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“Islamic State” and Malaysia: Perception, Policy, Current and Future Trends and Security Challenges

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Introduction

The concept of establishing an “Islamic State” in Malaysia has been closely linked to the vagaries of Malaysian politics, and the pressures arising from managing a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. There is little doubt that external events occurring in the Muslim World have, and do impact upon the religious trends in this Malay-Muslim majority country of 30 million people. The Ayatollah Khomeini Revolution of 1979 in Iran can be traced back as furnishing a major benchmark and boost to demands for Islamization of the country, i.e. moving away from the secular fundamental provisions in the Malaysian Constitution and towards narrower interpretations of Islam as the “official religion” of the country. The role of the State in promoting Islam in the country is also a crucial factor in the current state of Islamization in Malaysia. The pressure to capture the mind and soul of the Muslim faithful, viewed by the two major Malay/Muslim parties, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, PAS), as the key determinants of electoral outcomes, has indeed accelerated the pace of Islamization. These two Malay/Muslim political parties have essentially dominated the political scene for the past 35 years since the Iranian Revolution catapulted the Islamists to power and created a theocratic state. Little did the Malaysian Muslims or the Malay-dominant government ever realize at that time that the Sunni-Shia divide could also impact upon Malaysian politics in ways that can threaten Sunni power in Malaysia.

This Discussion Paper will argue that Malaysia is not immune to global trends in the Muslim World, and as such, also contributes to the Islamization process through its domestic structures, institutions, policies and laws. As such, while Islamization as a trend and policy could be politically expedient to the ruling elite in enabling them to remain in power, it can be a double-edged sword that can seriously undermine national unity and religious harmony, the twin pillars of Malaysia’s hitherto political and economic success.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared on 21 September 2001 that Malaysia was already an “Islamic Country”, and there should be no further debate on its religious status. This concept of “Islamic State”, of course, has nothing to do with the more recent ISIL formulation of “Islamic State”. The Malaysian conception is

based on the role of Islam in Malaysian society and economy – a role that was conceived as peaceful, developmental, and constructive, at least in the Malay/Muslim mind. Islam therefore, was viewed as a vehicle for further enhancing Malay dominance and political legitimacy in multi-ethnic Malaysia. The Mahathir declaration was undoubtedly a big boost to accelerate the building of mosques, establish new Islamic economic institutions, Islamic kindergartens, schools and universities, and eventually towards the establishment of Shariah (Islamic legal system) in the country.

Against this background, this paper attempts to examine recent developments in the Middle East that have, and are impacting Malaysian Muslims. These include the rise of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and its establishment of the Islamic State (IS) in parts of the territories of Iraq and Syria. It also examines the possible impact on national security managers in Malaysia, and the measures currently being taken by the authorities to contain if not avert threats to the way Islam is practiced in the country, and the management of Muslim-Non-Muslim relations in multi-religious Malaysia.

Official Perception of, and Reaction/Response to ISIL Terrorism

Islam in the Malaysian context, is viewed by the Malay/Muslim ruling elite as a legitimizing instrument for Malay hegemony. Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution states that Islam is the religion of the Federation. Islam therefore enjoys a preeminent position as the Official Religion of the country. This provision together with other provisions relating to the Malay Rulers, national language and special privileges for the Malays and other indigenous races are not open to discussion or debate. Thus, Islam occupies a special position in the political economy of Malaysia in the sense of entrenching Malay/Muslim dominance in the country.

This political scenario is well and good provided Muslims themselves do not begin to threaten Malay hegemony. All Muslim sub-groups or denominations that deviate from Sunni Islam are not condoned, and usually suppressed out of fear that permission of such religious freedom for Muslims will divide them and ultimately dilute if not erode the control exercised by the dominant political party, UMNO, since independence in 1957. Earlier, on 21st October 1994, the Al-Arqam movement was banned, while in more recent times, Sufi, Shia and Ahmadiyah sects and followers in Malaysia have been given little or no public space by the religious authorities to worship as they will.

However, the threat to the Malaysian State presented by the rise of ISIL is confounding the authorities in terms of how to comprehend the support by

Malay/Muslims for the ideology of violence preached by the IS as an instrument to overthrow the existing internal, regional and international order (status quo) which ISIL sees as oppressive and insulting to their conception of Islam. Figures released by the Malaysian police indicate that over 100 Malaysians have found their way to join IS fighters in furtherance of the IS goal of establishing a Global Caliphate by using force, violence and terrorism.¹

Official Perception of the ISIL Threat to Malaysia and the Region

Malaysia/Southeast Asia has historically been a region that, while being open to external influence, has been comfortable and confident in absorbing, fusing what is good from the outside and rejecting if not containing what is seen as harmful to the domestic/regional environment. The ASEAN-based regional order typifies this approach to the strategic management of the regional-external nexus.

In the event, ISIL ideology is clearly a foreign element that does not mesh with the regional culture. The way Malaysia, Indonesia and ASEAN as a whole reacted to post-9/11 terrorism in Southeast Asia suggests that State Security takes priority over ambitions, even if they are officially condoned or encouraged, to establish an Islamic State or “Darul Islam” in Southeast Asia.

The Royal Malaysian Police gave an assessment of the ISIL threat to Malaysia once it became clear that Malaysian “jihadists”, who were found to be making their way to the Middle East to join the terror group (IS) to launch strikes in Iraq and Syria, are now training their sights on their home government. According to Ayub Khan, a senior counter-terrorism official at the Headquarters of the Royal Malaysian Police (Bukit Aman), Malaysian supporters of ISIL (an offshoot of Al-Qaeda), “are looking to topple Putrajaya and replace the government with a fully Islamic government based on Shariah law”.² The official added that the 19 suspects that were arrested also discussed planning attacks against a disco, pubs in Kuala Lumpur and a Carlsberg factory in Petaling Jaya, a neighbouring city located about 8 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur.

The actual number of IS sympathizers having gone to, or were planning to go to Iraq and Syria to fight along ISIL is believed by intelligence officials to be much

¹ Lee Shi-Ian, “More than 100 Malaysians still fighting in Syria and Iraq, say intelligence officers”, *Malaysian Insider*, 28 June 2014: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/more-than-100-malaysians-still-fighting-in-syria-and-iraq-say-intelligence#sthash.sv64iEnf.dpuf>, 28 June 2014 (Accessed: 10 May 2015).

² Malay Mail Online (quoting South China Morning Post, 11 August 2014), “Islamic State militants have Putrajaya in crosshairs, Bukit Aman says”: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/islamic-state-militants-has-putrajaya-in-crosshairs-bukit-aman-says> 11 August 2014 (Accessed: 20 May 2015).

larger. Today, the number is estimated to be well over 200. The greatest fear of the Malaysian Government regarding the domestic impact and implications of the IS threat can be stated as follows:

- (1) Ideologically, ISIL ideology poses a fundamental threat to Malaysian Islam based on constitutional provisions that recognize the Malay Rulers as the heads of Islam in their respective states (there are 9 Malay Sultans in the 14-state Malaysian Federation). In other words, IS is a threat to monarchist Islam in the same way that it threatens the monopoly of power held by Sunni Arab monarchies in the Middle East/Persian Gulf.
- (2) Politically, the ruling Malay party, UMNO also fears losing control of the Malay/Muslim agenda of Islamization of Malaysia according to the UMNO schedule and priority of ensuring it remains in power, if possible in perpetuity. Rightly or wrongly, UMNO takes the view that only their political party can ensure Malay dominance of Malaysia and protect and promote what they see as Malay rights and privileges in this multi-ethnic country. A change of government in favour of the opposition, even if it is led by the other Malay/Islamic party, PAS cannot guarantee that the present structure of Malay/Muslim supremacy will be preserved for the future.
- (3) Economically, the prospect of an Islamic State not led by UMNO could alter the political economy of the country in some fundamental ways. It could and possibly would undermine the ability and control of UMNO elites to assert political control over the economy in favour of political and economic elites linked to this Malay-led political party. In sum, any new Islamic ideology that aims to subvert the political-economic ideology created and sustained by UMNO over the past 60 years is evidently viewed as a threat to Malaysian national security.
- (4) Regionally, the expansion of IS influence in Malaysia and also Indonesia can seriously undermine the ASEAN Way of promoting regional order, cooperation, cohesion and integration based on the principles of inclusivity and cooperative security. Given that the IS threat is particularly relevant to Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia – two vital and critical members and supporters of ASEAN, any major failure to manage or combat this transnational threat to national/regional security could have serious repercussions on domestic political stability, economic growth, and the flow of foreign investment to the countries concerned as well as the region as a whole. Moreover, as current Chair of ASEAN, Malaysia must be seen to instil regional and international confidence in its ability to combat transnational terrorism, especially of the IS variety whose modus operandi is quite foreign to the culture, customs, and religious practices of Southeast Asia.

Radicalization and Recruitment

A major critical question confounding the Malaysian authorities is this: Why and how have Malaysian jihadists been radicalized and recruited to fight for a cause in a distant land given that the Government's pro-Malay/Islam policies have generally ensured "the good life" for Malays (vis-à-vis the Non-Malays) in Malaysia? Malaysian factory worker Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, suspected of being a member of the group — formerly called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — was believed to have been the suicide bomber who killed 25 members of an Iraqi police team in May 2014. Instructively, what right does a Malaysian have to go to a distant land and kill citizens of that country (Iraq) based on his misguided belief that he was advancing the cause of Islam? How did he reach a level of indoctrination that, in his view, justified his act of suicide terrorism in a foreign land? Are they being radicalized by Muslim preachers in Malaysia, or are they being self-radicalized via the Internet?

Indeed both sources of radicalization need to be further investigated. In Malaysia, Friday sermons are usually scripted by the Federal and State Islamic authorities to ensure that the messages delivered are not anti-Government. However, in the Pas-controlled states or mosques, as in Kelantan, it may not be possible for the Government to effectively monitor or control the messages delivered. It is also debatable whether, despite the prepared Friday sermons issued by the Federal/State Islamic authorities, the faithful could still be exposed to, and radicalized by powerful preachers who insist that it is the duty of every Muslim to wipe out injustices committed against the "ummah" anywhere in the world, even by resort to violence and terrorism, for they will be received as "martyrs" in the after-life.

The former Mufti of Perlis, Dr. Asri Zainul Abidin asserts that "Many young Malay Muslims have been reeled in to join the militant activities abroad, drawn by the prospects of helping out Muslims in need and to fight and die in the name of Islam. I know lots of Malay youths have been asking me about it, either in person or through email. The offer is attractive to them...In Malaysia, there is an unhappiness over what is happening, a sense of injustice... many of these youths have a good intention, because they see Muslims in Syria being bombed and killed so they feel that they want to help out whatever way they can".³ Here, the motivations of the Muslim terrorists who killed *Charlie Hebdo* editor and cartoonist Stephane Charbonnier and 11 others in a **terror** attack on 7th June 2015 in Paris, is a good case for comparison of methods of self and group radicalization. Social rejection, imprisonment, travel and communication, and especially the use of the internet were all key factors that

³ Interview given in June 2014 by by Perlis Mufti Datuk Dr Asri Zainul Abidin to the Malay Mail: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia...bukit-aman-says>.

combined to radicalize the Kouchi brothers who executed the attack on the premises of the newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*.⁴

Challenges for Malaysia and ASEAN in Combating IS Threat

Evidently, the full impact of exposure to IS ideology and terror manuals will be felt when its fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia and even a handful from Singapore return home. This concern was expressed by General Moeldoko, commander of the Armed Forces of Indonesia (TNI), who added that the behaviour of the returnees was unpredictable. It is therefore incumbent upon national and regional security managers in collaboration with ASEAN's external Dialogue Partners to formulate scenarios and strategies for collective action against this menace to national, regional, and international stability and security. The gravity of the IS threat was summed up by General Moeldoko in his lecture in Singapore, "ISIS is like a cancer... As a Muslim, it has nothing to do with the Islam I know, or the God I pray to".⁵

Secondly, the appeal of ISIL will largely be in Southeast Asia, with Indonesia and Malaysia hosting significant Muslim populations. In an earlier phase following the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S., followed by the American Government's response in overthrowing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, quite a large number of Al-Qaeda sympathizers in Malaysia and Indonesia went to Afghanistan for training. They have also travelled to the Middle East. The huge security challenge for State authorities is to track the secondary effects of these travels, and the ongoing linkages these sympathizers have with Abu Bakar Bashir's Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia as well as Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters in the Philippines. These terrorist groups could strengthen the bond between ISIL and Asian extremism. International security expert, David Edwards suggests the urgent need to set up an international combatant command coordinating council, an increase in regional partnerships, and an increase in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and intelligence sharing.⁶

While international cooperation has undoubtedly been upgraded since 9/11 to combat global and regional terror, including the measures suggested above, there

⁴ "Charlie Hebdo Attackers' Path to Radicalization": New York Times, 17 January 2015: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/01/18/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-attackers-radicalization.html>? (Accessed: 18 May 2015).

⁵ Returning ISIS Fighters 'Pose Threat to Region' The Straits Times Online, 30 October 2014.

⁶ David L. Edwards, "Ignored in Asia: The ISIL Threat", Small Wars Journal, 22 January 2015: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/david-l-edwards> (Accessed 2 June 2015).

needs to be closer study and scrutiny of Lone Wolf radicalization. It is here that the immediate security threat lies in Malaysia and Indonesia, arising largely from a significant expansion of Internet literacy and easy access of ICT devices including the mobile phone which can be easily converted for lethal purposes. Therefore, one effective way of combating ISIL ideology to prevent it from spreading to Malaysia and ASEAN is by intensifying cyber warfare. This would include creating a 24-hour website to answer any questions, concerns or queries from the public on ISIL, and to expose its ideology and actions as directly betraying the proper teachings and peaceful nature of Islam.⁷ Additionally, the religious authorities have a key role to play in dismissing ISIL as being simply a terrorist organization that destroys the good image of Islam as a religion of peace and which supports peaceful coexistence with all other faiths. Publication of leaflets in the local languages of the country and region is another strategy being employed by Singapore to combat religious terrorism.

Malaysia's concerns over the IS threat to the country were deepened by the arrest of two soldiers for allegedly expressing support for IS. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is also the ASEAN Chair for 2015 has urged stronger regional cooperation and intelligence sharing to combat this trans-national jihadist phenomenon.⁸ Malaysia also needs to develop an effective de-radicalization program to counter this new variety of IS terrorism, which includes beheading of non-believers and other forms of gruesome torture and killings. The Saudi well-funded program helps terrorist offenders abandon their ideologies by attempting to cognitively dissuade them from violent extremist beliefs. It also involves family support and offers other more pragmatic reintegration initiatives such as organising marriages, housing and employment.⁹

Conclusion

The Asia-Pacific region hosts a significant Muslim population, of which Indonesia and Malaysia are key actors in the effort to combat Muslim terror and violence launched by religious extremists and radicalized individuals unhappy with the status

⁷ "Malaysian Police official: Fight ISIL Influence Via the Internet: Bernama (Malaysia's National News Agency), 26 February 2015: <http://en.abna24.com/service/east-asia/archive/2015/02/26/673354/story.html> (Accessed: 2-6-15).

⁸ Ahmed S. Hashim, "Policy Report: THE IMPACT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN ASIA", Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, February 2015, p. 9.

⁹ Clark Jones, "Terrorists can be turned around - here's how", 8 October 2014: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-08/jones-terrorists-can-be-turned-around/5796544> (Accessed: 28 May 2015).

quo. In the Malaysian case, there is an urgent need to review the Government's Islamization agenda, policies and strategies as they could well be the key contributing factors for the rise of right wing ethno-nationalist sentiments and extremist religious tendencies that may lead to self or group radicalization. The radicalized individuals or groups might reach the point earlier rather than later, that Malaysia is an apostate state as it has failed to practice the true doctrine and virtues of Islam. They could also resent the presence of Non-Muslims in the country as their continued presence, in the view of these radicals, hinders their dream of establishing the full blown "Islamic State" in Malaysia with Sharia as the primary source of law.

In sum, the politicization of religion, i.e. putting religion more and more in the public domain, could well exacerbate cleavages *within* Islam and *between* Muslims and Non-Muslims in multi-religious Malaysia. Thus, one way forward in curbing the rise of Islamic or religious radicalism in a plural society is by preaching as well as practicing the doctrines of inclusivity and moderation as the surest way of upholding the sovereignty of Islam in Malaysia, while also promoting respect for all religions in this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society.