

**RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION OF MUSLIMS IN
MALAYSIA: THE MALAY TIES WITH THE MUJAHIDIN, AL QAEDA AND ISIS**

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the reasons behind the rise of religious extremism in Malaysia within the framework of international politics and the world order by highlighting the ties of Malay Muslims with the Mujahidin, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) over the last four decades. For that purpose, a qualitative analytical approach is used, referencing secondary sources such as academic journal articles and scholarly books. In understanding the situation, online newspaper articles were also considered as secondary sources to extract the data to understand the destructive situation in Malaysia, which has gradually become a fertile ground for the sowing of radical ideas. The paper highlights that since the 1970s, religious extremism and radicalism have intensified due to the Cold War politics, the conflict between Palestine and Israel, and, later, foreign invasions of Muslim nation-states, giving rise to many local religious extremist groups with their relations to international extremist groups. Analysis of the secondary sources reveals the existence of a radical understanding of Islam by a substantial portion of the population, thus suggesting that the authorities should pay attention to extremist influences on the moderate nature of social relations in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia. At the same time, the paper argues that this negative transformation cannot be explained by external factors alone, as the internal factors have played an important role in the radicalisation of Malay society. The paper concludes with several practical recommendations such as improvisation of religious education that emphasises on peaceful cohesion, and discontinuation of foreign intervention policies and overgeneralisations. These recommendations are to regulate the escalation of extremism and radical understanding of Islam in Malaysia, which considerably threatens national security and citizens' wellbeing.

Keywords: Al Qaeda, ISIS, Islamic radicalism in Malaysia, mujahidin, religious extremism.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Extremism is not a modern phenomenon, as humanity has witnessed various waves of the rise of extremism in different forms, including extremism triggered by religious sentiments. In the 1970s, the attention of the international community was drawn on the rising of radical revolutionary movements in the Muslim world. That period marked the turning point for the change of the international attention towards Islam and Muslims and sparked a tendency towards fear of Islam, which quickly became equivocated to extremism and seen as a religion that promotes extremism and violence. Since then, the Muslim world has witnessed the rise of several extremist groups such as the Mujahidin, Al Qaeda and ISIS, which allegedly base their radical ideologies on their exclusive interpretations of Islam. As of now, many of these extremist groups are attempting to use the grievances faced by Muslim populations around the globe to justify their wrongdoings on the name of Islam. Since 1970s, these three groups have been the main agents in disseminating the radical interpretation of Islam, causing the spread of this phenomenon in different parts of the Muslim world, including Malaysia.

Despite the extensive presence of the phenomenon of extremism, there is no single definition agreed upon by the international community (Nozick, 1997). Extremism is usually defined as the holding of extreme political or religious views, while defining the noun, extremist, as a person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who advocates illegal, violent, or other extreme action. Extremist, accordingly, is the term referring to a person who opts for harming others and is aggressive in attaining their goals by using the extreme political or religious ideas. In most cases, an extremist commonly attempts to impose his/her beliefs and ideas on the society, mainly in discriminative ways.

The term religious extremism, on the other hand, as defined by Mason and James (2010) is an “anti-social behaviour that is based on religious beliefs. Sometimes people’s extreme religious views make them treat others as inferior or wrong. Extreme religious beliefs can lead to violence” (p. 4). Rad (2013) defined it as “A religious extremist is a self-righteous person gone too far” (para. 2). Depending on how one defines the highly subjective phrases “self-righteous” and “too far,” this could be applied to just about any believer.

At the same time, the majority of academicians and scholars agreed that the term extremist is highly subjective and largely based on opinion (Kilp, 2011). Despite many works on extremism, its definition remains vague without any specific or fixed connotations (Nozick, 1997). In most cases, extremism is associated with believing that the existing government is corrupted and needs to be replaced by a perfect nation based on the ideal values. Extremists believe in the usage of force and aggression to spill blood in the way of achieving such ideal perfect state. Hence, extremism in this sense is contradictory to the main principle of Islam, namely moderation.

Extremism exists in many shapes and at different levels. Some individuals who are identified as an extremist could be resorted directly to violence, while some others only hold an extremist ideology, without being directly involved in any types of violence or aggression.

Extremism at the present time is mostly associated with the expression of religious extremism. In many ways, acts of religious extremism are often justified based on the strictly literal interpretations of religious tenets, while rejecting responses to modern developments through reasoning and logical interpretations. Extremism is always associated with the agenda of the ruling elite, and with the infiltration and combination of strict understanding of religious doctrines or tenets as a political instrument for the fear-based obedient masses. Religion is a strong force and an effective tool in garnering support from the masses.

In fact, the perversion of faith and beliefs have occurred since the earliest human civilisations and communities. Appalling menaces resulting from the acts of religious extremism were conducted by the followers of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as by other religious communities such as Hindus and Buddhists. This paper discusses the rise of religious extremism in Malaysia. It is intended to describe the bizarre situation in which extremism has spread so rapidly in a country which has been defined as an oasis of moderation.

2.0 EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA

Despite the fact that the Southeast Asian states are working continuously on enhancing and strengthening legal frameworks to regulate any type of extremism, the region remains being one of the main targets in recruiting new members for extremist groups in the Middle East and Asia.

Southeast Asia is a rising region with rapid development, particularly in the economic sector, often identified as the 'East Asian Miracle' by the analysts (East Asian Miracle includes

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia). Despite their achievements, these countries cannot escape from the crucial challenges that can jeopardise the efforts of modernisation and positive developments. Success in handling these challenges will eventually determine the sustainability of the process to prosper or regress. Among these challenges, the export of foreign extremist ideological elements to the region could be the most worrying. The concept of how extremism could spread rapidly can be understood in a statement made by David Cameron, the former Prime Minister of Britain, that “The root cause of the threat we face is the extremist ideology itself. The extremist worldview is the gateway, and violence is the ultimate destination” (Crone, 2016, p. 590).

In the region, the vivid evidence of the extremist threat, such as the ongoing clashes in Southern Thailand with the Muslim separatist movements, shows no indication to end. In May 2018, a wave of a deadly bombing attacks happened in Surabaya that exclusively targeted churches. The unending religious insurgency in Marawi, Mindanao turned the city into a ghost town and has haunted the people since then. In 2016, Malaysia also suffered from its very first terrorist attack believed to be having a direct involvement with the ISIS, when a club in Puchong, a remote area from Kuala Lumpur, was attacked with a grenade.

Many Southeast Asian countries have been affected by the spread of religious extremist ideologies. This paper focuses on the case of Malaysia as an example of multi-ethnic and multireligious community with the majority of Muslim population (Index Mundi, 2018). In 2018, the population of the country was 32.4 million. 69.1 percent (20.07 million) of the population consisted of the *Bumiputera*, i.e. Malays and indigenous people. The second largest community in Malaysia is represented by the Chinese with 6.69 million people. Indians are the third largest ethnicity in the country at 6.9 percent (2.01 million). Lastly, 1.0 percent (0.29) belong to other ethnicities than the Malay, Chinese and Indian such as the Kristang, Baba Nyonya and others (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2018).

For decades, Malaysia has been hailed as a country which practices moderation. However, in the past few years, the country seems to face changes in terms of the attitude of Malay Muslims on the practice of the religious rituals. A survey conducted by Pew Research Centre (2013) survey on Muslims’ view on suicide bombing discovered that a total of 27 percent Malaysian respondents favoured the extremist acts; 5 percent agreed that these actions are often justified, while the other 22 percent agreed that it is sometimes justifiable. The fact that the quarter of the Malaysian population supports extremist actions is quite alarming. This report reveals the recent inclinations of Malaysians toward religious extremism and the reality

of penetration of extremist ideas in a country which has been known as moderate and inclusive. Interestingly, Liebman (1983) states that the growth of religious extremism indicates that such ideologies have become more adoptable by society.

Extremism in Malaysia shares many similarities with its global appearance. The ethnic tension between the Malays and the Chinese in Johore Bharu in 1945 could be a perfect example. The Malays, represented by a group known as Gerakan Tentara Sabil Selendang Merah (Holy Army of the Red Sashes) and the Chinese, mainly motivated by the Bintang Tiga (Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army), both resorted to extreme violence. The installment of religious sentiments has been utilized as the main motivating force by the Malay Muslims after extremist acts such as the desecration of a mosque by the Chinese (Abdul Hamid, 2011), the violation of the freedom of religious practice, and forbidding the Muslims to pray at the mosque (Haniffa & Mohamad, 2017).

Another case that had tragically befell Malaysia was the tragedy of 13th May 1969. The event was marked with deadly racial discord involving the two largest ethnicities in Malaysia, the Malays and the Chinese, revolving around the period of general election in 1969. The affected areas were mainly confined to the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. While the main cause of the event was largely the deteriorating relationship between the Malays and Chinese after the general election campaign, other factors such as the deprivation of economic opportunities among Malays also instilled hatred. Guan (2000), a senior fellow at ISEAS (Yusof Ishak Institute), observed that poverty among the Malays largely was influenced by the Malay politicians and intelligentsia by the decision to use the ethnic inequality card, which eventually widened the gap between these two races. The reported total death toll was less than 200 lives. However, many commentators believe that the figure was higher at 800 to 1000 deaths (Vengadesan, 2008). According to Malaysian National Security Council (n.d.), the events of 13th May 1969 were identified as extremism that involved ethnic, ideological, religious and political conflict. This tragedy could also evidence how the Malaysian population could become extreme to some extent. According to Grant and Kirton (2007), extremism happens within the frame of ethnic differences and social frustrations. These authors stated that extremism exists when a political function of the specific group, by using common religious and racial slogans, attracts the support of their respective ethnic community. This group usually stresses frustration and calls to create an alternate entrance to gain political power, and generally take advantage of conditions of instability. In the case of Malaysia, 13th May 1969 incident triggered political differences and ethnic disagreements between the Malays and the

Chinese, and it was further fuelled by deprivation, discrimination and frustrations experienced by both ethnicities.

The later development of extremism in Malaysia has been influenced by global movements in the 20th century. The world witnessed the mushrooming of different types of extremist developments due to various factors such as Cold War policies, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, foreign invasions of Muslim countries, and regional and local conflicts. Such happenings in the international political arena oppressed many communities living in the Third World, thus resulting in the hatred of Western hegemony. Many Muslims from all over the world were interested in joining the armed struggle against such injustices. Later, anti-Western sentiments became the principal propaganda of the extremist groups to justify their wrongdoings against the peaceful citizens. In Malaysia too, the Cold War deepened hatred of the West and the Soviet Union. For instance, a Malay man by the name of Nasir Abas joined the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union (Justin, 2011). Many of those Afghan Alumni who survived the war later brought their extremist understanding of Islam to their home countries.

3.0 THE MUJAHIDIN IN MALAYSIA

Current cases of religious extremism are the products of a long historical process, although motivations have changed over time. The modern wave of religious extremism and the wide geographical scope of its influence could be traced few decades back. It started with the establishment of the Mujahidin, a group that once held up as the liberator of Afghanistan from Soviet invasion (1979-1989), eventually becoming source of many religious extremist groups today, including Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Mujahidin, the plural form of Mujahid, is derived from the Arabic word, *jihad*, which literally refers to fighting against evil and wrongdoing. *Jihad* also refers to the struggle against evils desire, efforts for a better Islamic and Muslims community (Esposito, n.d.). Its usage intensified sharply during the colonial age and it later became a part of the English vocabulary, referring to the Afghan military activities and mostly denoting guerrilla warfare against the colonialists. The term later was used to identify the fighters in the mountainous areas of Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion in 1979.

The outbreak of this war stimulated the expansion of religious extremist ideology in the other parts of the world through the Afghan alumni, who took a part in the anti-Soviet struggle under the banner of the Mujahidin. As Shay (2017) believes, after the return back of these

‘alumni’ to their countries, cases of extremist acts and terrorism increased sharply in the Muslim world. While Malaysia was not to be a fertile land in culminating the extremist ideologies, the Afghan alumni of Malay origin effected the gradual growth of the strict understanding of religious believes and practices in Malaysia.

It can be closely observed in the case of Malaysia that the rise of Afghan Mujahidin was an essential factor that significantly affected the growth of religious extremism in the Muslim world culminating during the time when Al Qaeda was at the zenith of its game. The conditions and hardship faced by the Afghan Muslims in liberating their country from the atheist Soviet invasion had profoundly touched the hearts of the Malaysian Muslims. The fight was not only perceived as the problem of the Afghans alone, but as a problem concerning the entire Muslim *ummah*.

Another factor that intensified the adoption of radical understanding of the Islamic teachings was the process of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia that coincided with the Soviet-Afghan War in the late 1970s. What came along with these developments in the most indirect way were two unintended results; first, a strong sense of revulsion toward the West has been instilled among the Muslims. Second, a more orthodox and strict understanding of Islam became widespread. The phenomenon makes the plight of the Mujahidin seen as a holy fight against the Soviets or the Kuffar, thus making the call for *jihad* even more appealing among the Malaysians. In the words of Veer and Munshi (2004), though the number of Malays who joined the holy war in Afghanistan was insignificant compared to those of the Arab origin, yet were crucial in importing the foreign ideas from war-affected zones to the local country. In Malaysia, the process of moving towards an extremist understanding of religion might have started at home, but the foreign ideology imported from war-affected zones had definitely played its significant role and sped up the process.

It can be observed that during the period from the 1980s until the emergence of ISIS, many of those who joined the *jihad* in Afghanistan brought along with them the radical and extreme ideas to their home countries. The influence of the jihadist Salafism and Wahhabism led to the formation of local religious extremist cells such as Tentera Sabiullah, Darul Dakwah (House of Call to Islam), Kumpulan Crypto (Crypto Group), Kumpulan Mohd Nasir Ismail (Mohd Nasir Ismail’s Group), Kumpulan Jundullah (Army of God Group), Kumpulan Revolusi Islam Ibrahim Libya (Ibrahim Libya Islamic Revolution Group), Kumpulan Mujahidin Kedah (Kedah Mujahidin Group - KMK), Kumpulan Perjuangan Islam Perak (Perak Islamic Movement Group - KPIP), Al-Maunah, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (Malaysian Mujahidin

Group) and Jemaah Islamiyah (Islamic Society). Scattered incidents raised the alarm on rising religious extremism in Malaysia, while all of these groups purportedly acted according to their very own wills. They all somehow shared common goals, which was to topple down the government and demanded the creation of the administrative body that would be fully aligned with their own versions of Islam (“12 Kumpulan Militan”, 2003). As stated by Tan (2009), Al-Maunah and KMM, for example, believed in permissibility of violence in gaining their goals.

According to the United States Agency for International Development (2016) report, in the span of 10 years (1985-1995), about 300-400 Malaysians and Indonesians were trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan as anti-Soviet Mujahidin, and many of them survived the war and returned to their home countries. These years marked the period in which the products of the war started to emerge. In 1986, a group of returning jihadists of the Malaysian origin formed Halaqah Pakindo (Persatuan Bekas Mahasiswa Pakistan, India and Indonesia or the Association of Malaysian of Graduates from Pakistan, India and Indonesia), which later to be known as Malaysia Mujahidin Group (KMM) by 1995 under the head of Zainon Ismail. KMM has been linked to many attacks on civilians and crimes involving the religious extremism since 1999, including bombings of churches, Hindu temples, murdering a local politician, attempts to kill two ethnic Indians and even an armed robbery (Rubin, 2010).

Another effort to spread the radical understanding of Islam in Malaysia was brought by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a group closely linked to KMM. It was established by two Indonesian men, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir, in Malaysia in 1985. The founders had returned back to their original country after the Suharto regime’s fall, yet their influence and control remained the same, especially in recruiting members and searching for financial support, which mainly was coming from Malaysia.

In a subtler way, the dissemination of extremist ideologies in Malaysia took place at local madrasahs (religious schools) as well. Especially in the period from 1970s onward, many local madrasahs were under the strong influence of religious extremist ideas and teachings, as they were mainly sponsored by the Saudi Wahhabism as stated by Aubrey (2004). While being supervised by a religious teacher who went to the Middle East or Asian countries like Pakistan to enhance religious knowledge and learn Islamic teachings, many local madrasah graduates became influenced by strict interpretations of the Islamic principles. Besides, these madrasah teachers were directly involved in the Soviet-Afghan war. For instance, Pesantren Luqmanul Hakiem that was established in Johor by Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir, who were radical preachers (Farish, Sikand, & Bruinessen, 2008) teaching Salafism and jihadism (Magouirk &

Atranb, 2008). At the same time, Barton (2005) said that both were actively recruiting fighters to join the Mujahidin troops in Afghanistan. The madrasah recruited teachers from Mujahidin alumni, such as Mukhlas or Ali Ghufron, an Indonesian religious extremist, who had served in the war in Afghanistan (Barton, 2005).

4.0 THE LINKS OF AL QAEDA TO MALAYSIA

The Soviet-Afghan War ended in 1989 by the defeat of the USSR. On the surface, it is fair to consider this war between the one that tried to establish their rule and communist ideological influence and the other who fought to reject that ideology, although the picture seems to be more complex than just an effort towards an ideological influence. The Soviet-Afghan War witnessed the same *modus operandi* applied during the first Vietnam War, which is generally considered as the war between the United States of America and the USSR by using the Viet Minh as a proxy. In the case of Afghanistan, the USA supported the Mujahidin by providing them with military training, weaponry and armaments to fight against the USSR. In the presence of USA, it could be argued that though the war ended with the victory of the Afghan Mujahidin against the Soviet invasion, the real winner was the USA. This is due to the realisation of USA's main aim of the prevention of the spread of the communist ideology in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the USA could not imagine that their efforts in suppressing the communist ideology would eventually give birth to a bigger threat to the modern world, that is the Al Qaeda of Osama Bin Laden.

Al Qaeda was created in 1988 and soon become the symbol of modern type of terrorism under the name of religion, Islam. Bin Laden and his associates were accountable for many violent acts such as the bombing of New York's World Trade Center in 1993, arming and training the Somali rebels that eventually killed 18 Americans, and the most notoriously, the deadliest attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11th September 2001. However, ever since, Osama Bin Laden was named the most wanted man of the decade. On 2nd May 2011, only almost a decade after 9/11, Bin Laden was killed by the USA Navy SEAL in Abbottabad, Pakistan. This was thought to be the end but was only a momentary victory for the USA and many others international parties, as the death of Osama Bin Laden did not put an end to the activities of Al Qaeda. Rather, it encouraged the group to strengthen its position all around the globe, including in Malaysia.

Anti-West propaganda, commonly called nowadays Bin Ladenism, and which directs the global Islamic world towards the stringent Wahhabi ideology spread and the full implementation of the Shariah law and Hudud was demanded in many Muslim countries

(Bergen, 2006). With the presence of the Afghan Mujahidin in the country, these new ideas found followers in Malaysia as well. In legitimating the cause, the Islamic tenets and the unending struggles and poor conditions of Muslims existing worldwide that has been believed to be the consequence of the Western hegemony were used as the main driving forces. The members usually often cite the verses from the Quran and the hadith of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) as the authorization tools in formulating their propaganda to make it sounder and 'in line' with the Islamic principles. The simplest example can observe that the group always chooses to use the word *fatwa* (religious opinion), which normally given out by a *shaikh all-Islam* (mufti or a qualified jury). Rodney (2013) believes that Malaysia can be considered an easy target and heaven for the terrorists and extremists due to its liberal visa policy. Thus, the country has been used as a medium for several occasions, as a meeting place of terrorists and extremists, and even a hideout for some of them.

Malaysia's first indirect involvement with the Al Qaeda can be observed in the domestic threat caused by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to the Malaysian society. This group, inspired by the extreme understanding of Islam and having allied to Al-Qaeda through its the alumni of the Soviet-Afghan War as its members, shared similar goals as the Al Qaeda. For years, JI had been loyal to Al Qaeda by sending newly recruited fighters from Malaysia to join the ranks of Al Qaeda. They were sent to be trained in the camps in Afghanistan while some were sent to Mindanao, the Philippines, to the military camps of Abu Sayyaf Group and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). While the exact number of those who joined the ranks of Al Qaeda is unknown, in 2002 a total of 47 Malaysians were arrested for having links with the Al Qaeda; the numbers of participants is believed to be much more (Gunaratna, 2002). Pike (2011) claimed that KMM wished to topple the Malaysian government under the leadership of the Prime Minister and establish an Islamic state that consisted of Malaysia, southern Philippines, and Indonesia and to form the Southeast Asian Islamic Caliphate.

In their most active years, the Malaysian extremist groups were under the strong motivation to spark a rift between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in Malaysia hoping that, by doing so, it may start a religious conflict. Along with stirring social disharmony inside the country, the extremist groups believed to assist Singaporean Jemaah Islamiyah, a well by providing them with ammonium nitrate, an ingredient for a bomb-making which was planned to be installed in Singapore (Ministry of Home Affairs Republic of Singapore, 2003). Indeed, this was a provocative act hoping that Singapore, a Chinese-majority neighbouring country,

would retaliate and consequently spark a new wave of war between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in the region.

Hays (2015) stated that the religious extremist groups showed a strong sense of hatred and loath toward the non-Muslim citizens and did not hesitate to apply their trainings into actual deeds when it was possible. Many of their extremist operations were conducted together with Jemaah Islamiyah (Atkins, 2004) was also the one who was loyally linked to Al Qaeda (Rabasa & Haseman, 2002). For instance, in May 2001, the group conducted a series of bank robberies allegedly to fund their further operations. Furthermore, KMM members were well-known for using their trainings in the terrorist camps in order to fight against the Christians and Hindus, and the government (Atkins, 2004). The members of KMM were the members of JI as well, as these two extremist cells in the region were interlinked.

Malaysian individuals linked to extremist activities were typically well-educated citizens with no criminal background previously. Three of the most internationally known names worth mentioning in this paper were Noordin Mat Top, a former accountant (Samsudin & Ibrahim, 2010) and a postgraduate student at the University Technology Malaysia (“Noordin was Never a UTM Lecturer”, 2005), Zulkifli Abdhir, who was trained as an engineer in USA (“Malaysian Terrorist Marwan Dead”, 2015), and Azahari Husin, an Associate Professor of Statistics and Valuation at the University Technology Malaysia in 1991-98 (McGirk, 2005). The involvement of these men with extremist activities indicate that not all extremists come from poor backgrounds or less-educated circles. These three individuals shared the similarities in their early lives, as all participated in Soviet-Afghan War and received military training there. It is believed that it was during this period that their adoption of extreme understanding happened. They rejected the *wasatiyyah* (balance) principle in Islam and did not accept the ideas that each professed Muslim must strictly practice virtue and avoid vice. Zulkifli, for example, demonstrated a complete remorse toward non-Muslims, and during his leadership at the KMM, he ordered killing apostates, such as the famous case of Noraishah Bokhari, a Muslim who converted to Christianity (Mohammad Aslam, 2009). Noraishah Bokhari, who had changed her name to Aishah Felicia Bokhari, had gave her father a phone call to inform about her conversion to Christianity. She then proceeded with the court procedure by legalising her conversion, assisted by a lawyer Lennet Teoh Hui Leong (Majlis Agama Islam Selangor, 2014).

5.0 ISIS AND ITS MALAYSIAN CONNECTIONS

The ongoing conflict in Iraq and the civil war in Syria escalated extremist inclinations regionally and globally to a higher level. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) as a consequence of turmoil in the Middle East had eventually spawned more fighters with inclinations towards radicalization and extremist understanding of the religious tenets. This militant group echoed the role that was first played by the Afghan Mujahidin as the agents of calling for extremist behaviour. With the apocalyptic narrative of the Muslims' struggle and the terrible conditions created by the civil war, ISIS successfully galvanised thousands of followers from all over the world, including Malaysia. A report prepared by the Asian Correspondent states that a detainee of Malaysian police who was willing to join ISIS revealed that they look upon the ISIS as the saviour of Muslims from the failure of justice in Muslim states (Kong, 2017).

Some Malaysian citizens reportedly migrated to war-affected countries to join the jihadist activities. As in January 2016, according to the USA Agency for International Development report, 300 to 450 Malaysians and Indonesians had joined the ISIS ranks in Iraq and Syria (United States Agency for International Development, 2016). The USA-based Pew Research Centre's Survey in November 2015, for example, reveals that 11 percent Malaysian Muslims express a favourable view of ISIS, while only 4 percent of Indonesian Muslims express the same views (Poushter, 2015). These figures reveal a serious concern for the existence of extremism in Malaysia. In 2016, according to Bukit Aman, as was reported in *The Star*, 46 Malaysians were ready to be positioned as suicide bombers (Ahmad, Hooi, & Aravinthan, 2016).

The strong influence of the ISIS on Malaysians may be explained by advancements of social media, as the main medium in recruiting new members and spreading their ideology. Social media is successfully used in provoking the sentiments of religious extremism and brainwashing the naiveté in joining the group. With the modern technology, the so-called caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, spread his fatwas and taunts over the prepared mediums and recruited passionate and young followers for his cause.

In Malaysia, as Principal Assistant Director at the Special Branch's Counter-Terrorism Division, Datuk Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, stated that, in May 2016, 98 percent of the Malaysians who intended to join the ISIS were recruited online (Azizan, 2016). Online networking worked like a charm for ISIS. For example, Malaysia faced its first terrorist attack when the Movidia Club in Puchong was attacked by a grenade while the customers were

watching a football match. The detained criminals revealed that they were ordered by Muhammad Wannady Muhammad Jedi, a Malaysian directing them far from Syria. Wannady was an active member of the ISIS before being killed in 2017 and the one who was responsible for recruiting fresh members from Malaysia and spreading ISIS ideology through social media, mostly stirring extremist ideas and ordering the attacks in Malaysia, though most of them failed. Mohamed Yasin (2017), founds that Wannady used religious sentiments as bait in luring new online membership through social media. While doing so, he managed to popularise a radical and extreme understanding of the concept of *jihad*. For example, a 20 year old student from International Islamic University College of Selangor was seriously tempted to join ISIS in Syria through Facebook conversations. According to Ayob, ISIS was targeting individuals who were considered to be easily misled and manipulated (Prakash, 2014). Malay speaking fighters, including Indonesians and Singaporeans, formed their own splinter cell that operated as a part of ISIS, known the Katibah Nusantara (Malay speaking arm of the Islamic State). According to the findings of Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, the group was expanding and gaining more members recruited through video and leaflets that published in the Malay language. The propaganda targeted young Malays to disseminate the ISIS's ideology and cause, especially on social media. Katibah Nusantara's role as the agent of ISIS in the Malay Archipelago was significant as publicising ISIS's causes in the Malay language, resulting in an increase of the numbers of new recruits.

The presence of the Katibah Nusantara in the region with active Malaysian members played a crucial role in bridging the ISIS ideology to the region and made it more globalized. Consequently, national security and wellbeing of Malaysian citizens became an issue in Malaysia with the rising number of those who were recruited by ISIS. In January 2016, as reported in the *New Straits Times*, a male teenager aged 16 was arrested in Kedah, wearing an ISIS style outfit and holding a woman on knifepoint (Parameswaran, 2016).

The Malaysian authorities repeatedly expressed their concerns about the rise of ISIS influence within the country. In 2018 alone, several arrests of Malaysian citizens occurred due to their direct or indirect links with ISIS. Seven men were arrested for purportedly threatening the king, Sultan Muhammad V, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Religious Affairs Minister, Mujahid Yusuf Rawa for not implementing Shariah law. According to the inspector general of Malaysian police, Mohd Fuzi Harun, one of the arrested suspects was an ISIS

devotee who had posted his intention to take action against the aforementioned Malaysian officials on his Facebook account (Chew, 2018).

In addition to social media, ISIS also uses *usrah* (an Islamic group gatherings) at the local educational institutions such as universities and colleges. *Usrah* is an easy way in approaching and disseminating an extreme understanding of religion among the youngsters. This method was definitely effective, as several cases were reported that Malaysians were left captivated with the *jihadi* movement spread by their *naqib* (male leader). In 2014, as reported by Zolkepli and Ghazali (2015), a former Malaysian army commander aged 29 was reported to join ISIS after being influenced by his *naqib*.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This article has discussed cases of radicalization among Malay Muslims due to their ties with the Mujahidin, Al Qaeda and ISIS. This analysis revealed the reality of the problem of the rising of religious extremist in Malaysia, thus suggesting that the authorities can no longer ignore its influence on the moderate nature of social relations in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia. At the same time, the paper argued that this negative transformation cannot be explained by external factors alone, as internal factors have played an important role in the radicalization of Malay society.

After a long period of calamitous war against ISIS, in January 2018 the current President of the USA, Donald Trump, proudly declared its defeat. Just like the previous momentarily victories over Al-Qaeda and the Mujahidin, one might consider questioning the reality behind the final defeat of extremism and terrorism. The USA might have won the war over these militant groups, but ideologically, they can never be defeated. There will always be another Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi that will create another war and propagate similar ideologies. The ideas on which these radical movements based are still very much alive, though the groups went underground. It is possible that there could be new religious extremist cells under different names but based on the same ideologies as the Mujahedin, Al Qaeda and ISIS. Rising extremism in Malaysia thus cannot be ignored by the government and local society, as it may pose a substantial threat to the multi-racial society and national security.

From the discussions, it can be observed that one of the reasons for spread of extremism is actually related to internal factors, such as the readiness of the Malay society to accept literal, radical and extreme interpretations of Islamic tenets. KMM for once can be set as an exemplary

group that opted for a literal and simplistic interpretation of Islam, which from such belief finally led them to be surrounded by the attitude that justifying the wrong interpretation of the Islamic concepts, especially the concept of *jihad* in Islam (Razak et al., 2017). It is believed that this transmission and the readiness of the Malays to embrace such kind of thinking is a long and gradual process, as Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid has stated that Malay Muslims are slowly but assuredly becoming more radicalised (Habib, 2016). He later outlined the radicalization process by referencing to the students that went for religious study in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, where they were exposed to the strict ideas of Wahhabism. Many of these students eventually became teachers or politicians; influential people in Malaysia who have a platform to, whether aware or unaware of their actions, slowly disseminate this understanding (Habib, 2016).

Thus, what steps can be taken in order to curb the rising of religious extremism in Malaysia? Since this problem is based on the incorrect understanding of religious principles, the paper suggests that Malaysian Muslims should be given the proper tools of religious education, based on the principles of peaceful cohesion, moderation and social respect since the early stages of public education. The basic teachings of Islam promoting peace and human dignity shall be highlighted, as it is stated in the Qur'an (16:90) that, "God commands justice, doing good, and generosity towards relatives and He forbids what is shameful, blameworthy, and oppressive. He teaches you so that you may take heed."

Secondly, international society, especially the United States of America and other major powers, must stop from intervening other countries affairs by imposing and introducing foreign policies that could be inappropriate to other countries. The hidden agenda of exploiting a weaker country by triggering various types of disunity cannot be tolerated by the international community. This step is important for safety of many countries in the third world as individuals in war affected countries are more inclined towards radicalization and extremism. Consequently, many of these extremists tended to look for a new safe-haven and shelter in another country, and, consequently, they will bring their extremist ideologies to new countries. This was true in the case of Malaysia, when the foreign extremists established new bases in the country. The intervention of outside powers has been proven to be one of the main factors for religious extremism. The intervention of superpowers under catchy slogans may first be welcomed by the people, but the subsequent actions in ruling the invaded lands engenders hatred among the locals. The sad reality is that acts of extremism are eventually shouldered on the doer. and he is the one who is blamed alone for the happening but ironically, the failure of

governments in providing security and human dignity, and the reasons for such criminal acts, are never drawn into attention. As we can see on the examples of the Mujahidin, Al Qaeda and ISIS, all of them emerged as a consequence of foreign intervention or ongoing injustices. The foreign intervention will only multiply the numbers of the extremists.

At the same time, it is time to realize that all actions taken by the extreme groups as a response to foreign interventions and injustices actually destroyed their own countries. Thus, Muslim societies and states should move towards calmer and peaceful policies instead of armed struggles, which in the end will only cost the death of thousands. Other than that, if the situation is really dire and cannot be solved without foreign intervention, then it is best that if the international power shall seek the opinions from the involved countries rather than making the policy based on the mainstream judgment.

Furthermore, today the world is facing another extremist worldview based mainly on Islamophobic sentiments, considering Islam as the main reason for extremism. We believe that the fact of the misuse of Islam by militant groups to justify their wrongdoings should never be assigned to the religion. Rather, the individuals themselves are responsible for conducting crimes against humanity. Every religion calls for the peaceful, harmonious and respectful social coexistence of people of different backgrounds, beliefs, and races. Religion is a very sensitive case; thus, condemning and defaming it for wrongdoing conducted by individuals might lead to backlashes of the believers which if it does not stop, the problem will eventually occur. Every religion enjoins goodness and forbid evil deeds. Thus, as a fact, faith and belief should and could mean obtaining the true success in life. A peaceful life does not merely mean living in a world of harmonious political co-existence, but rather, a life that is free of oppression and repression, with a guarantee for everyone's inner freedom.

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