Interviews with analysts from the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization at the International Islamic University Malaysia (ISTAC-IIUM) and IMAN Research (IMAN), February 2020.

¹¹ Interviews with members of UMNO, PKR, Amanah, and Bersatu, February 2020.

¹² Interviews with Sisters-in-Islam (SIS), Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), International Women’s Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (WAFIQ), Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (IKRAM), and Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), February 2020.

that discuss the radicalisation of Malaysian women in ISIS, the role of women and their socio-political milieu are assumed to be static.

I argue that women's roles in radicalisation must be examined within the nexus of changing social, political, and religious discourses, with each of these contexts interplaying with and influencing one another. A deeper understanding of Malaysian women's involvement in ISIS's violent extremism will allow for more targeted counter-terrorism measures. With this objective in mind, the first section of this paper examines the universal discourse of ISIS concerning women.

(I) ISIS and Women: The Global Context

Soon after the emergence of ISIS in 2013 and the establishment of the so-called caliphate, the militant group identified women as being significant in state-building. Women were considered essential in raising the next generation of militants who would continue and champion the ISIS cause. Consequently, female-focused strategies were developed to recruit more women who would serve to nurture the next generation of militants. These strategies included preparing and disseminating treatises specially targeted at women. The treatises were written by Al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-women police division and religious enforcement unit of ISIS. Women were given a voice through ISIS social media channels as their ability to directly call on other women to join the cause was seen as valuable propaganda.

Women were initially contributing to ISIS primarily in the medical and educational sectors. However, as the urgency and magnitude of ISIS's missions grew stronger, women were also recognised as being valuable for carrying out terror operations because they were less likely to be perceived as terrorism suspects owing to widespread assumptions that women are not violent.¹³ ISIS, as well as leaders of pro-ISIS groups, soon began to call on women to become suicide bombers, and subsequently, women became increasingly conspicuous as operations executives even though frontline ISIS fighters were still predominantly male. As with multiple other militant groups, ISIS thrives on using women to commit violence because it adds an element of shock to its missions: the conventional image of women as nurturers of life is disrupted with the juxtaposed reality that women can exterminate life and provoke moral panic.

The Push for Gender Equality and Female Empowerment

In 2013, the role of women in threatening international peace and security through terrorism was noted in Resolution 2129 of the United Nations Security Council.¹⁴ In 2014, Resolution 2178 urged member states to counter violent extremism and the spread of terrorism by empowering women.¹⁵ In the same year, the presidential statement of the Security Council observed that women and girls were targets of violent extremism and that women and women's organisations had to be engaged with to develop strategies to counter violent extremism.¹⁶ One of the seven priority areas in the UN Secretary General's Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism included gender equality and female empowerment.¹⁷

¹³ Interview with a member of Malaysia's counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

¹⁴ United Nations, "Role of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism", United Nations Security Council Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/womens-role.pdf>.

¹⁵ United Nations, "Role of Women"

¹⁶ United Nations, "Role of Women"

¹⁷ United Nations, "Role of Women"

Discourses on gender equality and female empowerment were already prevalent globally prior to these UN resolutions. Since the first wave of feminism emerged in the West in the 19th century, all subsequent feminisms struggled to detach from being labelled as Western constructs. Indeed, the vocabulary of feminism itself is “Western”. As such, the globalisation of the various feminisms has been widely perceived as ramifications of Western imperialism.

In the case of ISIS, despite its rejection of the West and Western-centric notions, including democracy and feminism, it was compelled to appropriate and recontextualise the discourses on female empowerment and gender equality to its advantage so that women were not deterred from participating in ISIS. This by no means constitutes a repudiation of its patriarchal attitudes; instead, it was merely a tactical shift. ISIS realised that the notion of migrating to the Islamic State because it was a religious obligation was on its own an insufficiently persuasive rationale to mobilise women.

Adapting and Adopting New Strategies

In line with the need to attract women, there was a recodification in ISIS’s strategy for recruiting women. The recruitment discourse encompassed a variety of promises:¹⁸

- (a) freedom from the “oppressive world”, which included, but was not limited to, constraining families and/or disenfranchising local contexts;
- (b) the empowering of individuals to wreak vengeance against discriminating “unbelievers” through the waging of jihad to establish justice and honour “pure” Islam;
- (c) a romanticised, utopian life of being a jihadi bride and serving to support the fight of martyrdom;
- (d) the agency of productive involvement in the ISIS cause and creative autonomy in building an Islamic state;
- (e) the divine blessing that would help them (women) ascend to the status of *taqwa*, the Islamic term for being conscious or cognisant of God;
- (f) a sense of belonging with the jihadi sisterhood of “girl-power”; and
- (g) atonement of, and liberation from, previously committed sins, with the reward of *jannah*, literally paradise, or the abode in the afterlife for righteous Muslims.

These promises were variously articulated, but the smokescreen of emancipation couched within tenets of Islam and Islamic eschatology was leveraged to indoctrinate and, to a large extent, exploit women.

Such was the paradoxical practice of ISIS in recruiting women: despite its resistance to Western hegemony, it strategically adopted and adapted Western discourses. Hegemonic masculinity within ISIS was also reconfigured in some sense: the rhetoric of female empowerment, although not overtly labelled as such, was employed to influence women to become militants, including suicide bombers.

¹⁸ Interview with a member of Malaysia’s counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

The (Ir)relevance of Militant Feminism

In a pre-ISIS study, Christine Sixta notes that most women who have been involved in terrorism choose it “as a means of political participation” and as a mode of combatting for the “betterment of their gender”.¹⁹ She argues that this form of involvement is “militant feminism” as violence becomes a tool to attain gender equality.²⁰ Sixta postulates that female suicide bombers aim to “accomplish deeds that make them as great as men”.²¹ According to her, these women seek societal recognition that portrays them as powerful heroines and idols for children and adults: their self-sacrificial martyrdom testifies to their dedication to the cause.

Sixta’s view of militant feminism in her pre-ISIS publication covering non-jihadist organisations generalises the multi-layered hegemony embedded within different structures of power that has since come into play with the emergence of ISIS and similar militant groups. Indeed, the non-jihadi female terrorists that she examined were likely to be fuelled by diverse proclivities.

I argue that the lived experience of women in ISIS illustrates a contradistinctive reality where the concept of militant feminism is rendered irrelevant. Most of the women joined ISIS on their own volition with the promise of being able to reside under the shade of the Islamic State, where they could freely practise “true” Islam, guided by *shari’a* law, and had no intentions of engaging in combat. However, some were coerced to join the fight as suicide bombers when ISIS needed additional militants.²² This tactic is not exclusive to ISIS: several other terrorist groups have sent women on suicide missions as they are perceived to be akin to disposable artillery that holds low military value.

Most female ISIS fighters were from Western countries, including Britain, Germany, and the United States.²³ The irony of using citizens of the West to fight the West was perhaps a deliberate choice, intended to signify yet another form of resistance against the West. As such, the approach of using “female empowerment” was a form of strategic manipulation. The deeply entrenched patriarchy of ISIS had certainly not disintegrated: if women agreed to fight, they were “empowered women”, but if they disagreed, they would be coerced into agreeing. Their passports were confiscated and they were not allowed to return home at will.²⁴

Women who attempted to escape were often raped or subjected to sex slavery in exchange for their freedom. Multiple cases have documented that the men in ISIS would pray before raping women as they believed that ISIS ideology should be bred into future generations to ensure the survival of the

¹⁹ Christine Sixta, “The Illusive Third Wave: Are Female Terrorists the New ‘New Women’ In Developing Societies?”, *Journal Of Women, Politics & Policy*, 29, no. 2 (2008): 261-288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15544770802118645>

²⁰ Sixta, “The Illusive Third Wave”

²¹ Sixta, “The Illusive Third Wave”

²² Syria Direct, “How the Islamic state uses women to control women”, *Syria Direct*, March 25, 2015, available at <https://syriadirect.org/news/how-the-islamic-state-uses-women-to-control-women/>

²³ Syria Direct, “How the Islamic state”

²⁴ Syria Direct, “How the Islamic state”

Islamic State.²⁵ Also, several male ISIS members maintained multiple sex slaves on the assumption that this practice would fortify their masculinity.²⁶ Similar physical, sexual and emotional oppression of female terrorists has been observed in other militant organisations.

There is also an economic impetus that lures a few financially desperate women to ISIS. Suicide bombers are frequently promised handsome financial rewards, which, upon successful execution of their operations, would be offered to their families. Acquiescing to violence often becomes the sole option for women in dire financial circumstances.

Nonetheless, several women were motivated to join and remain in ISIS through a complex interplay between the multiple strains of Islam and distinct socio-cultural contexts.

Indeed, in Sixta's more recent publication on jihadi women where she studies ISIS, among other terrorist organisations, she acknowledges that because these groups comprise extremely fundamentalist Muslim men who are clear on women's roles, it is unlikely that they will push women to do more and give them more empowered access in jihadist terrorist organisations.²⁷ She also classifies the motivations for women joining jihadist groups into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. She notes that the primary motivation is often likely to be religious, fuelled by the desire to attain paradise, while the secondary and tertiary levels involve a variety of reasons including personal, social, political, and economic factors. Significantly, Sixta asserts that most women abide by their normative socio-cultural roles in these jihadist militant groups.²⁸ Sixta's arguments are further dissected in the next segment through the specific case of Malay-Muslim women of Malaysia.

²⁵ Interview with a member of Malaysia's counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

²⁶ Interview with a member of Malaysia's counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

²⁷ Christine Sixta, *Sexual Jihad: The Role of Islam in Female Terrorism*, (London: Lexington Books, 2019).

²⁸ Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*

(II) Malay-Muslim Women in Malaysia: The Domestic Context

Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore are countries in the Southeast Asian region that are reported to have had women involved in ISIS. Women in Indonesia have been considered to be the most radical and active, followed by those in the Philippines, Malaysia, and then Singapore.²⁹ The focus of this paper is on Malay-Muslim women in Malaysia as their context is unique.

The number of Malaysian women involved in ISIS had gradually increased from 2013 till 2017, when the fall of the caliphate slowed down the recruitment drive and the overall numbers recruited. Reports in 2018 indicated that 44 out of 415 persons arrested and detained since 2013 for their involvement in terror-related activities in Malaysia were women.³⁰ Of the 415 detainees, the majority (334) were ISIS members or recruits, of whom over 30 were women.³¹

Most of the women were detained before they could depart Malaysia.³² Notably, the demographic profiles of these female detainees are not homogenous; they cut across age, education, and socio-economic lines.³³ In all of the reported cases of radicalised Malaysian women, their gravitation towards ISIS was never imbued with “militant feminism”. Instead, the main motivations for the majority of the women's direct involvement with ISIS were: (i) marrying jihadists; (ii) absolving themselves of the shackles of the sins they had committed, and; (iii) striving for Allah's blessings and the ultimate goal of *jannah*.³⁴ By examining the cultural context of Malaysia, I discuss below why these factors resonated with Malay-Muslim women more than the call for gender equality.

Relative Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment

While there is significant variation between and within the Southeast Asian countries, the assumption that Southeast Asian women were always passive, oppressed, manipulated by the “system”, and devoid of agency, both culturally and economically, is a problematic colonial and Western-centric perspective. Anthony Reid observes that in the 16th and 17th centuries, Southeast Asian women had the highest relative autonomy in the world.³⁵ Studies of pre-colonial Southeast Asian women, in fact, indicate that the women were greatly involved in agricultural production and trade. As they were economically

²⁹ Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, "Radicalization of Women in ISIS in Malaysia"

³⁰ Zaiton Hamin and Saslina Kamaruddin, "When women are the criminals: Governing violent extremism in Malaysia via 'hard' and 'soft' modalities", *GATR Global Journal Of Business Social Sciences Review* 7, no. 1 (2019), 48-53, [https://doi.org/10.35609/gjbssr.2019.7.1\(6\)](https://doi.org/10.35609/gjbssr.2019.7.1(6))

³¹ Hamin and Kamaruddin, "When women are the criminals"; Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, "Radicalization of Women in ISIS".

³² Hamin and Kamaruddin, "When women are the criminals"; Zakuan, "Radicalization of Women In ISIS".

³³ Zakuan, "Radicalization of Women in ISIS".

³⁴ Interview with a member of Malaysia's counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

³⁵ Anthony Reid, "Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia", *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (1988), 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x00009720>

engaged outside the domestic environment, they had higher economic and social freedom than women in India, China, and the Arab world, who were strongly constricted in the private sphere.³⁶

In pre-colonial Malaysia, matriarchal and matrilineal communities were commonplace. Due to these societal norms, the status of Malay women in families and communities was equal, if not superior, to men. Colonisation and global and local Islamic revivalism triggered a significant shift in norms, and gendered identities became entrenched in society.³⁷ Despite this, Charles Hirschman argues that in the case of Malaysia, the pre-colonial historical tradition of Malay women holding a relatively high status continues until today in several aspects.³⁸ He observes that the Malay family structure does not adhere to the conventional patterns of patriarchy: preference for male progeny, patrilineal descent, or newly-wed couples living at patrilocal residences. But he qualifies his argument carefully, stressing that these findings do not reflect an absence of patriarchy altogether. Nonetheless, Hirschman's study shows that Malay women, in some aspects, indeed enjoy gender equality relative to women in many other parts of Asia.

Furthermore, owing to rapid development in educational opportunities since the 1950s, gender equity was seen in school enrolments, which led to an increase in women transitioning to professional, technical, and administrative positions in multiple countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.³⁹ In Malaysia, the introduction in 1971 of the affirmative action policy for Malays known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) meant that Malay-Muslim women were included as beneficiaries of educational subsidies and scholarships as well as well-placed and well-paying careers. In other words, Malay-Muslim women had a pathway for upward economic mobility.

The Female Subsistence Effect of Islamic Revivalism

Anne Booth points out that Malaysia and Indonesia rank higher than most other Muslim-majority countries on indicators of gender empowerment.⁴⁰ But, while gender equality exists only in relative terms, the lack of absolute gender equality is not necessarily perceived by the majority of Malay-Muslim women as a dire injustice that must be overcome.⁴¹ Alternatively expressed, although most Malay-Muslim women do not deny that patriarchy exists, it is not widely regarded as an overwhelming problem that must be overcome. Despite their economic empowerment, women have been socialised to accept a secondary social role to men.

³⁶ Charles Hirschman, "Gender, the Status of Women, and Family Structure in Malaysia", *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* 53, no. 1 (2016), 33 - 50.

³⁷ Hirschman, "Gender, the Status of Women"

³⁸ Hirschman, "Gender, the Status of Women"

³⁹ Anne Booth, "Women, Work and the Family: Is Southeast Asia Different?", *Economic History of Developing Regions* 31, no. 1 (2016), 167-197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20780389.2015.1132624>

⁴⁰ Booth, "Women, Work and the Family"

⁴¹ Interview with Malaysian women's rights expert, February 2020.

The notion that gender inequality is not generally perceived to be significantly problematic could be attributed to the increasing levels of conservatism in contemporary Malaysian society, which in turn is a result of the rise of political Islam in Malaysia. This point will be discussed in detail in the following section. While the NEP aimed to build a class of successful Malays and this had, to a large extent, cut across gender lines, the Islamic agenda of the state tended to subdue and domesticate women. The strong religio-political forces of global and local Islamic revivalism as well as various social forces created space for the rise of a new middle class of Muslim women: women professionals who were also homemakers, child-bearers, and nurturing mothers. Indeed, in many Muslim societies, female identities are similarly founded upon the roles that women played in the Qur'an, that is, the role of the wife and mother taking precedence above all other roles.⁴²

A chief of the women's division of a prominent religious non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kuala Lumpur casually remarked in a personal interview that "a woman could be a leader professionally, but, at home, the husband is always the head of the family. Women should consider themselves holding the status of the *timbang* (deputy) within the household, instead of equals".⁴³ Ironically, it is frequently women themselves — both in rural and urban spaces, in all-women *usrahs* (religious study circles) and/or online sisterhood forums — who champion this narrative.

This bifurcation of the public and private spheres as separate realms has been affirmed by highly educated women since the rise of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. For the majority of Malay-Muslim women today, the unequal power dynamic between men and women in the private sphere has become naturalised. It is accepted as "behaviour patterns", the "fate" that Muslim women are bound to, or justified on grounds that the needs of women are of a lower order than those of men.⁴⁴

In discussions of what constitutes a "good Muslim woman" that I have held with women from various religious NGOs that facilitate or engage in *usrahs*, the notion of obedience featured repeatedly and was strongly emphasised. In a 2019 survey of 675 Muslim women across Malaysia done by the NGO Sisters in Islam, 97 per cent said that their primary Islamic responsibility is obedience to God and 96 per cent stated that obeying one's husband was the responsibility of a Muslim woman.⁴⁵ In Malaysia, as in several Muslim communities across the globe, many women believe that their subordination to men is divinely ordained. In interviews with women from several Muslim NGOs, the Islamic concept of *nusyuz* (disobedience) was referred to when asked why married Muslim women must obey their husbands.⁴⁶ Significantly, *nusyuz* has been codified as an offence under Malaysia's Federal Territories Islamic Family Law, whereby a woman can be fined for disobeying an order lawfully given by her husband.⁴⁷

⁴² Christine Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*.

⁴³ Interview with a leader of a Muslim NGO in Malaysia, February 2020.

⁴⁴ Interview with female members of Muslim NGOs in Malaysia, February 2020.

⁴⁵ Jessica Lin, "One In 5 Muslim women in Malaysia believe husbands have a right to beat their wives", *Business Insider Singapore*, October 22, 2019, available at <https://www.businessinsider.sg/1-in-5-muslim-women-in-malaysia-believe-husbands-have-a-right-to-beat-their-wives>

⁴⁶ *Nusyuz* is commonly transliterated as *nushuz* outside the Malay-speaking world.

⁴⁷ Interview with women's rights expert in Malaysia, February 2020.

As such, the *nusyuz* principle serves as a religious deterrent against women challenging their spouses. Therefore, while Malay-Muslim women's economic agency in the public sphere does indeed provide them currency to negotiate their position in their household, it does not break down the dichotomy between the private and the public spheres.

Counter-intuitively Reclaiming Agency

However, it would be a hasty generalisation to state that Malay-Muslim women, therefore, lack agency in the private sphere. Agency for them has been redefined to signify a deliberate submission to Islam; their empowerment lies in fully surrendering to piety and serving the family. Sylvia Frisk's study of urban Muslim women in Malaysia notes that they have a powerful desire to "submit to the will of a transcendental God", and that this submission requires a "transformation in the husband's religious behaviour and attitude".⁴⁸ In other words, the ability of a Malay-Muslim woman to use Islam to transform her husband and children into better Muslims constitutes her wielding power over them.⁴⁹

Additionally, irrespective of how dogmatic some of the Islamic interpretations are, women still function in a practical world that affords them degrees of economic agency. Structural factors that have led to economic development are seeing trends of increasing Muslim women in educational institutions and the workforce. Hence, Muslim women cannot be contained in the domestic and private realm.

Radicalising Malay-Muslim Women

Some scholars use a parochial lens to portray women in terrorist groups as victims lacking agency. However, this view is not necessarily justified in most cases. Women have proactively joined and decided to remain in such groups. As Sixta points out in her 2019 study, women in jihadist terrorist organisations have, in fact, been key recruiters.⁵⁰ They play an integral role in seeking out other women to marry jihadi men and serve the organisation. She also underscores how women exercise their power as mothers to recruit their children for ISIS "martyrdom" operations.⁵¹ Mothers and wives regard the act of recruitment as a divine blessing for they are instrumental in leading others to become a *shaheed* or martyr — one who is selected by Allah to die in jihad and who is guaranteed entry into *jannah*. The title of *shaheed* is considered one of the most honourable ones in Muslim societies.⁵²

In a recent ethnographic study of Malay-Muslim women in Malaysia, Serina Rahman echoes this line of reasoning. She draws on a common Malay cultural trope, *syurga di bawah tapak kaki ibu* (heaven is

⁴⁸ Sylva Frisk, *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2009).

⁴⁹ Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women", *Studies In Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 5 (2007), 397-414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701258585>

⁵⁰ Christine Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*

⁵¹ Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*

⁵² Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*

under the feet of their mother), to illustrate that a mother has a powerful role in a family.⁵³ Given this role, she argues, radicalised mothers could potentially serve as vectors of violent extremism and jeopardise Malaysia's multi-faith society.⁵⁴ This powerful role that female recruiters play must not be ignored if terrorism is to be effectively rooted out.

Malaysian women have indeed participated in militant activities in the past. However, they had always adopted the role of supporters and remained confined to home soil. Seeking to venture out from Malaysia to a conflict zone and proactively arranging to wed ISIS fighters and wage jihad is a new phenomenon. In such cases, access to social media echo chambers of extremism plays a significant role. The instance of the youngest female detainee, a 14-year old girl who had sought to travel to Syria to join ISIS, is illustrative. It was through Facebook that she had connected with an ISIS sympathiser, a 22-year-old Malaysian, but she was apprehended by the Malaysian police as she was about to depart for Cairo to marry him.⁵⁵ The two had planned to depart for Syria via Istanbul after their wedding. In another case, a 28-year-old girl had extensive communication with ISIS militants through social media, after which she decided to leave Kuala Lumpur for Syria.⁵⁶

ISIS members who recruit Malaysian women have been notorious for also targeting lonely Malay-Muslim widows into becoming jihadi brides. These jihadi brides would sometimes lose their "martyred" spouses but often opted to reside within ISIS grounds and were expected to immediately re-marry and/or provide *jihad-al-nikah*, or sexual jihad, to the other militants, despite certain stipulations in Islamic jurisprudence that prohibit women from remarrying too soon.⁵⁷ Gender roles in these ISIS camp sites remain mostly traditional and are reinforced through religious frames.

As such, "militant feminism" as a rationale for galvanising women into participating in violent extremism simply does not take root in the Malaysian context. Calls for fighting in the name of gender equality do not resonate with most Malay-Muslim women, considering their privileged positions relative to men in socio-economic terms and their religious disposition of upholding the role of women stipulated in the Qur'an and reinforced in the Hadith. Whether this "relative" gender equality is real or perceived, its lack is not necessarily widely regarded as fundamentally problematic by these women. As such, most Malay-Muslim women who travelled to Syria to join ISIS in the name of jihad have not participated in roles beyond the "supportive" roles of nurturing children and looking after the household while their militant spouses were engaged in martyrdom. Indeed, Sixta, too, affirms that the role of women in jihadist

⁵³Serina Rahman, "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle: Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home", *Trends In Southeast Asia*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020.

⁵⁴Rahman, "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle"

⁵⁵Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and Local Dimensions of the ISIS Phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia", *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (2018), 122-139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1424710>

⁵⁶Schulze and Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad".

⁵⁷Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of 'Moderation': Understanding the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia", *Asian Security* 16, no. 1 (2018), 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1470508>

militant organisations is primarily domestic and that their value in these organisations is predicated on traditional Islamic views of women.⁵⁸

The notable anomaly challenging gender norms was the case of a 51-year-old aspiring female suicide bomber in Malaysia. Terrorism analysts and counter-terrorism authorities note that a common factor that motivates men and women to opt for violent extremism is intense frustration. This frustration could arise out of the failure to shift socio-political conditions through conventionally acceptable modes and may coincide with injury, imprisonment, or death of a loved one. Such was the case with the 51-year-old. She had turned to extremism after her husband suffered a stroke. Significantly, her family background did not neatly fit into the categorisation of a Malaysian “Malay-Muslim woman”: her father was from Pakistan and her mother a Bruneian.⁵⁹ Furthermore, her grandfather was involved in the war in Afghanistan against the United States. Her career as a journalist also played a significant role in her political involvement. In an interview with me, a member of the Malaysian counter-terrorism authorities involved in her rehabilitation described her as having “fully internalised the ideology of ISIS”. According to Sixta, this is generally the case with jihadist females who opt for suicide bombing on their own will: they often have unideal life circumstances and so volunteer as martyrs, commonly subscribing to “a romanticised notion of defeating the enemy and becoming one of the *houris* in paradise”.⁶⁰

However, apart from the small number of cases of radicalised Malaysian women, ISIS ideology lacks appeal with the majority of Malay-Muslims (men and women). In the following section, I highlight that the ISIS narrative lacks legitimacy for the vast majority of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia because of a transnational disconnect.

⁵⁸ Christine Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*.

⁵⁹ Interview with a member of Malaysia’s counter-terrorism authorities, February 2020.

⁶⁰ Christine Sixta, *Sexual Jihad*. *Houris* are popularly understood to be virgins awaiting the faithful in heaven. Jihadists use the reward of *houris* to motivate men to martyr themselves as suicide bombers.

(III) ISIS in Malaysia: The Transnational Context

ISIS had sought to recruit Muslims of Southeast Asia, including Malaysians, within a year of its establishment in 2013. A Malay media division was launched as part of its propaganda efforts directed at the region. Official ISIS media agencies such as Al-Hayat, Wilayah Al-Barakah, Al-Azzam Media, and Furat Media released videos in Bahasa Indonesia, which is generally understood by most Malays.⁶¹ These videos were not only recruitment calls pitched at the Southeast Asian Muslim community, but also advertising efforts for the caliphate: children who seemed to be ethnically Malay or Indonesian were filmed while they eloquently cited the Qur'an and trained with AK-47 rifles.⁶² An official newsletter in Malay titled Al-Fatihin was also published. The publication provided reports on developments in the caliphate and featured articles that extolled martyrdom and jihad, among other Islamic teachings.⁶³

ISIS did manage to attract some Malaysians to its cause. The peak of the recruitment drive was in 2017: 95 Malaysians, including around 10 families, were reported to have travelled to Syria and Iraq.⁶⁴ The number of Malaysian ISIS supporters or sympathisers was comparatively higher than those affiliated with other militant organisations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM). This is not surprising, considering the creative propaganda and impressive mobilisation methods of ISIS's recruitment drive.

Motivations of Malaysian ISIS Recruits

The Soufan Group, a US-based global security and intelligence consultancy, pointed out in their 2015 report that the majority of Malaysians recruited to ISIS were driven by aspirations to be good Muslims, had romanticised conceptions of an Islamic caliphate, and had no prior association with extremist groups.⁶⁵ The caliphate was considered as a requirement for pious Islamic living and it promised *jannah* in the afterlife.

Another report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) highlighted that jihad was the first most significant factor that compelled the Malaysian militants to join ISIS, the re-establishment of the caliphate was their second, and ISIS's success and legitimacy the third.⁶⁶ The

⁶¹ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence: Nuancing Religiopolitical Legitimacy and Conceptualizing the Appeal of ISIS in Malaysia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019), 86-113, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs41-1e>

⁶² Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence"

⁶³ Jasmin Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani, "Al-Fatihin: Islamic State's First Malay Language Newspaper", *RSIS Commentaries* 155 (23 June 2016), <https://hdl.handle.net/10356/81449>

⁶⁴ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence"

⁶⁵ The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", The Soufan Group, December 2015, https://wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/bp-attachments/4826/TSG_ForeignFightersUpflow.pdf

⁶⁶ Greg Fealy and John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," United States Agency for International Development, January 6, 2016, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2016/PBAAD863.pdf>

report outlined jihad as the individual's perceived responsibility as a Sunni Muslim to help their brethren in Syria in their struggle against the "enemies of true Islam", a responsibility that comes with being part of, and building, the *ummah* (the Islamic collective identity). The caliphate had to be re-established as it was the apotheosis of piety stemming from "sharia-mindedness". ISIS's legitimacy were perceived to be due to its acquired power from successfully seizing territories, defying international hegemonic powers, and seeking to re-establish the historical caliphate.

A Transnational Disconnect

However, it is crucial to note that while there are pockets of sympathy for the plights of the oppressed Muslims that ISIS purports to defend, the number of recruits in Malaysia is low relative to the percentage of Muslims in the country. This is because ISIS propaganda had not attempted to refer to the issues (whether real or perceived) that Malay-Muslims were concerned about and was completely detached from their everyday socio-political realities. The anxieties of the Malay-Muslims have predominantly revolved around the historically racialised political, social, and economic competition in the country, primarily between the Malays and the Chinese. ISIS's focus, on the other hand, was on notions of the ideological–political divide between the West as a global hegemon and ISIS as champions of true Islam. Their publications highlighted the political conflict in the Middle East and the role of ISIS in building a unified *ummah*. The contempt for Western political domination and the concept of the *ummah*, which may have gained traction with a limited number of radicalised Malay-Muslims in Malaysia, remains irrelevant to the daily grievances experienced by the majority of the Malay-Muslim community.

Additionally, the barbaric violence committed by ISIS contradicts the Islamic values of peace and compassion. This transgression of theological values negates the appeal of ISIS for the vast majority of Muslims across the world, including those in Malaysia. Indeed, soon after ISIS had established its so-called caliphate in 2014, over 126 Islamic scholars across the world issued an open letter to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers to refute ISIS ideology and condemn its atrocities.

The extremist ideology of ISIS also fails to garner substantial Muslim support as it runs counter to the existing political consensus in Malaysia — even if fragile and strained at times — on respect for the rule of law and system of government. This consensus among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims (who form about 40% of the total population), forged over several decades of nationhood, is at variance with the ISIS ideology of intolerance towards non-Muslims and Muslims who oppose ISIS and ISIS positions on governance, elections and civil liberties. It can be expected that any attempt by ISIS supporters to increase its influence will be met with vigorous pushback from most Malay-Muslims.

Furthermore, the role of Islam in Malaysia extends the parameters of the faith and serves also as a central feature of Malaysia's socio-political milieu. It is a marker of identity imbricated within the Malay race: one cannot, as constitutionally defined, be Malay without being Muslim. Being "Malay-Muslim" triggers social, economic, and political mobilisation in Malay-Muslims as they have been beneficiaries

of state-sanctioned affirmative action. As such, Islam holds currency in bolstering the claims of Malay-Muslims' primacy and empowerment in Malaysia. This contradicts ISIS's prevailing rhetoric of Muslim "weakness". ISIS has remained silent on how Malay-Muslims have been advantaged in Malaysia's racially fragmented social makeup and history owing to state-manufactured narratives on ethno-religious supremacy.⁶⁷ As a result of this silence, the appeal of ISIS is blunted for the majority of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia.⁶⁸

The number of ISIS supporters in Malaysia is only a minuscule percentage of the total Muslim population of 20 million in the country, but this low figure does not detract from the gravity of the ideological and security threat that ISIS and its Malaysian supporters pose to Malaysia and the region as a whole. Nonetheless, in the following section, I describe why it is significant to note how the Malaysian socio-political context, cutting across gender lines, has functioned as a deterrent to the influence of ISIS.

⁶⁷ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence".

⁶⁸ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence".

(IV) The Rise of Political Islam in Malaysia and the Institutionalisation of Salafism: The Institutional Context

Salafism, a stream of Sunni Islam that purports to return to the ways of the pious ancestors, or *salaf*, is noted for its puritanical interpretation of the teachings of the faith.⁶⁹ Some scholars have argued that the politicisation of Islam and the institutionalisation of Salafism in Malaysia created a conservative religious–socio–political context that “underpinned the gravitation of some Malaysian Muslims towards ISIS”.⁷⁰ While this is indeed true, the Malaysian context also simultaneously diminishes the appeal of ISIS for the majority of Malay-Muslims. In this section, I trace the rise of political Islam in Malaysia and the state’s institutionalisation of Salafism and how that has undermined the legitimacy of ISIS’s narrative.

The Emergence of the Islamisation Race

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the single largest and most influential Malaysian political party, was founded on the basis of representing the Malay-Muslim majority. In the context of Malaysia’s racialised politics, UMNO’s strategies of holding political power involved “accommodation and compromise, particularly of minority interests”.⁷¹ In 1952, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) emerged as the leading opposition party. Since its conception, PAS has called for Malaysian governance to be in accordance with Islamic principles and championed the establishment of an Islamic state. According to PAS, the empowerment of Malay-Muslims lies in aspiring to Islamic governance as modelled by the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an. The party’s pressure for an Islamist agenda, fuelled by the global revivalism of Islam, led UMNO to Islamise its personality in order to negotiate from a dominant position in the struggle for retaining power.⁷² UMNO, then led by Mahathir Mohamed, invested in developing Islamic political, economic, and legal infrastructure to outmanoeuvre PAS in the political race of Islamisation. Mahathir also co-opted Muslim religious figures from the opposition into the government and advanced policies that supported personal piety. Importantly, Mahathir founded JAKIM, the Department of Islamic Development, and expanded the Islamic bureaucracy.

Enforcing Sectarianism and Convicting Religious Deviancy

The agenda of Islamisation also demanded the drawing of clear boundaries within the Muslim community. While this was perceived to be politically advantageous for the ruling coalition, attitudes of xenophobia and sectarianism were cultivated towards non-Muslims such as Christians and Jews, as

⁶⁹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam", *Trends in Southeast Asia, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute*, July 2016.

⁷⁰ Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad"; Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad In The Bastion Of 'Moderation'".

⁷¹ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

⁷² Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

well as Shi'a Muslims. Sunni Muslims, who are the majority in Malaysia are considered true Muslims, and Shi'a Muslims are portrayed as deviants. Shi'ism is perceived by the state to delegitimise the Malaysian Islamic authority and so it is projected as a national security threat: Shi'a Muslims have been prosecuted under the Internal Security Act (ISA) instead of the Shari'a courts.⁷³ This is a significant area where the Malaysian state's discourses inadvertently overlap with the discourse of ISIS. ISIS is similarly opposed to Shi'a Muslims and has labelled them as *mushrikin* (polytheists).⁷⁴ In this regard, both ISIS and the Malaysian state have rigid Islamic regulations on deviation from Islam, although ISIS considers several more sects to be deviant, and its persecution of such deviants is far more brutal.

Scholars argue that such a socio-political context "fostered the seeds of violent Islamist extremism" and represented "one of the greatest push factors for supporters and sympathisers of ISIS in Malaysia".⁷⁵ However, one must note that the objective of penalising the deviant is driven by the same strategic aim for both ISIS and the Malaysian state: to strengthen the establishment of the dominant authority. This overlap in position weakens the currency of ISIS's narrative. The reach of state discourses to local Malay-Muslims is far more extensive than ISIS discourses are. As such, the appeal of the latter is diminished because it contends with a locally dominant religious bureaucracy that has grown tremendously in its influence over the people.

The Rhetoric of Rebuffing the West

The Malaysian state has also gained popularity for its anti-Western rhetoric. Even as UMNO's *bumiputera* (sons of the soil, referring mainly to Malay-Muslims) empowerment agenda was flourishing owing to the global economic growth driven by neoliberalism, Mahathir rejected the logic that economic modernisation implied that the West was a superior model against which countries ought to be judged. According to him, economic development did not imply superiority, with the West assumed to be economically and historically exemplary.⁷⁶ Mahathir also often attacked the concept of universal human rights as an expression of Western cultural imposition.⁷⁷ Instead, UMNO continuously sought to balance its developmental project with projections of Malaysia as an Islamic state. As discussed earlier, the rejection of Western impositions and the declaration of an Islamic state are key overlapping themes that ISIS narratives share with the Malaysian state. One may argue that this Islamist socio-political climate in Malaysia creates conditions conducive to easy radicalisation to ISIS's violent extremism. However, the opposite is more likely true. Because Malaysia's policies seek to empower Malay-Muslims and are pro-Islamisation, the legitimacy of the state is seen as stronger than that of ISIS for the majority of Malay-Muslims.

⁷³ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

⁷⁴ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

⁷⁵ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad in The Bastion of 'Moderation'".

⁷⁶ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

⁷⁷ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

Institutionalising Salafism and Wrangling for Islamic Authenticity

UMNO's reiterated declarations of Malaysia being an Islamic state opened up debates on whether and how Malaysia is indeed an Islamic state, from the political, jurisprudential, and cultural dimensions. The government was often heavily criticised for not being Islamic enough. Hence, to bolster its Islamic credentials, UMNO inducted Salafi *ulema* (Islamic scholars) into the party. UMNO then employed fundamentalist Salafi arguments to discredit PAS's brand of Islam. After being co-opted into UMNO, the Salafi scholars affirmed that Malaysia was already an Islamic state, thus giving legitimacy to UMNO.⁷⁸ They also cited sayings of the Prophet to point out that "it is un-Islamic for a Muslim community to be led by more than one leader" and claimed that "Muslims in Malaysia cannot oppose the government".⁷⁹

Several scholars have argued that as Salafi literalism has infiltrated mainstream religious discourse in Malaysia and is closely mirroring the ISIS narrative, a conducive environment for radicalisation is being nurtured in Malaysia.⁸⁰ The widespread misconception revolving around Salafism is that it promotes violence through its literalist interpretation of jihad. However, this is not necessarily always the case. It is crucial to disentangle three key strands within the Salafism spectrum in Malaysia: (i) the purist Salafis, who are within the government and are vocal in their counter-narratives against ISIS and other violent groups; (ii) the reformist Salafis, who are flexible about adapting their religious beliefs based on changing circumstances, are loyal to the government but critical when duly required, and believe that defensive jihad is obligatory only if the community is under attack, and; (iii) the jihadi Salafists, who hold inflexible beliefs, reject the legitimacy of the nation-state, and generally assert that the Islamic community is persistently under attack by the disbelievers and therefore jihad ought to be waged within and outside the state.⁸¹ A contestation exists between these strands of Salafism on the definition of jihad, the circumstances in which jihad is to be waged, ISIS and "true" Salafism.

The reality that there is no singular, uniform discourse of religion within Malaysia further diminishes the appeal of ISIS. The discourses around the different brands of Islam are disconnected, contradictory, and even internally inconsistent. As such, there is competition for Islamic authenticity within different layers of the state and the broader Islamic establishment. These discursive struggles in the local context resonate more strongly with Malay-Muslims than ISIS's hardline narratives, from which they are geographically and culturally alienated.

⁷⁸ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Salafi Ulama in UMNO: Political Convergence or Expediency?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 2 (2014), 206, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs36-2b>.

⁷⁹ Osman, "Salafi Ulama in UMNO"

⁸⁰ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "ISIS In Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism Is A Major Factor", *Trends In Southeast Asia, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute*, May 16, 2016; Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "The Extensive Salafization Of Malaysian Islam"; Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad"; Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad In The Bastion Of 'Moderation'".

⁸¹ Osman and Arosoaie, "Jihad In The Bastion Of 'Moderation'"; Assaf Moghadam, "Defining and confronting the Salafi Jihad", *Middle East Strategy at Harvard (MESH)*, February 11, 2008, available at <https://blogs.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/02/defining-and-confronting-the-salafi-jihad/>

Significantly, jihadi Salafi scholars are free to preach in Malaysia. Some notable examples include Abdullah Iraqi, Maulana Fakhurrazi, Ustaz Masran, and Mohamed Rais.⁸² However, except for the jihadi Salafi strand, the vast majority of Salafis do not have a strong inclination towards violence. The key recruiters and leaders of ISIS in Malaysia identify themselves as Salafi, and many of them are linked to a few jihadi Salafi preachers. These jihadi Salafi preachers have explicitly criticised the purist Salafis for not being true adherents of Salafism. Purist Salafis who have been subjected to such criticism include Fathul Bari, who is a member of the executive committee of UMNO Youth and sits on the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) council, which determines whether detainees held on terrorism charges should be released or charged in court.⁸³

Understanding the Convergence/Divergence of the Universal and the Particular

The Islamisation race between UMNO and PAS, which was driven by a battle for securing political power, led to the emergence and normalisation of Islamic conservatism in Malaysia. As a result of this contestation for Islamic legitimacy, Salafism was co-opted into the government and infiltrated the mainstream religious discourse. This brought about an acceptance of, and identification with, tenets of the jihadi Salafi stream of Islam for some Malay-Muslims. It is within this context that the ISIS narratives on what constitutes the “right” and “true” Islam gained traction in Malaysia. The jihadi Salafi discourse at a local level aligned with ISIS’s “universal” discourse, thus garnering support for ISIS from some radicalised Malaysians. Notably, most of the radicalised individuals are not cognisant of what Salafism means and the differences between the various schools of thought within Islam.

It is vital to understand that the Islamic bureaucratic structure is not a singular entity, but instead, as Kerstin Steiner points out, an “intricate entity” that consists of “various hierarchies of authorities at the state and federal level”.⁸⁴ As the discourses at different levels of the state’s institutions are not homogenous, these discourses may interact and overlap with one another. They may also diverge from and contradict one another. Overlaps occur when the Malaysian state’s policies and the policing of Islam inadvertently reinforce some aspects of ISIS ideology. In such instances, the Malaysian state may be seen as the more legitimate actor because of its cultural proximity with the locals and the vast resources it has at its disposal. In instances of divergence though, the Malaysian state’s legitimacy in the eyes of the vast majority of Malay-Muslims serves to diminish the authenticity of ISIS’s discourses.

ISIS has called out many of the Muslim-majority states, such as Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, and Libya, for their alleged apostasy.⁸⁵ While ISIS may consider Malaysia to be un-Islamic, Malaysia, however, has

⁸² Osman and Arosoaie, "Jihad In The Bastion Of 'Moderation'"

⁸³ Osman and Arosoaie, "Jihad In The Bastion Of 'Moderation'"

⁸⁴ Kerstin Steiner, "Branding Islam: Islam, Law, and Bureaucracies in Southeast Asia", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2018), 27-56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341803700102>

⁸⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

fares well in its political legitimacy in terms of Islamic governance.⁸⁶ The Malay political and religious elites have used Islam as a crucial pillar in their claims of Malay supremacy, and, as a result, have adopted some policies that are inadvertently similar to ISIS's policies, such as prosecuting groups that are considered to be deviant from their regulated brand of Islam. The Islamisation policies lie at the heart of the state's hegemonic project to condition the non-Muslims and non-Malays to acquiesce in their assimilation into Malaysia's social fabric as "subordinate, peripheral partners".⁸⁷ The state's consistent implementation of these policies has, to a large extent, empowered the Malays over the past 30 years. ISIS, on the other hand, does not have the same resources and cultural repertoires at its disposal. Significantly, as the process of Islamisation is deeply interwoven with the agenda of empowering Malays, the Malaysian state has a higher degree of legitimacy for the majority of Malay-Muslims, which cuts across gender lines, thus curtailing the appeal of ISIS.

Additionally, Malaysia's counter-terrorism measures, including POTA, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA) and the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) have been specifically used against the ISIS threat. These served as yet another hard form of de-legitimation of ISIS by the Malaysian state.

In sum, Malaysia's state-driven efforts of: (i) institutionalising Islam politically, economically, and legally to empower the Malays; (ii) increasing sectarianism by cracking down on the Shi'a community as deviants; (iii) promoting strong anti-Western rhetoric while riding on the narrative of empowering the Malay-Muslims; (v) enabling jihadi Salafi preachers to teach in the country, thereby allowing some degree of plurality in the interpretation of Islamic teachings; and (vi) developing strong counter-terrorism measures have upheld the Malaysian state as the key body of authority and Islamic legitimacy, to the detriment of ISIS.

⁸⁶ Liow and Arosoaie, "The Sound Of Silence".

⁸⁷ Michael D. Barr and Anantha Raman Govindasamy, "The Islamisation of Malaysia: Religious Nationalism in the Service of Ethnonationalism", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 64, no. 3 (2010), 294–95.

Conclusion

Resolution 2242 (2015) of the United Nations Security Council calls for a “gendered perspective” to form a crucial aspect in official responses to preventing violent extremism.⁸⁸ On 30 January 2020, the Malaysian police reported that 56 Malaysians were under detention in Syria for suspected militancy links, out of whom over one-thirds were female (12 women and 8 girls).⁸⁹ Significantly, in February 2020, the Royal Malaysia Police appointed Normah Ishak as the chief of the Special Branch’s Counter-Terrorism Division, the first female to hold the post in the country. Among her first tasks, given the collapse of the Islamic State, is the repatriation of 65 ISIS militants from Syria.⁹⁰

Even if the female returnees in this group claim to only have been mothers and housewives, as most women in ISIS did in the past, Lydia Khalil emphasises that ISIS regards its female supporters as the key to its survival in the future. She argues that some female returnees have declared that “even if we haven’t been able to keep (the Islamic State), our children will one day get it back”.⁹¹ Several researchers and analysts believe this sentiment has its basis in the ethno-religious issues in Malaysia that ISIS can exploit to claim Islam is under threat, thereby keeping its extremist ideology alive in the country. They assert that the current intensification of political Islam worsens the situation.⁹²

However, for the “universal” ISIS ideology to become “particularised” in the local context of Malaysia is not so straightforward. While in some cases the state adopts policies that inadvertently reinforce some universal elements of ISIS ideology, one must also take into account how, for the majority of Malay-Muslims, the state hollows out support and sympathy for ISIS. The reason the discourses of the state can create possibilities that simultaneously condone and condemn ISIS is that the “state” itself is not a fixed, monolithic entity. As argued earlier, its agents and discourses are varied and frequently contradict one another at various levels. The state mirrors the diversity and complexity of Malaysian society, and the fact that it is not a unitary system in some contexts is not necessarily a weakness but can be a strength.

As a consequence of multiple discourses within the state, a persistent tension within the Islamic space is the contradictory and ambivalent position on the status of women. This has been capitalised by various forces to strengthen their authoritative voices. Currently, PAS’s strategy of prominently profiling its female leaders and using its women’s wing (Dewan Muslimat) to galvanise Malay-Muslim women

⁸⁸ United Nations, “UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015)”, *UN Security Council Report*, 2015, available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf

⁸⁹ The Malaysian Insight, “56 Malaysians Still Held in Syria for Terrorism Links”, *The Malaysian Insight*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/215915>

⁹⁰ Amy Chew, “Malaysia appoints first female counterterrorism chief”, *South China Morning Post*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3050744/malaysia-appoints-first-female-counterterrorism-chief-normah-ishak>

⁹¹ Lydia Khalil, “Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad after the Caliphate”, *Lowy Institute*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/behind-veil-women-jihad-after-caliphate>

⁹² Interview with political researchers and security analysts in Malaysia, February 2020.

into all-women *usrahs* creates a significant space to engage with local women. Competing against this is UMNO's strategy of using Puteri UMNO, its women's wing, to showcase "the embrace of modernity and religiosity in a complementary way among the young" while providing justifications from the Qur'an and Hadith to encourage its members to engage in charity work.⁹³

State-driven religious forces have also vigorously orchestrated campaigns that promote "traditional" and "Islamic" family values where the family is emphasised as the critical space for producing a nation with ideal citizens and nurturing a pure, pious version of Islam. Here, the regulated role of women in the private sphere becomes significant: women are encouraged to play a role at home that allows them to become guardians of a moral order in the public sphere. The moral authority and legitimacy of the state and its religious institutions is reinforced through this particular context and this deters women from subscribing to militant feminism.

The Islamist agenda of ISIS may resonate with some Muslims who attempt to live a "righteous" life because of its "universal" Islamic signifiers. However, the particularism of the Malaysian socio-political context, especially in how women are positioned, sets a question mark on whether the "universal" may neatly align with the "particular".

As Malaysian politics and the global political and economic situation appear headed towards more instability, both state and international extremist narratives will evolve. Although the previous Pakatan Harapan government comprising a large Chinese party collapsed after less than two years in power, its election and certain political moves had aroused concerns among some Malay-Muslims that Malay supremacy may be in danger of erosion. This sentiment is one of the reasons why it is imperative to continually monitor the nexus between local and global Muslim narratives, i.e., whether the ISIS narrative of Muslim oppression is resonating among Malay-Muslims. The key is to examine the contestation for universal and particular legitimacy in order to assess the likelihood that radicalisation and violent extremism can take hold in Malaysia. Only then can counter-terrorism measures remain effective.

⁹³ Maznah Mohamad, "Negotiating Political Islam: Women in Malay-Muslim Organisations", in *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*, ed. Maznah Mohamad, Cecilia Ng, Tan Beng Hui (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

About the Author



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