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THE EXTENSIVE SALAFIZATION OF MALAYSIAN ISLAM

AHMAD FAUZI ABDUL HAMID



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## **FOREWORD**

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam

By Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The form of Islam normatively understood and practised in Malaysia, i.e. Malaysian Islam, has undergone myriad changes since the 1970s as a result of gradual Salafization. Powered by Saudi Arabian largesse and buoyed by the advent of the Internet, this new wave of Salafization has eclipsed an earlier Salafi trend that spawned the Kaum Muda reformist movement.
- Recent surveys suggest that there has been a rise in the level of
  extremism among Muslims in Malaysia. While the majority is
  far from being enamoured by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
  (ISIS), the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine that ISIS claims to represent
  in unadulterated form does appeal to many of them following the
  decades-long Salafization of Islam in the country. This tallies with
  media reports on increasing numbers of Malay-Muslim youth
  harbouring an attraction towards radical Islamist movements such as
  ISIS.
- Salafization, referring to a process of mindset and attitudinal transformation rather than the growth of Salafi nodes per se, is not restricted to individuals or groups identified as "Salafi", but rather affects practically all levels of Malay-Muslim society, cutting across political parties, governmental institutions and non-state actors. It has resulted in Islamist, rather than Islamic, ideals increasingly defining the tenor of mainstream Islam in Malaysia, with worrying consequences for both intra-Muslim and inter-religious relations.
- Responses to the Wahhabi-Salafi onslaught from the Malay-Muslim ruling elite in Malaysia have been ambivalent, and have had weak counteracting effects on the Salafization process.

# The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam

By Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid<sup>1</sup>

# INTRODUCTION

Several surveys conducted over the past few years by the U.S.-based Pew Research Centre show a growing appeal of Islamist extremism in Malaysia. While absolute numbers may still point to Malaysian Muslims being generally unattracted to radical notions of Islam, some figures pointing in the opposite direction appear staggeringly high when compared to similar figures for Indonesia, particularly since the general impression, in view of the greater number of terrorist attacks in Indonesia, is that Indonesian Islam is much more radical than Malaysian Islam.

These figures have in fact been quoted by several commentators as a warning against the possibility of Malaysian Muslims gravitating towards Islamist violence as manifested by the likes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or simply the Islamic State (IS) or as Daesh, after its Arabic acronym) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) (cf. Raj 2015, Abuza 2016). Already hundreds of Malaysians are known to have joined Katibah Nusantara, the Malay-speaking chapter of ISIS in the Middle East (Chalk 2015, pp. 10–11, Muhammad Haziq and Jasminder 2016, Farrah Naz and Aliza 2016).

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Much of the statistics is surprising. For example, proportionately fewer Malaysian Muslims (8 per cent) express worry about Muslim extremist groups than do Indonesian Muslims (53 per cent); the former are concerned more, at 31 per cent, about Christian extremists. And at 18 per cent, the proportion of Malaysian Muslims approving suicide bombing as justifiable is more than double the comparable figure of their Indonesian co-religionists, which is at 7 per cent (Pew Research Center 2013*a*: 68–71).

A later survey put Malaysian Muslims' support for suicide bombing as often or sometimes justified at 27 per cent, as compared with the Indonesian figure of a mere 6 per cent (Pew Research Center 2013b). More Malaysian Muslims (11 per cent) also express a favourable view of ISIS than do Indonesian Muslims (4 per cent) (Poushter 2015). It is also telling that Malaysian Muslims greatly surpass their Indonesian counterparts in messianic fervour, with 62 per cent of the former in comparison to only 23 per cent of the latter expecting the redeemer Imam al-Mahdi's advent during their lifetime (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 65). While this might not directly translate to support for extremism, it would suggest that they are more susceptible to the apocalyptic messages propagated by ISIS (cf. Wood 2015).

The survey results, while not amounting to an overwhelming endorsement of radicalism, do however support the contention that the understanding of what constitutes religious extremism has shifted in a more rigid direction, as has been suggested for example by Liow (2015) and Chin (2015a). Both these scholars lament the role the Malaysian state has played in politicizing Islam in narrowly essentializing terms, thus laying the ground for the mainstreaming and institutionalization of radical interpretations of Islam in public discourse in Malaysia. Chin (2015b) further blames the Malaysian state's obsession with the ethnocentric idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) — now given a new shot of legitimacy as Ketuanan Islam (Islamic supremacy), as the source of Islamist radicalization that threatens Malaysia's character as a democratic nation state. Maszlee (2016), in attempting to absolve Islam from blame for the violent antics of Muslim terrorists, has appealed to socio-economic conditions and personal motivations as cardinal factors in Malaysia's ISIS foot soldiers gravitating towards Islamist violence.

Whichever the case, the mainstreaming of categories and traits once discursively located in the Islamist radical fringe is undeniably a cause for concern. Malaysia may have been a proud model of harmonious interethnic coexistence, but if its rising Islamist extremism is left unchecked, the future of both inter-faith and intra-Muslim relations in the country will be affected badly. The authorities bank on the weakness of actual militant networks in Malaysia in their fight against terrorism, and have hence been prioritizing legal-based counter-recruitment measures (Mohd Azizuddin 2016). They seem therefore to be in denial of any connection between how Islam is played out in Malaysia's public space and what drives Malaysian Muslim youth towards extremist tendencies. In this light, it must be contended that the existence of radical nodes and nexuses is ultimately secondary to ideological conditioning in laying the ground for a religio-political eco-system that fuels pro-Islamist orientations. In Malaysia, such conditioning has been happening since the 1970s, fuelled by transnational connections and often supported by state-connected elements, whether consciously or not.

### AN OVERVIEW OF MALAYSIAN ISLAM

For the purpose of this monograph, "Malaysian Islam" refers to the normative understanding and practice of Islam as has prevailed in the independent nation state of Malaysia that came about through the merger in 1963 of the Federation of Malaya i.e. Peninsular Malaysia; Sarawak and Sabah on Borneo island; and Singapore. Singapore left the federation in 1965. This usage is distinct from the more history-centric usage of the term "Malaysia", as employed for instance by Fatimi (1963) and Majul (1964) in their rendering of the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia, which refers to the larger Malay world, encompassing all Malay-speaking areas in the region.

The most distinctive characteristic of Malaysian Islam, as confined within the nation state, is its relative homogeneity, which Osman Bakar detects as a prime factor behind "Malaysia's lack of experience in dealing with intra-Islamic pluralism" (Osman 2008, p. 82). Islam was made the religion of the federation via Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution, but how it is played out in the public domain was left in the hands of Malay-

Muslim politicians. Islam is constitutionally recognized as being under the purview of the thirteen states that form the Malaysian federation, but the federal government nevertheless exerts control over Islamic affairs via national institutions such as the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) and its forerunner Pusat Islam (Islamic Centre) — situated under the Prime Minister's Department, the Islamic Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia (YADIM, Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia), the Islamic Welfare Organization of Malaysia (PERKIM, Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia) and the Pilgrim Funds Board (LTH, Lembaga Tabung Haji).

This trend of "statist Islam" was arguably at odds with the pluralistic nature of the Islam that arrived in the Malay world, heavily coloured as it was by tasawwuf (Sufism) or spiritual teachings (cf. Johns 1961, 1995; Al-Attas 1963, 1969; Ahmad Fauzi 2002). What prevailed then was a general tolerance of myriad interpretations of religious texts and scriptural sources which trace their origins to the Our'an and the Sunna (trodden path of the Prophet Muhammad). In the pre-colonial era, the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the Muslim community was mainly held by the *ulama* (religious scholars), through whose efforts both religious and worldly knowledge were developed, debated, deconstructed and reconstructed in independently-run educational institutions. Generally, wherever and whenever Muslim leaders were pluralistic enough to adopt "a flexible and differentiated approach in matters of governance, culture and society," dominions under their rule blossomed (Hefner 2005, p. 23). A large number of ulama developed a symbiotic relationship with the various Malay sultanates, serving as the rulers' advisors and trusted confidants. Under the influence of the schools of thought subscribed to by their dominant ulama, a Malay-Islamic identity was gradually formed around four commonalities monotheistic theology (tauhid), jurisprudence (figh), language, and political order. The identity resulted from "creative cultural encounter between the core Islamic religious elements and the core Malay ethnic elements ..." (Osman 2014, pp. 268–69). It was grassroots-based rather than state-based.

# THE KAUM MUDA: SALAFIS BUT NOT WAHHABIS

British colonialism brought about new challenges in the management of religious affairs in Malaya. The Pangkor Treaty of 1874 heralded an era of colonial intervention that encroached into religion even though the realms of Islam and Malay culture were ostensibly left in the hands of the sultans (Ahmad Fauzi 2004). While some *ulama* immersed themselves in educational concerns as teachers and heads of *pondoks* (independent Islamic boarding schools), others chose to work within the Britishmonitored system of state religious councils, limited application of *sharia* (Islamic law) and a growing Islamic officialdom based in mosques and *sharia* courts (Mohamed Nawab 2008, pp. 122–27). As the domains of religion and Malay customs were ostensibly out of bounds for colonial officials, the *ulama* saw themselves as serving the sultans rather than collaborating with colonial bureaucracy.

It was not until the 1930s, with the Kaum Tua–Kaum Muda (Old Faction–Young Faction) dispute sweeping across villages throughout Malaya, that intra-Malay religious conflict came out in the open on a large scale (Roff 1967, pp. 56–90). It has been commonplace to view the Kaum Muda as reformists influenced by the resurgence of the *salafiyyah*<sup>2</sup> tradition expounded by the Cairo-based Al-Manar school associated with Jamaluddin Al-Afghani (1838–97), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Rasyid Rida (1865–1935). Despite its vigorous dissemination of reformist thoughts via modern Islamic schools called *madrasahs* and periodicals

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Deriving from the word *salaf*, whose literal meaning is "those who precede" i.e. predecessors. *Salaf* is commonly paired with the word *salih* or *soleh*, meaning "pious" or "righteous", to form the term *salaf al-salih*, i.e. pious predecessors, who, based on a *hadith*, are taken to refer to the faithful Muslims who lived in the first 300 years following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. See, for example, Mohd Radzi and Rahmat (1996), pp. 75–78; Hilole (2012), pp. xv–xix; and Haddad (2009), pp. 9–18.

such as *Al-Imam*, which was modelled on the Rasyid Rida-edited journal *Al-Manar*, the Kaum Muda was outflanked by their traditional *ulama* competitors, who were in control of Islamic officialdom as *muftis*<sup>3</sup> and appointed members of state religious councils (Azra 1999).

Theological disputes over aqidah (belief) were secondary to jurisprudential disagreements in the polemics of the Kaum Tua-Kaum Muda conflict. Although tauhid-based conflicts did surface once in a while, these were not the central fault line amongst Malay-Muslims, as can be seen in their absence from Malay religio-legal documents (Maszlee 2013, p. 53). The major issue that the Kaum Tua held against the Kaum Muda was the latter's *la mazhabi* (not professing any particular standard figh of the four orthodox schools, i.e. Shafie, Maliki, Hanafi and Hanbali) posture. The Kaum Muda were excoriated as Wahhabis. referring to the puritanical stream pioneered by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) of Nejd in the Arab Peninsula (Shiozaki 2015, p. 223). Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab famously collaborated with the tribal leader, Muhammad ibn Saud (1710-65), whose expansionist jihad (holy war) resulted in the erection of three Saudi states — from 1744 until 1818, from 1824 until 1891, and one since 1902 which culminated in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 by Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (1875–1953), whose sons have ruled the country till today. The emergence of the Saudi states in succession effectively diverted the flow of Malay-Muslim students away from Mecca, their traditional destination, to Cairo, from the 1920s onwards (Mohammad Redzuan 1998, p. 147, Shiozaki 2015, pp. 217–18). On their part, the Kaum Muda, as represented most ably by chief protagonist Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin (1869–1956) (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 29, 162, 239; Hafiz 2007, pp. 131-33), strenuously disavowed any link to Wahhabism (cf. Bachtiar Djamily 1994, pp. 15, 81, 93). If there was any link at all between the Al-Manar school and the Saudi state, it was to be found in Rasyid Rida. A lasting influence on Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> A *mufti* is an officially appointed scholar entrusted with the task of delivering a *fatwa* (legal ruling).

Rasyid Rida was a diehard exponent of *Tauhid 3*,<sup>4</sup> referring to the three dimensions of *tauhid* expounded by medieval theologian Ibn Taimiyyah (1263–1328), the intellectual forefather of virtually all who profess to be Salafis (Mustafa 2009, pp. 111–17, 175). Rida was a special guest to the Saudi-sponsored Khilafah Congress in Makkah in June 1926, convened by the regime to trump a rival Congress held in Cairo just one month before (van Bruinessen 1995, p. 134; Hosein 2013, p. 130).

Ibn Taimiyyah's tauhidic formulae were emulated by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. They basically conceptualized tauhid as being divided into tauhid rububiyyah (Lordship), tauhid 'uluhiyyah (Oneness) and tauhid asma' wa sifat (ownership of His names and attributes). According to their exclusive theological scheme, it is adherence to tauhid 'uluhiyyah, also called tauhid 'ibadah (Servitude), that determines one's Islamicity, but whose stringent conditions most Muslims purportedly fail to pass, hence nullifying their faith (Algar 2002, pp. 31–34; Hilole 2012, pp. 15-31). But whereas Ibn Taimiyyah propagated his literalist doctrine only through oral and written communication, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in alliance with Ibn Saud, institutionalized the coercive power of the state in accomplishing his aims of cleansing Islam from so-called accretions. It laid open the door for takfir, which was a fundamental characteristic of the physical jihad launched by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab against his co-religionists 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, both friends and foes, confirms his sanctioning and even encouraging of militant jihad against Muslims deemed to have crossed the line of apostasy by way of polytheistic behaviour (cf. Engku Ibrahim et al. 2011; Muhammad Idrus 2010, pp. 42–44; Hilole 2012, pp. 83–98).

To Malay-Muslims, what was particularly repulsive about the Wahhabi occupation of Mecca and Medina was the wholesale levelling of tombstones of the Prophet's family and companions. This raised their fear of being forbidden from visiting the Prophet's grave in Medina

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See below for a more elaborate explanation of *Tauhid 3*.

in conjunction with their pilgrimage to Mecca. But Malay-Muslim sentiments were not overwhelmingly against the evolving Wahhabi hegemony; they bordered more on uncertainty and ambivalence. Kaum Muda publications such as *Seruan Azhar* (Call of Azhar), *Idaran Zaman* (Passing of an Era) and *Al-Ikhwan* (Brothers), and even the purportedly Kaum Tua-linked *Pengasuh* (The Educator) were on record for having defended Ibn Saud's expansionist campaign at some point in time (Mohammad Redzuan 2004, pp. 261–68). In contrast to its stereotypical image of a Kaum Tua organ antipathetic to Kaum Muda views (cf. Roff 1967, pp. 79–80; Rahimin Affandi 2006, p. 95). *Pengasuh*'s reformist orientation, as exemplified in its advocacy of modern educational methods as an alternative to traditional *pondok*-style learning, resonated even among the Kaum Muda (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, p. 30; Kushimoto 2012).

While some Kaum Muda figures may have been influenced to some extent by the Wahhabis (cf. Badlihisham 2009, p. 107), Wahhabism was not the pivotal feature of Kaum Muda thinking. Being lumped together with the aggressive Wahhabis permanently stigmatized the Kaum Muda, eventuating in Kaum Muda's untimely passing as a reformist movement and causing it to lose religious significance (Roff 1967, p. 90). Unilaterally depicted as threats to societal unity and potential usurpers of royal power, the Kaum Muda lost the propaganda war against the Kaum Tua, who were in control of religious bureaucracies in all the states except Perlis (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 81–82). In states with strong orthodox Sunni traditions such as Johore, guided by its long-time *mufti* Sayyid Alawi Tahir al-Haddad (1884–1962), the Kaum Muda was equated with heretical sects such as the Qadiyani<sup>5</sup> and the Khawarij — a rebellious sect notorious for *takfir* (excommunication of fellow Muslims) and assassinations of Muslim leaders such as Ali ibn Ali Talib, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Deriving from the village of Qadian in Punjab, India, the birthplace of its pioneer, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908). Better known in the larger Muslim world as Ahmadis, Qadiyanis are by and large considered to be outside the fold of mainstream Islam for disputing the finality of the Prophet Muhammad's prophethood.

Prophet's cousin-cum-son-in-law (Rahimin Affandi 2006, pp. 101–102; Shiozaki 2015, p. 222).

As far as Islamic religious orientation was concerned, upon independence, Malaysian Islam remained predominantly Ashaarite in *tauhid* and Shafi'ite in *fiqh*. These were schools of thought developed along the teachings of the classical scholars Abu Hassan al-Ashaari (874–936) and Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'e (767–820). The Ashaarite method of theological reasoning was distinguished by heavy doses of logical argumentation and counter-argumentation associated previously with the Mu'tazilite school of medieval rationalists, but interrogated within the framework of the Quran and the Sunna (Sirajuddin Abbas 1991, pp. 16–17, 36–79; Ibn Muhammad 1994, pp. 147–49). In the Malay world, the Ashaarite school of *tauhid* is popularly known as *Tauhid Sifat 20*, referring to the twenty attributes of God.

# SALAFIZATION IN POST-INDEPENDENT MALAYSIA: PAS AND ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

After being out-manoeuvred by their Kaum Tua rivals, Kaum Muda activists retreated into educational enterprises, founding reformist *madrasahs* that also became bastions of anti-establishment political activism. For example, in Perak, Madrasah Yahyawiyah led by Syeikh Juned Tola (1897–1948)<sup>7</sup> in Padang Rengas and Ma'ahad al-Ehya al-Syarif founded by Syeikh Abu Bakar al-Baqir (1907–74) in Gunung Semanggol were both instrumental in producing Malay nationalist cadres who would later form Hizb al-Muslimin (HM, or Party of Muslims) and Parti Islam Se-Tanah Melayu (PMIP, Pan-Malayan Islamic Party), precursor of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, or Islamic Party of Malaysia)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In orthodox Sunni theology, the only other legitimate school that has survived to this day is the one founded by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853–944) of Samarkand.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Syeikh Juned was the father-in-law of former PAS President Mohamad Asri Muda (1923–92).

(Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 189–99, Ahmad Fauzi 2007*a*, pp. 388–89). Through its transnational educational networks, PAS broadly adhered to a Salafi orientation. Its future leaders such as Zulkifli Muhammad (1927–64) and Yusuf Rawa (1922–2000) for example built connections with the Ikhwan al-Muslimun (MB, Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt, and were very much influenced by the revolutionary thoughts of Sayyid Qutb (1906–66). Qutb's ideals were formulated based on his unique understanding of *tauhid* to include the concept of *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty) as an additional component to Ibn Taimiyyah's *Tauhid 3*, thus elevating the *sharia* towards being part of *aqidah* (Mohamad Fauzi 2007, pp. 123–27, 130–31, 136–37).

Modern Islamists, or proponents of haraki (movement)-based political Islam, many of whom modelled their values upon and cemented linkages with MB, invariably subscribe to *Tauhid 3* rather than orthodox Sunni theology of the Ashaarite-Maturidite traditions. MB, it must be noted, despite its progenitor Hassan al-Banna's (1906–49) Sufi roots in the Hasafiya tariqa, underwent a process of Salafization as a result of many of its leaders and ideologues finding a safe haven in Saudi Arabia in the wake of regime-orchestrated repression in Egypt. The merger between Qutbism and Wahhabism ideologically produced the violencelegitimating strand of Salafi-jihadism, as represented most clearly in the person of Abdullah Azzam (1941–89) of Al-Qaeda and the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan (Wiktorowitz 2005, pp. 82–85; Lynch 2010). Violence as a corollary of the culture of takfir has been a bane in the history of Salafism as a whole and its Wahhabi variant in particular. Staunch Wahhabi-Salafists make no apologies for the violence entailed in the process of enacting a true Islamic state as aspired to by ISIS, whose narrative is premised upon re-creating the first Saudi state (1744–1818), lock, stock and barrel. Despite sharing the same Wahhabi roots, ISIS regards the present Saudi regime as a betraval of the pristine ideals of Wahhabism (Bunzel 2016).

Today, both Sayyid Qutb and the Pakistani Abul A'la Maududi (1903–79), to whom Qutb was intellectually indebted, are looked up to by many Salafi-jihadists as their godfathers (Zimmerman 2004; Wiktorowitz 2005, pp. 77–81). It was Qutb-cum-Maududi's radical doctrines that came to dominate MB thinking as a consequence of Al-Banna's failure

to implant credible scholarly foundations among his followers — a fact that he reputedly regretted (Al-Azhari 2014). The Qutb-cum-Maududi strand has exerted the greatest influence on generations of Malay-Muslim Islamists furthering their education not only in the Middle East but also the West (Lemiere 2009, pp. 65–66, 78, 80, 83; Kamal Hassan 2003, pp. 430–40).8 Some accounts also mention direct Wahhabi influence on Malay-Muslim overseas students (Lemiere 2009, p. 71; Stark 2005, p. 310).9 No less responsible for legitimating Wahhabism under the guise of Salafism are scholars with Islamist sympathies and linkages. Relying on Maududi's text, Fadhlullah Jamil, for instance, in his essay on Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin, includes Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab among the righteous *ulama*-cum-renewer that Muslims should emulate (Fadhlullah 2003, p. 32). Yet, it was Maududi who in the same work refuted the legitimacy of *Tauhid Sifat 20*, which has coloured Malay-Muslim religious identity for generations:

Imam Abul Hasan Ash'ari and his followers strove hard to check this growing trend but they could not meet with success. For though they commanded the necessary scholastic skill, they were not fully aware of [or] trained in the rational sciences. In their enthusiasm to oppose the Mu'tazilites, therefore, they went rather too far and took it upon themselves to prove and establish certain things [that] in fact did not belong to true faith (Maududi 1981: 56).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The pages in Lemiere (2009) refer to transcripts of her interviews with Malaysian Islamists from *Jama'ah Islah Malaysia* (JIM, or Society of Islamic Reform), many of whose members once made up the professional group in PAS. Many of them have today drifted into the newly established PAS splinter party Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH, or National Trust Party).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Lemiere (2009) refers to her interview with Saari Sungip, former JIM President and state assemblyman for Hulu Kelang in Selangor, once on behalf of PAS but now representing AMANAH. Stark (2005) refers to the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), but ABIM Vice-President Jufitri Joha (2013) denies that ABIM is Wahhabi-oriented.

The Qutb-cum-Maududi's schemes of understanding God within the context of the obligation to fight for a sharia-based Islamic state dominated *usra*<sup>10</sup> themes among Malay-Muslims from the 1970s to the 1990s. Usra-based indoctrination was frequently more powerful than formal religious lessons (Zainah 1987; Shamsul 1995). What emerged was a black-and-white "Islam versus infidel" world, influenced no doubt by the Wahhabi doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) which advocates total separation in all spheres of Muslim and non-Muslim lives. The worldview being promoted by default was of two irreconcilable abodes separated by faith, entangled in a state of perpetual war where violence and loss of civilian lives could become legitimatized as unavoidable collateral damage within the holy struggle against the forces of *taghut* (false gods). As a consequence, Islam becomes essentialized as Islamism — a supremacist and ethnocentric dogma that instrumentalizes coercion and violence as its most potent weapon (El Fadl 2005, pp. 198–99, 206–49). It is no accident that ISIS, in claiming the mantle of the true guardian of Wahhabism and in undermining the legitimacy of the Saudi regime, addresses its supporters in Saudi Arabia as the people of tauhid and the people of al-wala' wa al-bara' (Bunzel 2016, p. 4).

In the 1980s, the anti-government *takfiri* climate was fuelled by the issuance of an *Amanat* i.e. published excerpts of a speech, by then PAS State Commissioner for Terengganu and present President Haji Abdul Hadi Awang, a Saudi-educated firebrand. The so-called *Amanat Haji Hadi* effectively apostasized members of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party for retaining an infidel constitution and separating religion and politics. The *Amanat* was blamed for instigating rebellion against the authorities in Memali, Kedah, in November 1985, when a showdown between security forces and PAS villagers resisting the arrest of their leader, Ibrahim Libya, ended in eighteen deaths

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Literally meaning "family" in Arabic, *usra* refers to MB-inherited cell-like groups founded to discuss ways and means of acting on Islam as a way of life, often conducted outside of official working hours.

(Ahmad Fauzi 2007*b*, pp. 10–16; Badlihisham 2009, pp. 67–73). Haji Abdul Hadi has never disowned his *Amanat*. Unsurprisingly, unlike many other orthodox Sunni theologians, he regards Wahhabism as being within mainstream Sunni Islam rather than an aberration if not outright deviant sect (Abdul Hadi 2008, pp. 25–27; Sirajuddin Abbas 1991, pp. 309–34; Algar 2002, p. 3). His Madrasah Rusila in Terengganu maintains close educational networks with the Sayyid Maududi International Islamic Institute (SMII) in Lahore, Pakistan, run by Maududi's Jama'ati Islami movement. Founded in 1982 from the King Faysal Award grant that Maududi received from the Saudi government in recognition of his contributions to Islam, SMII survives on Saudi funds and Islamist-linked donations, and counts among its former students Ja'far Umar Thalib, the Indonesian militant of Laskar Jihad notoriety (Farish 2008, pp. 147–61).

On the whole, Haji Abdul Hadi maintains a puritanical view of the Islamic state (Norshahril 2014, pp. 56–58). In June 2015, he disavowed PAS's professionals' faction during the party's General Assembly, leading to its members being out-voted en masse from leadership positions amidst accusations of them failing to display wala' (loyalty) regarding the party policy on hudud (Islamic criminal law). Amidst protestations from former PAS progressives who insist on re-inventing PAS by injecting an inclusivist outlook under the banner "PAS for All", Abdul Hadi maintained a rejectionist attitude by dismissing the Islamic basis for their forming the breakaway Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH, or National Trust Party). Abdul Hadi claims to have referred the matter to Yusuf al-Oaradawi (1926–), a Oatar-based scholar with strong MB credentials and many Malaysian admirers (The Malaysian Insider 2015). The Abdul Hadi-sanctioned ostracization of his former compatriots led to them later alleging that PAS encourages a takfiri culture à la ISIS (Mujahid and Raja Kamarul 2015; *The Star Online 2015*).

# SALAFIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: UMNO, THE GOVERNMENT AND STATE INSTITUTIONS

Since the founding of the third Saudi state with Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud's takeover of Riyadh in 1902 and the declaration of the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia in 1932, some of the more extreme tendencies of Wahhabism have been toned down by the Saud ruling dynasty in the interest of modern statehood and international relations norms (cf. Sedgwick 1997). However, under the guise of Salafi puritanical tenets, Saudi Arabia's dissemination of Wahhabi thought has no doubt proceeded apace since the 1970s. This evangelical fervour was further buoyed by its desire to outwit post-revolutionary Iran in the rival claim for the true mantle of an Islamic state, with traditional Wahhabi antipathy of Shi'ism thrown in. Powered by petro-dollars that accumulated after the OPEC oil crises of 1973– 74 and working under Saudi patronage, Wahhabi scholars marshalled by Nasiruddin al-Albani (1914-99) have since effectively hijacked the "Salafi" brand (Ibn Muhammad 1994, pp. 116–19; Zulkarnain and Nordin 2013, p. 20). Since the 1990s, the term "Salafi" has in global Islamist terminology referred almost exclusively to the Wahhabi-Salafi stripe (El Fadl 2005, pp. 75–94). The world of contemporary Salafism has by now come to revolve around the writings 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- ). The Afghani-Abduh-Rida trio of the Al-Manar school has been largely disowned (Salafi Publications 2003; Wiktorowitz 2006, p. 212). This Wahhabi co-optation of Salafism is a global trend, and has had a tremendous effect on the contours of Islam in Southeast Asia. Penetrating deeply into structures of Muslim states, ruling parties, charity associations, non-governmental organizations, Islamist movements and educational networks, Wahhabi-Salafi doctrines have been increasingly defining mainstream Islam in Southeast Asia (Horstmann 2009, pp. 48– 50; Banlaoi 2009; Hasan 2009; Liow 2009). The transmission process in Southeast Asia has been most well documented for the Indonesian case (cf. Hasan 2008; Kovacs 2014; Wahid 2014). But Malaysia was not spared from this global process.

Dissemination of *Tauhid 3* was pivotal to the design to Salafize other regions of the *umma* (global Muslim community). In Malaysia, the outreach of the Salafi-based *Tauhid 3* was not limited to PAS and Islamist non-governmental organizations (NGOs). During the height of Islamic resurgence in the 1980s, when Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's administration embarked on a series of Islamization programmes,

Tauhid 3 found its way into Islamic education syllabi when Anwar Ibrahim (1947–), whose transnational links with the Saudi-based Muslim World League (MWL, or Rabitah al-'Alam Islami) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) were made during his leadership of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) (1974–82), was Minister of Education (1987–91) (Ahmad Fauzi 2009, pp. 145–47, Maszlee 2013, p. 58; Allers 2013, pp. 51, 58). 11 From 1988 until his dismissal as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998, Anwar was also President of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), which had immensely benefited from Saudi donations and on whose governing board the Saudi ambassador to Malaysia sits as a permanent member. This period coincided with IIUM's Rectorship being held by a Saudi citizen-cum-MB activist, Dr Abdul Hameed Abu Sulayman (1936–) (Asmady 2015, pp. 195–99). Under Abu Sulayman's stewardship, IIUM emerged as the main proponent of "Islamization of knowledge", which refers to the systematic and systemic endeavour to synthesize the vast body of knowledge within the Islamic epistemological tradition, with Western humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.

Islamization of knowledge was once a tagline of the U.S.-based International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), of which Abu Sulayman was also a President, and which maintains a scholarly agreement with IIUM until today (IIIT 2016). IIIT was the brainchild of the Palestinian-American professor of comparative religion Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi (1921–86) of Temple University, Philadelphia. Due largely to his efforts in translating three of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's treatises, Al-Faruqi is identified by Algar (2002, pp. 14–15, 50–52) as "one of the principal promoters of Wahhabism in North America". Al-Faruqi's Salafi bent was evident from his antipathy towards *tasawwuf* in his Islamization of knowledge scheme (Rosnani and Imran 2000, pp. 35–36), in contrast to parallel conceptions of Islamization of knowledge put forward by Malaysian-based scholar Syed Naquib Al-Attas

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Both MWL and WAMY have fallen into controversy in the Global War on Terror era for allegedly being conduits for the exportation of Saudi-style Wahhabism. See Pew Research Center (2010).

(1931–), whose ideas Al-Faruqi is alleged to have plagiarized without giving due acknowledgement (Wan Mohd Nor 2005, pp. 332–38). It was by virtue of Al-Faruqi's ability to procure a US\$25 million grant from the Saudi-based Islamic Development Bank (IDB) that IIIT was established (Tasnim et al. 2015, p. 239). Among many Malaysian Islamists, Al-Faruqi remains a much-admired figure, a status not less elevated by his brutal murder in 1986. Both Al-Faruqi and Al-Attas had more or less equal standing in the eyes of Anwar Ibrahim (Esposito and Voll 2001, p. 181; Allers 2013, pp. 46–48), but it was mainly due to Al-Faruqi's influence that Anwar Ibrahim made the momentous decision to join UMNO and the government in 1982 (Badlihisham 2009, p. 50; Allers 2013, p. 72). Al-Faruqi also enjoyed a cordial relationship with long-time Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in an advisory capacity (Schottmann 2013, p. 61).

While Saudi Arabia is not known to have directly pressured Malaysia into officially adopting Salafi-centric doctrines, its government was alloting more and more scholarships and places for Malaysians to pursue religious education in the Kingdom, besides generously donating funds to Islamic missionary programmes and bodies such as PERKIM and YADIM (Nair 1997, pp. 62, 105; Asmady 2015, pp. 191–95, 207–208). The *ulama* created by these Saudi-connected initiatives would have almost certainly embraced the Wahhabi-Salafi religious worldview. a major component of which was Tauhid 3. The Saudi embassy in Malaysia, meanwhile, had been sending representatives to meetings and conventions organized by the small but growing Ahl as-Sunnah congregations, as the inheritors of the Kaum Muda tradition now expressed themselves (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 174, 187, 230). Before the onset of Mahathir's Islamization programmes, Saudi Arabia-Malaysia bilateral relations had thrived on the basis of personal relations between leaders, for instance between first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903–90) and King Faysal (1906–75). Tunku's idea of an Islamic commonwealth in 1961 led to a series of Islamic conferences that eventually established the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), whose patron was King Faysal and which Tunku led in 1971-73 as its inaugural Secretary-General (Mohamad Abu Bakar 1990, p. 6; Asmady 2015, pp. 68–71).

Malay-Muslim graduates from local Islamic studies faculties, along with Islamist ulama and activists returning from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Kingdom have been spreading the Salafi-oriented Tauhid 3 through formal and informal education in schools, usras and online forums. Curriculum changes have seen Tauhid 3 gradually being placed at par with the Ashaarite Tauhid Sifat 20 as mainstream theology in the religious worldview of modern Malay-Muslims, whose perspectives were becoming globalized via Internetdriven technology (Maszlee 2013, pp. 61–62). According to Engku Ahmad Fadzil Engku Ali (1969-), a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Islamic Studies of Malaysia (IKSIM, Institut Kajian Strategik Islam Malaysia), a government research outfit under the auspices of JAKIM, Tauhid 3 has since the mid-1990s, eclipsed Tauhid Sifat 20 as the definitive theology of Malay-Muslims, at least as officially taught in state-sponsored institutions, events and mosques. 12 This means that for at least two decades now, the national religious education system has been more likely to produce *ulama* who subscribe to Wahhabi-Salafi theological concepts. In the field of Qur'anic exegesis, the Salafioriented Tafsir al-Maraghi, written by Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi (1881–1945) — Rasyid Rida's fellow student under Muhammad Abduh and a former Syeikh al-Azhar — has been accepted as standard text in both private and public religious schools (Mustafa 2009, p. 198).

# SALAFIZATION IN THE ERA OF NAJIB RAZAK

The leadership transition from Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (1939–) to Najib Razak (1953–) in April 2009 took place amidst an atmosphere of growing Islamist conservatism in the country (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin 2014). One of the most important consequences of such a development was the decline

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Interview with Engku Ahmad Fadzil Engku Ali, Kuala Lumpur, 7 February 2016.

in both bilateral and multilateral interfaith initiatives that engaged both Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups (Osman 2009, p. 69; Rahimin Affandi et al. 2011, pp. 95–97). The relentless pace of administrative expansion of official Islamic institutions that Mahathir undertook as part of his Islamization programme had created, by the time Najib assumed the Premiership, an Islamist instead of an Islamic bureaucracy. Islamic officialdom had turned into a power centre with a dynamic of its own, whose feathers even politicians were careful not to ruffle lest their public image be tarnished as un-Islamic. Such bureaucrats believed that it was their responsibility to ensure that Malaysia's Islamization would continue unhindered towards its ultimate goal of an Islamic state (Ahmad Fauzi 2010, pp. 164-69; Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin 2014, pp. 169–71). As recruitment to the bureaucracy was based on tertiary qualifications in Islamic studies, many ulama of Wahhabi-Salafi orientation found employment within the Islamic administrative apparatus, at both state and federal levels. The path for a Salafi state capture had been conveniently laid out. Pro-Salafi voices from within JAKIM were becoming more open in legitimizing Wahhabism as part and parcel of authentic Sunni Islam, as evident for instance in a 2010 article by JAKIM research officer Mohd Aizam Mas'od (Mohd Aizam 2010).

In 2010, younger cohorts of like-minded Salafi-oriented *ulama* mobilized under the Association of Malaysian Scholars (ILMU, Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia) which boasts interlocking membership with UMNO, styling itself as its Ulama Muda (Young Ulama) faction (ILMU 2016, Mohamed Nawab 2014, p. 212). One of its stalwarts, Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya (1980–), is the son of Mat Jahaya Hussin, a former mufti of Malaysia's northernmost state of Perlis, where Salafinclined tendencies trace their origins to the influence of Ahmad Hassan Bandung (1887–1958) in the 1950s. Among Kaum Muda circles, Ahmad Hassan is very much remembered for heroically engaging Kaum Tua scholars led by the Singaporean Fadhlullah Suhaimi (1886–1964) in a 1953 debate held in Penang over the permissibility of *taqlid*, i.e. blind emulation of religious authority (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 162–63). Perlis' Islamic establishment has traditionally been controlled by the *Ahl as-Sunnah* group, whose doctrinal tendencies closely mirror

Salafi tenets, by virtue of royal patronage and organic linkages with the state's UMNO structure (Mohd Radzi and Rahmat 1996, pp. 113, 123–24, 150).

Fathul Bari is by far ILMU's most popular figure as gauged by online visits to his personal webpage. He has since been a prominent figure in UMNO General Assemblies, albeit sometimes coming up with controversial speeches that make the UMNO old guard uncomfortable (Fathul Bari 2015). Fathul Bari is frank about his high opinion of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab as a reformist, and stoutly defends Tauhid 3 as a veritable method of understanding God with no necessary connection to violence. He earnestly admits that his joining UMNO was engineered by the pro-Salafi former Perlis chief minister Shahidan Kassim (1951–) and Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (1971–), a Perlis *mufti* for two terms (2006–08, 2015–). Mohd Asri has until today maintained an apolitical stance although rumours were rife that he would join UMNO together with his like-minded colleagues in June 2010. Prime Minister Najib Razak has welcomed the entrée of the forty ILMU-affiliated *ulama* into UMNO with open arms, while at the same time providing assurance that the influx would not turn UMNO into an extremist party (The Star Online 2010).

In view of Najib's own Islamic deficit, his opening of the party doors to a group of agile and youthful *ulama* may be understood as a measure to counter the rising influence of PAS since PAS's cooperation with Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party of Malaysia (PKR, Parti Keadilan Rakyat) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the opposition People's Pact (PR, Pakatan Rakyat) coalition in 2008 (Mohamed Nawab 2014, p. 214). But the Wahhabi-Salafi penetration into state-linked corridors of power has aroused disquiet among traditionalist *ulama* who uphold orthodox Sunni teachings of the Ashaarite-cum-Shafi'ite orientation. The present Kedah mufti, Muhamad Baderudin Ahmad (1947–), for instance, has spoken out openly against both Fathul Bari and Mohd Asri for their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Interview with Fathul Bari, Kuala Lumpur, 3 February 2016. The Shahidan connection is also noted by Mohamed Nawab (2014), p. 214. Shahidan Kassim is presently Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Wahhabi-Salafi bias (Muhamad Baderudin 2013). At the turn of 2016, Fathul Bari, Mohd Asri and fourteen other Salafi-inclined *ulama* were banned from preaching in the state of Johore (*The Star* Online 2016*a*).

Together, Fathul Bari and Mohd Asri represent the most articulate face of Salafism in contemporary Malaysia, with a large following over cyberspace and among Malay-Muslim youth. Mohd Asri openly repudiates Tauhid Sifat 20 as antiquated, dismissing it as having been polluted with Greek-derived theosophy, which has allegedly unnecessarily complicated Islamic theology (Mohd Asri 2007a, pp. 33–34; Mohd Asri 2012). The religious authorities Mohd Asri quote also arouse suspicion of his hard-core Wahhabi-Salafi views becoming a conveyor belt towards more extreme tendencies, in spite of he himself maintaining civility in public as an officially appointed religious functionary. In defending the legacy of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, for instance, he refers to Ibn Jibrin, a contemporary Salafi scholar of Saudi Arabia (Mohd Asri 2007b, pp. 8–9). Yet, the same Ibn Jibreen<sup>14</sup> is identified by Bunzel (2016, p. 8) as a hardliner cleric whose views have been instrumental in moulding the thoughts of his former student, Turki al-Binali (1984–), widely thought of today as ISIS's mufti. Another authority Mohd Asri quotes in his treatise lambasting latter-day Sufis and tarigas for having transgressed the *sharia* is Jordanian MB leader Dr Hammam Said (Mohd Asri 2005, p. 30). Yet, the same Hammam Said is assessed by Wiktorowitz (2000, p. 231) to be a Salafi-leaning hardliner in the same mould as Al-Qaeda's Abdullah Azzam. It is noteworthy also that Hammam Said was a special guest to PAS's General Assembly in 2008 (Aniz 2008).

Since 2013, the younger generation of *ulama* of traditional Ashaarite-cum-Shafi'ite orientation has come together under the banner of the Malaysian Association of Ahl as-Sunnah wal Jamaah (ASWAJA, Pertubuhan Ahl as-Sunnah wal Jamaah Malaysia), led by Zamihan Mat Zin (1976–). Zamihan is notorious for taking pot shots at Mohd Asri and other Wahhabi-Salafi scholars whom he considers non-Sunnis on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The slight variation in spelling may be due to the different transliteration system used.

account of their deviant theology (Zamihan 2013, 2015). The founding of ASWAJA was prompted by what Zamihan sees as the sluggishness of the older generation of traditional *ulama* in fighting the scourge of Wahhabism, allowing it to reach cancerous levels in Malaysia. As a civil servant, Zamihan cultivates close relations with the counterterrorism division of the Royal Malaysian Police Force (PDRM, Polis Diraja Malaysia), which has cooperated with ASWAJA in organizing anti-extremism courses and functions that contain palpable anti-Wahhabi messages. A regular speaker at ASWAJA's functions is the previously mentioned Engku Ahmad Fadzil Engku Ali, Senior IKSIM Fellow, who is also a diehard opponent of *Tauhid 3* on the grounds that it purportedly paves the way to violence (Engku Ahmad Fadzil 2016; Norhayati Paradi 2016). Zamihan has brought the issue of the lurking danger posed by Wahhabi-Salafism to Malaysian society up to the level of the Council of Rulers and Prime Minister Najib, but to no avail so far.

Zamihan is no stranger to controversy. In 2010, he caused an uproar when he named Shahidan Kassim, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Haji Abdul Hadi Awang and then Perlis mufti Dr Juanda Jaya (1972–)<sup>19</sup> as potential security threats due to their association with Wahhabism (Jimadie Shah 2010). Later, he warned that the forty *ulama* who joined UMNO in June 2010 had been radicalized by a Syrian Salafi-jihadist, Aiman al-Dakkak, a freelance religious preacher who was eventually arrested and deported (Zamihan 2011, pp. 92–94). He himself has been the victim of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Interview with Zamihan Mat Zin, Kuala Lumpur, 6 February 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> For example, The Training of Trainers course, "Bahaya Militan Islamic State" [Dangers of Islamic State Militants], Saloma Bistro, Kuala Lumpur, 6–8 February 2016, an event graced by the Inspector General of Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, and attended by the present author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Interview with Engku Ahmad Fadzil, Kuala Lumpur, 7 February 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Interview with Zamihan, Kuala Lumpur, 6 February 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> A native Sarawakian, Juanda Jaya was recently elected as the ruling National Front (BN, *Barisan Nasional*) state assemblyman for the Jemoreng constituency in the Sarawak state election on 7 May 2016.

a vicious online war waged by Wahhabi-Salafi sympathizers who accuse him of harbouring sympathies and even having direct association with Shi'ism, purportedly through his Jordanian mentor Hassan Ali al-Saqqaf (1961–), and the Al-Ahbash radical traditionalists in Lebanon (Mohd Aizam 2010; Maszlee 2013, p. 58). Zamihan denies following them blindly, even disavowing their own anti-Wahhabi-Salafi extremism, but admits to having met and used al-Saqqaf's and Al-Ahbash leader Abdullah al-Harari's (1910–2008) conceptual frameworks grounded in Ashaarite theology. Zamihan claims he does not subscribe to their counter-*takfiri* disposition. Indeed, the Al-Ahbash sect is infamous in the Middle East for its ferocious online war against Wahhabi-Salafists, who for the Al-Ahbash, are no better than infidels themselves, for all their Wahhabi-Salafi *takfiri* stances (Kabha and Erlich 2006).

The battle over social media between Zamihan Mat Zin and Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin almost erupted into a real-world debate in mid-February 2016 at the initiative of Shahidan Kassim. The debate was cancelled due to interference from fellow Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Jamil Khir Baharom, who deemed it unnecessary (The Star Online 2016b). Zamihan suspected that there were hidden hands out to destroy his reputation by floating the idea of a debate without prior consultation with him when he already had a prior appointment to fulfil in his capacity as Senior Assistant Secretary of the Home Ministry (Radzuan Hassan 2016). Following the aborted debate, Zamihan was transferred back to JAKIM on twenty-four hours notice. In April 2016, Zamihan courted further controversy by calling for the security apparatus to block the Malaysian roadshow of Indian comparative religion televangelist Dr Zakir Naik (1965–), whom ASWAJA considers as having displayed Wahhabi-Salafi traits in some of his past lectures. This earned him further salvos from Mohd Asri (Portal Islam & Melayu 2016a, b). Despite having a history of uttering inflammatory remarks, Zakir Naik was a recipient of Malaysia's Ma'al Hijrah (With Emigration, i.e. Islamic New Year) Distinguished Muslim personality award in 2013, after which he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Interview with Zamihan, Kuala Lumpur, 6 February 2016.

also received the King Faysal award from Saudi Arabia in 2015 (*TODAY* Online 2016). Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki (1976–), has gone on record however defending both Zakir Naik as an icon of moderation in Islam and Wahhabism as being part of mainstream Sunni Islam (Asyraf Wajdi 2016*a*, *b*). Zakir Naik had begun his 2016 Malaysian tour as a guest of the state government of Terengganu, whose *mufti*, according to Zamihan, is one of the three *muftis* with pro-Wahhabi-Salafi inclinations, the other two being those of Perlis and the Federal Territory.<sup>21</sup>

For all the effort put in by the likes of Zamihan and other traditionalist *ulama* in combating what they see as the Wahhabi-Salafi menace, the furthest that JAKIM has been prepared to go against Wahhabism has been to issue a cautionary *fatwa* against Wahhabism as being unsuitable for Malaysian society (JAKIM 2013; *Malay Mail* Online 2015). The Malaysian government's position on Wahhabism has been ambivalent at best and inconsistently vague at worst, vacillating between conditional acceptance and measured rejection (Mohamed Nawab 2014, p. 213). One clue to this ambivalence lies in the importance that Malaysia puts on its bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, since it does not wish to jeopardize the generous pilgrimage quotas given to Malaysia year in and year out, besides other material benefits (Asmady 2015, p. 187).

# MALAYSIA-SAUDI ARABIA RELATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The traditionalist *ulama*'s restlessness over a perceived Wahhabi-Salafi march forward into the landscape of Malaysian Islam actually preceded Najib's administration. In late 2005, for instance, Muhammad Uthman el-Muhammady (1943–2013), honorary fellow of the government thinktank the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM, Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia) and recipient of the 2005 national *Ma'al Hijrah* award, raised the Wahhabi issue, which made headline news in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the Malay language weekly *Mingguan Malaysia* (Nazeri 2005). This was followed through with a series of articles authored by YADIM Assistant Director Mohd Shauki Abdul Majid (1959–) in Mingguan Malaysia and its daily counterpart *Utusan Malaysia* (cf. Mohd Shauki 2005a, b). This prompted a spirited defence of Wahhabi tenets by Shahidan Kassim, then still chief minister of Perlis (Yusri 2005b). Instead of producing pamphlets that explained the dangers of the movement led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as he said he would do (Yusri 2005a), Shahidan succeeded in getting the Perlis state government to officially organize an international seminar promoting Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab as a truthful religion icon (Zamihan 2011, pp. 135–36). Pro-Wahhabi-Salafi ulama also published their own rebuttals of Muhammad Uthman's and Mohd Shauki's views (cf. Mohd Yaakub 2006). Although Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi realized that extremist views were making themselves increasingly felt in the public sphere, after the 2008 general elections, which saw BN losing their two-thirds parliamentary majority and conceding rule in five states to the opposition, he became too preoccupied with stemming an internal UMNO rebellion (Ross 2008) to do much about it. By 2015, out of power, he lamented in an interview that extremist voices had become louder since his exit in 2009 (Razak 2015).

The quick turnaround corresponded with his successor Najib Razak's increasing gravitation towards Saudi Arabia, home of Wahhabism. Religious justifications were increasingly found in Saudi *ulama*'s fatwas and statements defending UMNO, the ruling Barisan Nasional coaliton and the government (cf. Metra Syahril 2012; FMT 2013; Nazura 2013). Visits by members of the Saudi *ulama* establishment to Malaysia became more frequent, and when concern was raised regarding their Wahhabi affiliations, JAKIM stepped forward to dismiss such worries (cf. Othman 2011). In June 2014, Najib shockingly praised the courage of ISIS fighters during an UMNO function (Chi 2014). In spite of the Prime Minister's Office's insistence that Najib's faux pas was a case of being quoted out of context (Malay Mail Online 2014), the fact that Najib could at all attribute positive traits to ISIS in the public domain was more revealing about the religious orientation of his advisors-cum-speech writers than a slip of the tongue on his part. In legitimating his embattled Premiership during the 2015 UMNO General Assembly, Najib appealed to the opinion of Dr Sulaiman Saloomi, a *fatwa* council member of Mecca's Grand Mosque who enjoys close relations with Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya, on the illegality of deposing the government (Fathul Bari 2013; Najib 2015).

In the Najib Razak era, Malaysia–Saudi cooperation has continued to blossom, especially in the fields of business and security. In strenuously denying that the controversial RM2.6 billion (US\$681 million) funds that passed through his personal accounts were from the beleaguered state investment company 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1 MDB), Najib's favourite explanation was that the money was donated by the Saudi royal family as election funds to help his "moderate" government retain power and counter the challenge of such radical Islamists as the MB (Akil 2016; Dina 2016). Despite some equivocation and seemingly contradictory reports, the Saudis have by and large been contented to let Najib off the hook by broadly approving his clarification to bewildered Malaysians (Malaysiakini 2016; Zikri 2016; Yahoo! News 2016). In March 2016, even as the world continues to be concerned about Saudi Arabia's alleged support for terrorism and dismal human rights record (Blanchard 2008; BBC 2016), Najib Razak declared that Malaysia–Saudi Arabia relations have reached unprecedented heights (Rahimy 2016).

By now, the Salafization of Malaysian Islam seems to be beyond doubt, barring a future resurgence of traditionalist *ulama* who are able to provide a convincing counter-narrative<sup>22</sup> and at the same time strategically attempt a capture of the commanding heights of Malaysia's power centres. Discomfort expressed in public forums about "Arabization" is symptomatic of Wahhabi-Salafi categories increasingly defining the terrain of Malay-Muslim society through the use of terms that are decontextualizing, dehistoricizing and deculturating (cf. Koya 2015; Zahiid 2016). The increasing confidence of the Wahhabi-Salafi religious establishment is showcased by the fact that even when such concerns are expressed by Malay royalty, the bastion of Malay-Muslim heritage and traditions, Wahhabi-Salafi *ulama* could muster enough courage to argue that Arabization is not a bad idea after all. Such was the case in a recent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> In the manner parallel perhaps to *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU)'s championing of *Islam Nusantara* in Indonesia; see Njoto-Feillard (2015).

spat that took place between the Sultan of Johore and Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (Wong 2016; Danial 2016).

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