

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism is a Major Factor**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Recent media reports have speculated on an impending declaration of an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caliphate in Southeast Asia. Such an eventuality poses a grave threat to the pluralistic landscape of Southeast Asian societies.
- Surveys over the past few years have worryingly indicated a rise in the level of extremist tendencies among Southeast Asian Muslims, albeit these tendencies are still at a comparatively low level.
- The internalization since the 1970s of the Wahhabi brand of Salafism among Southeast Asian Muslims is the major factor behind this apparent shift towards a more radical worldview. The relatively low level of concern over rising Islamist extremism among Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims indicates a worrying institutionalization of radical interpretations of Islam in the general Islamic landscape of both countries.
- Countering Salafization is rendered difficult by the fact that influential Muslim personalities and elements within Muslim-majority states have themselves embraced aspects of Wahhabism. Between Wahhabism and ISIS, which is but its violent manifestation, lies a short and slippery slope.

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## ISIS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The ascendancy of the terrorist outfit the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), otherwise known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State (IS) or Daesh – after its Arabic acronym, seemed to have eclipsed other manifestations of global Islamist violence. ISIS's notoriety is attributable to, among other things, its spectacular brutality, territorial gains and apocalyptic ideology. ISIS believes that its feats will trigger the advent of the promised Islamic saviour, Imam al-Mahdi, who will lead Muslims to ultimate victory in the *Al-Malhamah al-Kubra* – the Great War between good and evil, Islamic eschatology's equivalent to the Battle of Armageddon. ISIS's official online journal, *Dabiq*, is named after a northern Syrian town which features in eschatological traditions as one of the battlefields.<sup>2</sup>

According to ISIS's methodology, violence is deliberately employed and sensationalized worldwide as a 'trauma weaponizing' exercise. Emotional trauma is intentionally inflicted in order to not only instil fear, anger and hopelessness among populations under its control, but also to sow impressions of ISIS's invincibility among the larger viewing public.<sup>3</sup> Such a tactic was instrumental in attracting large numbers of Muslim youths, including from Southeast Asia, to embark on a life-time journey of *hijrah* (emigration) to areas administered by ISIS in the Middle East. Credible reports indicate that not a few Southeast Asian Muslims from seemingly harmless backgrounds have joined the ranks of ISIS, even forming Malay-speaking chapters such as *Katibah Nusantara* and its rival *Katibah Masyaariq*.<sup>4</sup>

A great number of them, comprising mostly Indonesians and Malaysians, were radicalized by ISIS's online propaganda before travelling to the Middle East. Many were arrested along the way by security forces. Between 95 to 98 percent of Malaysia's ISIS's recruits, for example, are believed to have been inducted via social media, with numbers fast increasing beyond the estimated 200 joint Indonesian-Malaysian fighters in *Katibah Nusantara*.<sup>5</sup> Lamentably, in Indonesia, incarceration serves not as an obstacle to but rather a potential

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Timothy R. Furnish, 'Obama on ISIS: Oft In Lies Truth Is Hidden', *The Counter Jihad Report*, 11 September 2014, <https://counterjihadreport.com/tag/al-malhamah-al-kubra/>; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, 'Selective Nature of Islamic State's Armageddon Narrative', *Eurasia Review*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/09022015-selective-nature-isis-armageddon-narrative-analysis/> (both accessed 2 May 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Aref Ali Nayed, 'Extremism, Trauma and Therapy: Addressing the Rise of ISIS in the Middle East', seminar presented at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 28 March 2016. Dr. Aref Ali Nayed is Libyan ambassador to the United Arab Emirates and chief operations manager of the Libya Stabilization Team during the revolution which toppled Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Disunity Among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence*, IPAC Report No. 25, 1 February 2016, pp. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Farik Zolkepli, 'Militants threaten revenge', *The Star Online*, 25 January 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/01/25/militants-threaten-revenge-is-wing-warns-malaysia-for-stepping-up-campaign-against-group/>; Hariati Azizan, 'Taking the fight to IS online', *The Star Online*, 7 February 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/02/07/taking-the-fight-to-is-online/> (both accessed 3 May 2016).

medium of terrorist indoctrination.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, being within prison walls have not deterred veteran radicals such as Abu Bakar Baasyir from swearing allegiance to ISIS via cyberspace. It was in jail also that Abu Bakar Basyir met Aman Abdurrahman, who is today considered Indonesia's chief ISIS ideologue after his pledge of loyalty to the group in April 2014.<sup>7</sup> However, they have reportedly fallen out with one another over the Islamic legality of resorting to judicial review to quash one's conviction whilst serving a prison sentence.<sup>8</sup>

Since the terrorist attack in Jakarta on 14 January 2016, Southeast Asian governments have come to realize that ISIS-inspired attacks on home soil, however uncoordinated the plans may have been and even if they involved different factions vying to seize the initiative to boost their legitimacy in the eyes of their parent Middle Eastern organization, pose a real threat. From late 2015 onwards, both Malaysia and Indonesia have been constantly mentioned in ISIS's magazine *Dabiq* as targets for terrorist operations. The message to the would-be militants is chilling enough: they need no longer bother to emigrate to lands of the ISIS caliphate if circumstances do not permit them to do so. They are, however, encouraged to commit their macabre deeds anywhere else where ISIS's foes are present:

As for the Muslim who is unable to perform hijrah from dārulkufr to the Khilāfah, then there is much opportunity for him to strike out against the kāfir enemies of the Islamic State. There are more than seventy crusader nations, tāghūt regimes, apostate armies, rāfidī militias, and sahwah factions for him to choose from. Their interests are located all over the world. He should not hesitate in striking them wherever he can. In addition to killing crusader citizens anywhere on the earth, what, for example, prevents him from targeting Rāfidī communities in Dearborn (Michigan), Los Angeles, and New York City? Or targeting Panamanian diplomatic missions in Jakarta, Doha, and Dubai? Or targeting Japanese diplomatic missions in Bosnia, Malaysia, and Indonesia?<sup>9</sup>

Such instigation by ISIS targets not only operatives with known networking linkages to ISIS but also, more frighteningly, lone wolves whose daily movements are unlikely to be within the security apparatus' surveillance radar. According to Malaysian terrorism researcher

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<sup>6</sup> Dirk Tomsa, 'The Terror Attack and its Implications for Indonesian Regional Security', *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Perspective*, No. 5 (2016), 5 February 2016, pp. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Chalk, *Black flag rising: ISIL in Southeast Asia and Australia* (Barton: ASPI, 2015), pp. 12-13; 'The rise of IS ideologues increase', *The Star Online*, 26 January 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/01/26/the-rise-of-is-ideologues-increase-indonesia-grapples-with-charismatic-cleric/> (accessed 2 May 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Disunity Among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in MEMRI, 'Issue 11 of ISIS's English Language Magazine 'Dabiq' A General Review', September 9, 2015, [http://www.memrijtm.org/content/view\\_print/blog/8723](http://www.memrijtm.org/content/view_print/blog/8723) (accessed 3 May 2016). For the specific threat to Malaysia, see Dina Murad, 'Local militants rely on translated 'handbooks'', says terrorism expert', *The Star Online*, 16 January 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/01/16/local-militants-relying-on-translated-handbooks/>; Hariz Mohd, 'Malaysia a target of IS', *New Straits Times Online*, 18 April 2016, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/04/139800/malaysia-target> (both accessed 3 May 2016).

Ahmad el-Muhammady, potential militants are instructed to blend in with local communities, secure their trust so as to avoid detection, and exhibit no outward sign of embracing puritanical beliefs.<sup>10</sup> ISIS is known to have praised lone wolf attackers such as Man Haron Monis, who held 18 people hostage in a Sydney café before being gunned down in December 2014,<sup>11</sup> and might unabashedly even claim credit for such daring stunts.

Developments such as those outlined above have prompted some security experts to forecast an impending proclamation of a satellite ISIS caliphate in Southeast Asia, but with the Philippines rather than Indonesia and Malaysia being the more likely candidate as the host for such a node. The weakness of the anti-terrorist infrastructure in the Philippines, plus recent pledges of support from local militants of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), are cited to back such a foreboding.<sup>12</sup> From a longer term perspective, however, Joseph Liow, in an expert testimony before the USA House of Representatives Committee, recently warned that the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which was responsible for a spate of terrorist attacks across Indonesia including the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, poses a more resilient and durable threat to Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> This remark dovetails with another observation, that since its apparent overshadowing by ISIS, JI has been diligently focusing on disseminating radical ideology rather than engaging in fifth column armed strikes.<sup>14</sup>

## SOUTHEAST ASIAN MUSLIMS' RISING EXTREMIST TILT

The apparently growing appeal of Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia is reflected in the results of several surveys conducted over the past few years by the USA-based Pew Research Centre. While there is little doubt that religious extremism in itself still lacks general appeal among the Muslim populace of Indonesia and Malaysia and indeed the entire *ummah*, the relatively low level of concern over rising Islamist extremism among Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims indicates a worrying trend of institutionalization of radical interpretations of Islam in the general Islamic landscape of both countries. Pew's Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey, for instance, reveals that only 26 percent and 20

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 12 February 2016. See also, Dina Murad, 'Militants instructed to blend in', *The Star Online*, 16 January 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/01/16/militants-instructed-to-blend-in-handbook-gives-tips-on-evading-detection-and-how-to-plan-attacks/> (accessed 3 May 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Chalk, *Black flag rising*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>12</sup> Chalk, *Black flag rising*, pp. 15-6; Per Liljas, 'ISIS Is Making Inroads in the Southern Philippines and the Implications for Asia Are Alarming', *Time.com*, 14 April 2016, '<http://time.com/4293395/isis-zamboanga-mindanao-moro-islamist-terrorist-asia-philippines-abu-sayyaf/>'; 'IS may set up caliphate in Southeast Asia, experts say', *The Star Online*, 30 April 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/04/30/is-may-set-up-in-sea/> (both accessed 3 May 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Au Yong, "'JI, not ISIS, is bigger threat' to South-east Asia', *The Straits Times Online*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/ji-not-isis-is-bigger-threat-to-south-east-asia> (accessed 3 May 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Tomsa, 'The Terror Attack and its Implications for Indonesian Regional Security', p. 6, fn. 18.

percent of Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims respectively are very worried about Islamist extremism. Among those who are very concerned about the ISIS threat, only 48 percent of Malaysian Muslims and 25 percent of Indonesian Muslims share similar concerns about Islamist extremism.<sup>15</sup> More Malaysian Muslims (11 percent) express a favourable view of ISIS than do Indonesian Muslims (4 percent).<sup>16</sup> Proportionately more Indonesian Muslims (53 percent) express worry about Muslim extremist groups than do Malaysian Muslims (8 percent), who are more worried, at 31 percent, about Christian extremists.<sup>17</sup> Malaysian Muslims also vary significantly from their Indonesian counterparts in apocalyptic fervour, with 62 percent of the former in comparison to only 23 percent of the latter expecting Imam al-Mahdi's advent during their lifetime.<sup>18</sup> The survey results, while not amounting to an endorsement of radicalism per se, do however support the thesis that the understanding of what constitutes religious extremism has shifted in a more rigid direction, and perhaps more so in Malaysia than in Indonesia. In other words, an extremist attitude of yesteryears may now not be seen as being radical enough to warrant serious attention from the authorities.

Quoting from surveys that portray significant portions of Malaysian Muslims as approving measured violence against those deemed enemies of Islam,<sup>19</sup> both Joseph Liow and James Chin lament the role of the Malaysian state in politicizing Islam in narrowly essentializing terms, in contrast with Islam's rich and pluralistic intellectual tradition, thus setting the stage for the acceptance of Islamist extremist categories into mainstream public discourse on Islam.<sup>20</sup> Chin further pinpoints Malaysia's ethnocentric Islamic discourse, obsessed as it is

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<sup>15</sup> Jacob Poushter, 'Extremism Concerns Growing In West and Predominantly Muslim Countries', *Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends*, 16 July 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/07/16/extremism-concerns-growing-in-west-and-predominantly-muslim-countries/> (accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Poushter, 'In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS', *Pew Research Center Factank*, 17 November 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/> (accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>17</sup> *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, 'Chapter 2: Religion and Politics', *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-religion-and-politics/> (accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>18</sup> *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, 'Chapter 3: Articles of Faith', *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life*, 9 August 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-3-articles-of-faith/> (accessed 11 May 2016).

<sup>19</sup> For example, 27 percent Malaysian Muslims view attacks on civilians as sometimes or often justified ('Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups', *Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups/>), and a surprisingly high 18 percent, as compared to only 7 percent of Indonesian Muslims, consider suicide bombing as justifiable (*The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, 'Chapter 2: Religion and Politics', *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-religion-and-politics/>) (both accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum', *Brookings Opinion*, April 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/04/21-malaysia-isis-conundrum-liow/>; James Chin, 'Clear and present danger from the Islamic State' *Brookings Opinion*, 16 December 2015,



with the idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and now given a new brand of legitimacy as *Ketuanan Islam* (Islamic supremacy) supposedly aimed at creating a Malay-Islamic state, as the prime source of the radicalization of Malaysian Islam such as to threaten Malaysia's character as a democratic nation state.<sup>21</sup>

Other commentators have sought to downplay the religious factor in explaining Southeast Asian Muslims' seemingly uncharacteristic turn towards Islamist extremism of late. In attempts to perhaps absolve Islam of blame for the violent antics of Muslim terrorists, they display a typical social science bias against religion as a mobilizing force by mainly looking at socio-economic conditions and personal motivations as overriding factors in the gravitation towards Islamist violence.<sup>22</sup>

Whichever way we try to explain it, the phenomenon of rising Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia is cause enough for worry for the future of both intra-Muslim and inter-faith relations in the region, once a proud bastion of harmonious plural societies. While such a scenario may still be short of a crisis, and the majority of Southeast Asian Muslims remain moderate in character, the mainstreaming of categories and traits once discursively located in the Islamist radical fringe is undeniably a cause for concern. The fact that actual ISIS networks in Southeast Asia remain weak and haphazard is secondary to the ideological conditioning, some of which have been supported by elements of the state whether consciously or inadvertently, that opens the door for acceptance of pro-Islamist orientations by the masses.<sup>23</sup> In such a pro-Islamist-driven climate continuously fuelled by widespread Islamophobia, solitary terrorist stunts that are ISIS-inspired though not directly ISIS-connected,<sup>24</sup> can potentially destabilize Southeast Asia's religio-cultural pluralism in the long term.

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<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/12/16-malaysia-danger-from-islamic-state-chin> (both accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>21</sup> James Chin, 'Malaysia: Pseudo-democracy and the making of a Malay-Islamic state', in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, edited by William Case (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 399-409.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Maszlee Malik, 'ISIS in Malaysia: A Case Study', *Discussion Paper for ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Regional Outlook Forum 2016*, 12 January 2016, Shangri-La Hotel Singapore; Norshahril Saat, 'Terrorism should not be viewed through religious lenses', *TODAY Online*, 15 January 2016, <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/terrorism-should-not-be-viewed-through-religious-lenses> (accessed 11 May 2016).

<sup>23</sup> See the differential approaches of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments in handling the upsurge of radicalism in Geoffrey Macdonald, 'How to ISIS-Proof a Muslim-Majority State', *The National Interest*, 14 March 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-isis-proof-muslim-state-15476>; and Zachary Abuza, 'Terror attack could rip apart Malaysian society', *Southeast Asia Globe*, 7 March 2016, <http://sea-globe.com/terrorism-in-malaysia-zachary-abuza/> (both accessed 11 May 2016), respectively.

<sup>24</sup> The likelihood of such attacks is interrogated in Thomas Murphy, 'When IS is Not IS: Terrorism in Indonesia', *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 25 February 2016, [http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australian\\_outlook/when-is-is-not-is-terrorism-in-indonesia/](http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australian_outlook/when-is-is-not-is-terrorism-in-indonesia/) (accessed 11 May 2016).

**WAHHABISM AS A FACTOR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S ISIS CONUNDRUM**

In nailing down the growth of extremist tendencies within Southeast Asian Islam to the institutionalization of Islamism in the body politic, parlance and psyche of Muslim political actors in the region, it is important not to bark up the wrong tree. The problem here lies with Islamism rather than Islam per se. Islamists or adherents of Islamism have ideologically politicized Islam such that matters of faith, spirit and morality – cardinal elements of a religion, are overwhelmed by politico-legal considerations in efforts to accomplish the ostensibly noble task of erecting an Islamic state (*dawlah Islamiyyah*). Driven by the belief that Islam provides comprehensive solutions to all problems of life once its systems are implemented, a political Islamist invariably regards a *sharia*-based juridical state on earth as the be-all and end-all of the Islamic struggle.

Such fervent conviction in the completeness of Islam as a way of life has given birth to *haraki* (movement)-type Islamist groups worldwide, many of which are modelled upon and cemented linkages with Egypt's *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (MB: Muslim Brotherhood). While MB founder Hassan al-Banna (1906-49) was known to have been a member of the Hasafiya sufi (spiritual) order, the exile of MB activists particularly to Saudi Arabia in the wake of regime-orchestrated repression radicalized MB's discourse by marrying the thoughts of Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) with the theological principles of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) of Nejd, notorious for his abhorrence of sufism and large-scale excommunication (*takfir*) of fellow Muslims. This ideological combination produced the violence-legitimizing strand of *salafi-jihadism*, as represented par excellence in the person of Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989) of Al-Qaeda and the Afghan war fame.<sup>25</sup> Essentially a merger between Qutbism and Wahhabism, *salafi-jihadism* in Southeast Asia is epitomized by JI.<sup>26</sup> In this unholy ideological alliance, what has effectively happened is the Wahhabi co-optation of Salafism, referring to the school of thought that advocates a return to the puritanical teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) among his companions and early generations i.e. until 300 years since his death. This Wahhabi hijacking of Salafism, marshalled by such scholars as Nasiruddin al-Albani (1914-99),<sup>27</sup> was not confined to Southeast Asia. Under the patronage of Saudi Arabia and powered by petrodollars, it became an *ummatic* trend such that the term *salafi* as now employed in global Islamist terminology refers almost exclusively to the Wahhabi-Salafi trend.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Marc Lynch, 'Islam Divided Between *Salafi-jihad* and the *Ikhwan*', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 6 (2010), pp. 467-87.

<sup>26</sup> Zulkarnain Haron and Nordin Hussin, 'A Study of the Salafi Jihadist Doctrine and the Interpretation of Jihad by Al Jama'ah Al Islamiyah', *KEMANUSIAAN: Asian Journal of Humanities*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2013), pp. 15-37.

<sup>27</sup> Zulkarnain Haron and Nordin Hussin, 'A Study of the Salafi Jihadist Doctrine and the Interpretation of Jihad by Al Jama'ah Al Islamiyah', p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), pp. 75-94.

The problem with Wahhabism is its *takfiri* ideology resulting from an exclusivist understanding of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*), which arguably led to widespread bloodshed against those deemed to have fallen outside the scope of Islamic faith. In the history of Wahhabi expansionism in Arabia, which ensued from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's political collaboration with a tribal leader, Muhammad ibn Saud (1710-1765), violence was wantonly perpetrated against Muslims accused of committing *shirk* (idolatry) and *bid'ah* (blasphemous innovation). Research into Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own writings, plus testimonies from his contemporaries among both friends and foes, confirms his sanctioning and even encourages militant *jihad* against Muslims deemed to have crossed the line of apostasy by way of polytheistic behaviour.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the Wahhabi doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) advocates total separation in all spheres of Muslim and non-Muslim lives, thus promoting a dichotomous worldview of two distinctive abodes i.e. of Islam and infidelity, being irreconcilably entangled in a state of perpetual war where violence is normal and civilian loss of lives legitimized as unavoidable collateral damage. As a consequence, Islam becomes essentialized as Islamism – a supremacist and ethnocentric dogma that instrumentalizes coercion and violence as its most potent weapon.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst the more extreme tendencies of Wahhabism have been much toned down throughout the years by the Saud ruling dynasty in the interest of modern statehood and international relations norms, Saudi Arabia's dissemination of Wahhabi thought in the guise of Salafism has proceeded apace since the 1970s. This evangelical fervour was further buoyed by its desire to outflank post-revolutionary Iran in the rival claim for the true mantle of an Islamic state, with traditional Wahhabi antipathy of Shi'ism to boot. Under the guise of *ummatic* unity, Saudi institutions such as the *Rabitah al-'Alam Islami* (MWL: Muslim World League) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) have served as conduits for exporting Wahhabi dogma worldwide. The transmission process in Southeast Asia has been well documented, penetrating structures of Muslim states, ruling parties, charity associations, non-governmental organizations, Islamist movements and educational networks.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, the Saudis themselves have been under tremendous pressure lately to

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<sup>29</sup> See for example, Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002); Engku Ibrahim Engku Wok Zin, Abdul Rahman Mahmud and Syed Hadzrullathfi Syed Omar, 'Syaiikh Muhammad bin 'Abd Al-Wahhab dan Kaitannya dengan Isu Takfir' [Syaiikh Muhammad bin 'Abd Al-Wahhab and His Relationship with the Issue of *Takfir*], *Jurnal Islam dan Masyarakat Kontemporari*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2011), pp. 61-72; and Hersi Mohamad Hilole, *Wahabi Sesatkah Mereka* [Are Wahhabis Deviant?], (Batu Caves: PTS Millenia, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, pp. 198-9, 206-49.

<sup>31</sup> See for example the essays by Alexander Horstmann, 'Transnational Ideologies and Actors at the Level of Society in South and Southeast Asia'; Noorhaidi Hasan, 'Transnational Islam in Indonesia'; Rommel Banlaoi, 'Transnational Islam in the Philippines', and Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'Local Networks and Transnational Islam in Thailand (with emphasis on the southernmost provinces)', in *Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia: Movements, Networks and Conflict Dynamics*, compiled by Peter Mandaville, Farish A. Noor, Alexander Horstmann, Dietrich Reetz, Ali Riaz, Animesh Roul, Noorhaidi Hassan, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Rommel C. Banlaoi, and Joseph C. Liow (Seattle: NBR, 2009), pp. 48-50, 121-40, 167-88, 189-208. On the Malaysian case, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, 'Salafi Ulama in UMNO: Political Convergence or Expediency?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2014), pp. 206-31,



prove their steadfastness to Wahhabi ideals.<sup>32</sup> Hence the emergence of ISIS, whose target is to re-enact the first Saudi state (1744-1818) lock, stock and barrel, even if it necessitated armed conquest, enslavement of the vanquished and decimation of heretics and recalcitrant populations. The present third Saudi regime, arising from Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud's (1875-1953) takeover of Riyadh in 1902 and the proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, is seen by ISIS to have betrayed the pristine ideals of Wahhabism.<sup>33</sup>

## A DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD

Four decades of Salafization have altered the face of Islam in Southeast Asia. Although it would be inaccurate to equate Salafization with Islamization, it would conversely be unwise to dismiss the important presence of Wahhabi elements in various Islamization programmes initiated and supported by Muslim politicians. In the landscape of Islamist activism in contemporary Southeast Asia, there exists general acceptance of Wahhabi-inclined authors such as Sayyid Qutb, the Pakistani Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979) to whom Qutb was intellectually indebted, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself, and a host of Saudi-affiliated scholars such as Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (1910-99), Nasiruddin al-Albani, Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymeen (1925-2001) and Saleh al-Fawzan (1933- ). Their writings are increasingly defining mainstream Islam in Southeast Asia, despite being doctrinally at odds with tenets of traditional Islam as championed by the likes of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia, and repackaged today as Islam Nusantara.<sup>34</sup> NU acts as a bulwark against the Wahhabi-driven deculturation of Islam – a process also sometimes termed as 'Arabization',<sup>35</sup> which Olivier Roy has recently identified as a major cause of radicalization.<sup>36</sup>

In Malaysia, there hardly exists a countervailing force against the Wahhabi-Salafi discursive onslaught. Hence, despite the existence of a national *fatwa* (legal ruling) pronouncing

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and Asmady Idris, *Malaysia's Relations with Saudi Arabia 1957-2003* (Kota Kinabalu: UMS Press, 2015), pp. 159-210.

<sup>32</sup> James Dorsey, 'Saudi Arabia's Future: Will Al Saud's Partnership with Wahhabism Hold?', *RSIS Commentaries CO16046*, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16046-saudi-arabias-future-will-al-sauds-partnership-with-wahhabism-hold/#.VzQ8A9J97cs>; Ben Hubbard, 'ISIS Turns Saudis Against the Kingdom, and Families Against Their Own', *New York Times Online*, 31 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/middleeast/isis-saudi-arabia-wahhabism.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&r=1> (both accessed 12 May 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Cole Bunzel, *The Kingdom and the Caliphate* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), pp. 4-7.

<sup>34</sup> Gwenael Njoto-Feillard, 'Ripples from the Middle East: The Ideological Battle for the Identity of Islam in Indonesia', *ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Perspective*, No. 42, 13 August 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization', in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, edited by Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 61-85.

<sup>36</sup> Olivier Roy, 'Why Arab farmers won't become militant suicide bombers', *The Straits Times Online*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-arab-farmers-wont-become-militant-suicide-bombers> (accessed 12 May 2016).

Wahhabism as unsuitable for Malaysian society,<sup>37</sup> the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Asyaf Wajdi Dusuki, has defended Wahhabism in Parliament as being part of mainstream Sunni Islam.<sup>38</sup> Such a view is in sync with that of Haji Hadi Awang, President of the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*) and an alumnus of the Islamic University of Madinah, but conflicts with those of orthodox Sunni theologians who consider Wahhabism an aberration if not as being outright deviant.<sup>39</sup> Such conflicting signals do not help in the government's purported crusade against ISIS, which critical voices within the Saudi religious establishment have come to accept as sharing similar Wahhabi-Salafi roots with the Saudi state.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak recently declared that Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations have reached unprecedentedly high levels,<sup>41</sup> as symbolized by the latter's willingness to let Najib off the hook with regard to the controversial RM2.6 billion (USD681 million) donation he purportedly received from the Saudi royal family. In legitimating his embattled premiership during the 2015 United Malays National Organization (UMNO) General Assembly, Najib appealed to the opinion of a *fatwa* council member of Mecca's Grand Mosque, Dr. Sulaiman Saloomi, on the illegality of deposing the government.<sup>42</sup> It is no accident that Najib has also been on record for praising the courage of ISIS fighters during an UMNO function in June 2014.<sup>43</sup> Such remarks speak volumes about the religious orientation of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) who are advising Najib and his government.

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<sup>37</sup> JAKIM, 'Pandangan Mengenai Golongan Wahabi' [View on Wahhabis], 23 December 2013, <http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/blog/pandangan-mengenai-golongan-wahabi>; 'No place for Wahhabism in Malaysia, fatwa council says', *Malay Mail Online*, 1 March 2015, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/no-place-for-wahhabism-in-malaysia-fatwa-council-says> (both accessed 31 January 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, 'Wahabi bukan ajaran sesat', 27 April 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/drasyrafwajdidusuki/photos/a.148660531830669.27045.116331768396879/1313553488674695/?type=3&theater> (accessed 12 May 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Abdul Hadi Awang, *Fahaman & Ideologi Umat Islam* [Thoughts and Ideologies of the Muslim Ummah] (Batu Caves: PTS Islamika, 2008), pp. 25-27; K.H. Sirajuddin Abbas, *I'tiqad Ahlussunnah Wal-jamaah* [The Sunni Creed] (Kota Bharu: Pustaka Aman Press, 1991), pp. 309-34.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance the public admission by Sheikh 'Aadel al-Kalbani, a former imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, in 'Senior Saudi Salafi Cleric: ISIS is a True Product of Salafism', <http://islam.hilmi.eu/senior-saudi-salafi-cleric-isis-is-a-true-product-of-salafism/> (accessed 12 May 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Rahimy Rahim, 'PM: Saudis respect Malaysia', *The Star Online*, 4 March 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/03/04/pm-saudis-respect-malaysia-bilateral-ties-have-reached-highest-levels/> (accessed 1 April 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Najib Razak, 'Najib's speech at UMNO General Assembly 2015 (full text)', <http://english.astroawani.com/politics-news/najibs-speech-umno-general-assembly-2015-full-text-84645> (accessed 12 May 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Melissa Chi, 'Be brave like ISIL fighters, Najib tells Umno', *Malay Mail Online*, 24 June 2014, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/be-brave-like-isil-fighters-najib-tells-umno> (accessed 12 May 2016).

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