

Understanding Extremist Ideology in Malaysia: A Short Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Extremism, including religious and political forms, is a concern in Malaysia. While Malaysia has strong ethnic and religious divisions, one should be at ease as the Malaysian political structure is complex and contradictory. This study will focus on the type of extremism that occurred in Malaysia, the challenges and concerns surrounding it, and strategies, initiatives, and plans to prevent and counter extremism in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: extremism in Malaysia, challenges, concerns, strategies, counter

I. INTRODUCTION

Extremism, in simple terms, is the quality or state of being extreme or the advocacy of extreme measures or views (MerriamWebster Dictionary, 2025). The term is primarily used in a political or religious sense to refer to an ideology that is considered (by the speaker or by some implied shared social consensus) to be far outside the mainstream attitudes of society (The Free Dictionary, 2025).

In Islam, some scholars mention extremism with the word *tatarruf*. According to the definition of *tatarruf*, it encompasses various aspects, such as politics, religion, sects, and lineage (Dr. Zulkifli, 2015). This extreme group or understanding is better known as the excessive group (*ghuluw*) in its understanding or actions. Therefore, *ghuluw* in religion is an attitude that transcends the bounds of religious orders. This is achieved by adding excessive attitudes until it deviates from what the syariah intends (Dr. Zulkifli, 2015).

This extremist or radical ideology does not only occur from a physical perspective, where groups that only know weapons, rebellion, or revolution as solutions to specific problems exist. Additionally, this attitude of extremism or radicalism also occurs in the form of understanding, belief, and ideology. Religious extremism, online radicalization, political extremism, racial extremism, and violent extremism are types of extremist ideology that occur most frequently in Malaysia. That is why Malaysia has been proactive in preventing and countering extremist ideology to ensure the safety and security of its people.

II. EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY IN MALAYSIA

A. Religious Extremism

Religious extremism refers to any behavior, attitude, or belief that deviates from the norm of accepted religious beliefs or practices within a particular faith or tradition. In Malaysia, there is no religious extremism like DAESH, ISIS, but there are heretical groups that have the potential to carry out terrorist activities and threaten national security. For example, on 2nd July 2000, the al-Ma'unah group led by Mohd Amin invaded a military camp in Perak and stole 119 types of firearms and ammunition, and even engaged in battles with the Malaysian Armed Forces and Police Officers (Sinar Harian, 2020). On 10 November 2013, the Chief Assistant Enforcement Officer of the Pahang Islamic Religious Department (JAIP), Ahmad Raffli Abd Malek, was shot dead by followers of the heretical teachings of Tuhan Harun. The head of the Tuhan Harun teachings, Harun Mat Saad, was also charged with conspiring to plan the murder (Astro Awani, 2013).

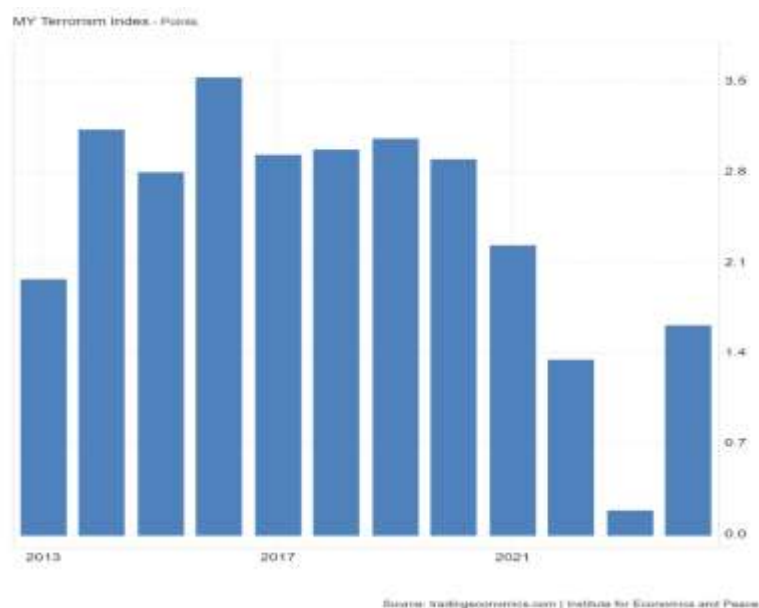
In Islam, the beliefs, teachings and ideology of al-Dawla al-Islamiya Fi Iraq Wa al-Sham (DAESH), or the Islamic State Militant in Iraq and Shams (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Islamic State (IS) (hereinafter collectively referred to as IS) are deviant and contrary to the actual teachings of Islam according to the beliefs of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama'ah and any Muslim, whether individually or in a group, is prohibited and forbidden from adhering to this belief, teaching and ideology (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Selangor, 2016).

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B. Terrorism

Terrorism is the calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective. Terrorism has been practiced by political organizations with both rightist and leftist objectives, by nationalistic and religious groups, by revolutionaries, and even by state institutions such as armies, intelligence services, and police (Jenkins, 2025). This is one of many definitions that describe the term terrorism.

Fortunately, in Malaysia, there were no terrorist incidents reported in 2022 and 2023 (Bureau, 2022-2023). How about the Malaysian terrorism index? Terrorism Index in Malaysia increased to 1.63 Points in 2024 from 0.19 Points in 2023. Terrorism Index in Malaysia averaged 1.60 Points from 2002 until 2024, reaching an all-time high of 3.54 Points in 2016 and a record low of 0.00 Points in 2006 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). This indicator is proof that Malaysia is among the nations that are proactive in preventing and countering violent extremism. This commitment is evident in Malaysia's ranking on the Global Peace Index 2024, where Malaysia is ranked 13th out of 163 countries listed. The Global Peace Index serves as a measure of a country's relative position in terms of peace and security (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). The chart below shows the Malaysian terrorism index from 2013 to 2024.



C. Political and Racial Extremism

In terms of political and racial issues, extreme ideologies can lead to polarization, radicalization, and violence. These ideologies can disrupt democratic processes, erode trust in institutions, and create an environment of fear and uncertainty. All these forms of extremism sow division within society, undermining values such as trust, compassion, and mutual respect, while hindering the spirit of innovation and progress toward shared prosperity. For example, the role of religious rhetoric in Malaysian politics is deeply concerning. Religious rhetoric in politics can lead to extremism, especially when politicians exploit religious differences to gain support (M. Yunoos, 2024). Such actions foster an “us vs them” mentality, radicalizing followers and driving divisions within the Muslim community. Politicians must recognize the responsibility they hold when invoking religion, as it can make their supporters more vulnerable to extremist ideas.

D. Online Radicalization

The internet and social media have become tools for radicalization, with extremist groups using online platforms to spread propaganda and recruit individuals, but it has not happened overnight. Radicalization is a slow, gradual process, often beginning with the subtle spread of extremist ideas that are sometimes introduced under the guise of religious teachings or political rhetoric. Radicalization also rarely happens in isolation. It often starts with exposure to seemingly harmless content such as speeches, sermons, or online content, which gradually shifts toward messages of intolerance and violence. For example, in Malaysia, extremist interpretations of Islam may be spread by fringe groups or charismatic preachers and leaders. Over time, these ideas become normalized within certain circles, leading individuals to radicalization without realizing it (M. Yunoos, 2024).

E. Violent Extremism

Violent extremism can be defined as having occurred when a person or group decides that fear, terror, and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political, or social change, and acts accordingly. Violent extremism is an extension of radicalization from a relatively benign expression of a viewpoint to the use of violence to achieve a particular goal (Living Safe Together, 2015). Malaysia

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has not been immune to the influence of extremism. Malaysia has seen numerous violent extremist organizations operate, plan, seek support, and even have their beginnings in Malaysia. For examples, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) waged a deadly insurgency against the authorities in the early days of Malaysia's journey to nationhood (Comber; 2009), Jemaah Islamiyah, infamous for its deadly attacks in Indonesia, had its roots in Malaysia, the Japanese Red Army (JRA) gained notoriety in this country with the hostage crisis in Kuala Lumpur in August 1975 (Oorjitham, 2015), both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)¹⁰ and Babbar Khalsa¹¹ tried to gain sympathizers and supporters in Malaysia, the North Kalimantan Communist Party (NKCP)¹² operated in the early 1970s in Sarawak and the Lahad Datu incursion in Sabah by the followers of Jamalul Kiram III in February 2013 tragically led to the death of six civilians and ten Malaysian security personnel (UNDP, 2022). Hence, violent extremists, in their various forms, are not new to Malaysia. In this regard, those in the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) space are aware of the environment they are confronting.

III. CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

A. Evolving Terrorist Network

Terrorist groups have evolved, operating through decentralized cells and utilizing online propaganda, which makes them harder to detect and disrupt. Online propaganda refers to the use of social media and other digital technologies to disseminate biased or misleading information, to manipulate public opinion, or to influence behavior. It leverages the reach and speed of the internet to communicate messages that may be strategically crafted to promote a particular viewpoint, often with a hidden agenda. (Andrew M. & Benjamin A., 2020). For example, in Malaysia, there have been instances of using hashtags like #13Mei to incite racial tensions, accusations of religious extremism against political opponents, and the use of divisive campaign speeches. These tactics exploit existing societal fault lines and can significantly impact voter sentiment.

B. Vulnerable Group

Certain groups, particularly youth, may be susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by extremist organizations. Why do extremist organizations focus on youth? Young people are often more vulnerable to radicalization due to their developmental stage, which involves searching for identity, belonging, and purpose. This group voluntarily join terrorist groups based on a range of motivations, including search for group-based identity, ideological appeal of the group, real or perceived exclusion, grievance, or cultural threat, potential for economic gain or long-term economic stability, prospects of fame, glory, or respect and personal connections, including family and friendship networks (Jessica; 2019). That is why the recruitment and indoctrination of youth by extremist groups are evolving rapidly.

C. Regional Context

Malaysia's geographic location makes it vulnerable to the spillover effects of violent extremism from neighboring countries. For example, in 2019, on June 18, 10 fishermen were kidnapped off the coast of Lahad Datu in Sabah state by ASG militants. The victims were later rescued and released without harm. On September 4, two armed men believed to be on the lookout for potential kidnap victims or with plans to commit violent acts were killed by local police in Sabah waters. The Eastern Sabah Security Command (known as ESSCOM) announced the security commission was on "high alert" following the September 23 kidnapping of three Indonesian fishermen and learning that ASG insurgents planned to carry out raids for ransom victims in the East Sabah area (Bureau, 2019). Until now, Malaysia has remained one of the many countries in Asia that has become a transit point and hub for kidnap-for-ransom activities perpetrated by other terrorist networks.

D. Threat of Homegrown Extremism

Homegrown extremism in Malaysia refers to the radicalization and mobilization of individuals within the country to engage in extremist or terrorist activities, often inspired by or affiliated with foreign terrorist organizations like JI, ISIS, or al-Qa'ida. These individuals may be radicalized through online platforms, social networks, or personal interactions, and their motivations can be a mix of religious, political, and social grievances—for example, an attack at Ulu Tiram police station on 17th May 2024. The suspect, believed to be a member of the Jemaah Islamiyah, stormed into the Ulu Tiram police station, killing two officers and injuring another before he was shot dead (BERNAMA, NST; 2024). Why did the suspect commit that killing? Perhaps inspired by extremist ideology that had been instilled in their organization.

IV. INITIATIVE, STRATEGIES, AND PLAN

A. MyPCVE Action Plan

What is MyPCVE Action Plan? MyPCVE Action Plan refers to the Malaysian Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia. To strengthen and boost efforts against terrorism and extremist ideologies, on 30th September 2024, the

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government launched MyPCVE to counter this ideology. (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia Official Website, 2024). The action plan was developed to coordinate actions addressing the threat of extremist ideology, focusing on four core areas: prevention, enforcement, rehabilitation, and reinforcement. Each pillar has several strategic focuses, which will be implemented through selected initiatives and measured by key performance indicators. The Prevention Pillar aims to enhance awareness, effective communication, and strategic collaboration between the community and authorities, as well as among authorities themselves, in addressing the threat posed by violent extremists. At the same time, the Enforcement Pillar focuses on enforcing laws related to extremist ideologies, ensuring they are implemented and adhered to by all levels of society to safeguard harmony, security, and public order. The Rehabilitation Pillar focuses on rehabilitating extremist ideologies, instilling positive values, building strong character, and empowering individuals and families. Lastly, the Reinforcement Pillar aims to strengthen national identity among Malaysians, aligning with the Federal Constitution, laws, the Rukun Negara, and values consistent with Malaysian societal norms, as well as Islam. (Kementerian Dalam Negeri, 2024) The initiatives developed will be executed synergistically by various identified agencies to prevent and counter the threat of violent extremism in Malaysia.

B. SEARCCT

What is SEARCCT? The Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) serves as a regional counterterrorism center focusing primarily on training, capacity-building, research, digital counter-messaging, and public awareness programs. In collaboration with other governments and international organizations, the Centre also promotes Malaysia's perspective on the most effective means of countering the threat posed by terrorism. SEARCCT has also been actively involved in attempting to change the mindset and effect a shift in the disposition of those who believe that the war on terror can only be won through military means. The Centre has leveraged various training courses, conferences, seminars, workshops, and forums to discuss and exchange views on the root causes of terrorism. The Centre promotes the view that the campaign against terrorism requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged and multi-faceted approach. Since its establishment in 2003, SEARCCT has held various types of training courses, in collaboration with numerous countries, on our seven core areas, which include investigation and legal aspects; chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) and crisis management; aviation, maritime, and transportation security; cyber terrorism; prevention and rehabilitation; terrorism financing; and youth and terrorism (Official Portal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia; 2023).

C. International Cooperation Mechanism

i. Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)

The GCTF is an informal, apolitical, multilateral counterterrorism (CT) platform that contributes to the international architecture for addressing terrorism. In addition to the commitment of 32 Members of the GCTF, including Malaysia, the Forum welcomes the valuable contributions of non-GCTF countries, international and regional organizations, as well as civil society organizations. Since its launch in 2011, the GCTF's mission has been to diminish terrorist recruitment and increase countries' civilian capabilities for dealing with terrorist threats within their borders and regions. A main objective of the Forum is to support and catalyze implementation of the United Nations (UN) Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, reviewed in June 2021, and the UN CT Framework more broadly, including for instance the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism presented to the UN General Assembly in January 2016. The GCTF works closely with UN bodies to pursue this goal. (GCTF; 2011)

ii. United Nations Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC)

The United Nations Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC) was established by Security Council resolution 1373 after the September 11th attacks. It consists of all fifteen members of the Security Council, including Algeria, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It is responsible for ensuring that all States follow the resolution. The Committee also works to increase the capacity of States to fight terrorism. According to Resolution 1373, States must: (Dagdok, 2025)

- Deny all forms of financial support for terrorist groups.
- Prevent the terrorists from acquiring safe havens or subsistence.
- Cooperate with governments in the apprehension of terrorists.
- Create domestic laws that criminalize terrorism.
- Participate in the relevant anti-terrorism conventions.

To counter terrorism, Malaysia aligns its efforts with the UN Counter-Terrorism Strategy and engages with UN bodies, such as the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC).

iii. Regional Organization-ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994 and serves as a crucial platform for security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific region. Twenty-seven countries participate in the ARF, and Malaysia is also among them. The two main objectives of ARF are to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern and to

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make significant contributions and efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. (ARF; 2025). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is also actively involved in countering terrorism and transnational crime. The ARF recognizes terrorism as a serious threat to regional stability and security, and emphasizes the need for cooperation and information sharing among its participants. Several ARF initiatives focus on strengthening border security, combating terrorist financing, and preventing the spread of violent extremism.

V. CONCLUSIONS

National unity is crucial. When individuals feel connected and part of a shared identity, they are less likely to be drawn into extremism. Malaysian diversity can be its strength if differences are celebrated rather than exploited. Politicians should refrain from divisive rhetoric, and religious leaders should promote tolerance and understanding. Building a culture of unity, respect, and inclusivity will help prevent extremist ideologies from taking root. We must urgently create a shared national identity.

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