

Why Malaysia has an Islamic State problem
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The blame for increased radicalisation cannot solely be levelled on external factors

The Islamic State has become one of the most serious regional concerns for domestic and international security. Many Southeast Asian nations are now having to face up to the foreign fighter phenomenon with increasing numbers of their citizens being lured by the ISIS ideology. To date, over 500 Indonesians and 200 Malaysians are believed to have joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. This is a worrying trend, especially for Malaysia given its relatively small population.

Since 2013, more than 120 individuals have been arrested by Malaysian authorities either trying to join Islamic State or returning from fighting with them. This poses a serious threat given the group's stated aim of expanding their operations locally. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, has stated that he fears the region could become a "key recruitment centre". According to some of Malaysia's top counter terrorism officials, an ISIS attack in Malaysia "is just a matter of time".

The growing fear is that some of these foreign fighters will return to their home countries and coordinate attacks motivated by an ideological passion developed during their time in Syria and Iraq. While Malaysian authorities have been placing "no travel" alerts on the passports of those suspected of wanting to engage in these activities abroad, as well as arresting those returning, this has not been enough to stem the flow of predominantly young men and women joining ISIS.

This enthusiasm for radicalism puts those involved at odds with Malaysia's image as a moderate Muslim state and model for other Muslim majority nations. The damage wrought by American foreign policy in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, as well as their perceived unwavering support for Israel at the expense of Palestinians living in occupied territories, has become a rallying cry for many local leaders against the injustices inflicted against overseas Muslims.

However, the blame for increased radicalisation cannot solely be levelled on external factors. It is also necessary to look at what has happened within Malaysia over the last couple of decades. Various observers have pointed to the politicisation of Islam combined with the reaction to increasing authoritarian security measures as possible factors to explain this new trend.

Shiism, adhered to by a minority of Muslims worldwide, is prohibited in Malaysia. Various Shiite scholars have been jailed and their places of worship shut down. To understand why an increasing number of Malaysians have displayed an affinity toward the ISIS movement, it may also be important to note that the current rebel-led conflict in Syria opposes the government of Bashar al-Assad who belongs to the Alawites – a branch of Shia Islam representing only a minority of the country's population.

The Malaysian government in no way condones the actions of the foreign fighters. However, anti-Shiite rhetoric disseminated through official media channels, such as newspapers and television, combined with sermons by some scholars claiming it is

acceptable for Sunni Muslims to join 'holy war' against a repressive Bashar al-Assad, has led to the perception that this is acceptable. Also, the Malaysian government continues to publicly lend its support to organizations like Hamas despite their bloody reputation for violence and suicide bombings against Israel.

In December of 2013, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal made an official visit to Malaysia where he met with various members of the ruling coalition, including Prime Minister Najib Razak. This support of a regime that has openly advocated for violence to be committed against civilian populations as recourse can have the effect of tacitly lending weight to the idea that it is acceptable to take up arms against those considered to be persecuting Islamic values abroad. Furthermore, during a speech to UMNO faithful last year, Prime Minister Najib asked for members to be as "brave" as ISIS in fighting the Iraqi army. What sort of message does this send to impressionable youth?

More attention also needs to be focused on the way ISIS uses propaganda to recruit Malaysians. Unlike the early 2000s when recruitment was heavily conducted through religious schools and madrasas, ISIS is using the Internet and social media platforms to effectively disseminate their message and lure the youth.

Before he died, Mohd Lotfi Ariffin, a 46-year old Malaysian with a long history of radicalism who was killed fighting with ISIS in Syria last year, managed to post a plethora of messages, pictures and videos detailing his and others' actions online. Like many other home grown terrorists he was seen by many as a hero and had a following in the many tens of thousands. The growing influence of 'leaders' like Lotfi must be monitored and controlled carefully by the authorities to avoid grooming other young men and women.

Earlier this year, the government pushed the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) through parliament. It allows for the detention of terrorist suspects for up to two years without trial, but critics say it may be instead used against dissidents and government critics. Despite the need for Malaysia to update security measures, the government should be placing more attention on identifying the drivers that lead to extremism rather than drafting new legislation that existing laws clearly cover. Imposing tougher penalties will not prevent the increase of extremism. Perhaps using the courts to conduct open and transparent trials of terrorism suspects, like in Indonesia, would be a better way to go.

Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, the Mufti of Singapore has argued that Muslims have a religious "obligation" to report those who wish to harm society. Malaysia's Islamic leaders should also take a proactive role and own this issue – encouraging the community here to do the same. It is also time for the Malaysian authorities, including government figures, to clearly and articulately argue that sectarian militancy has nothing to do with the true tenets of Islam. Encouraging religious radicalism will only amplify the problem and increase recruitment.

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