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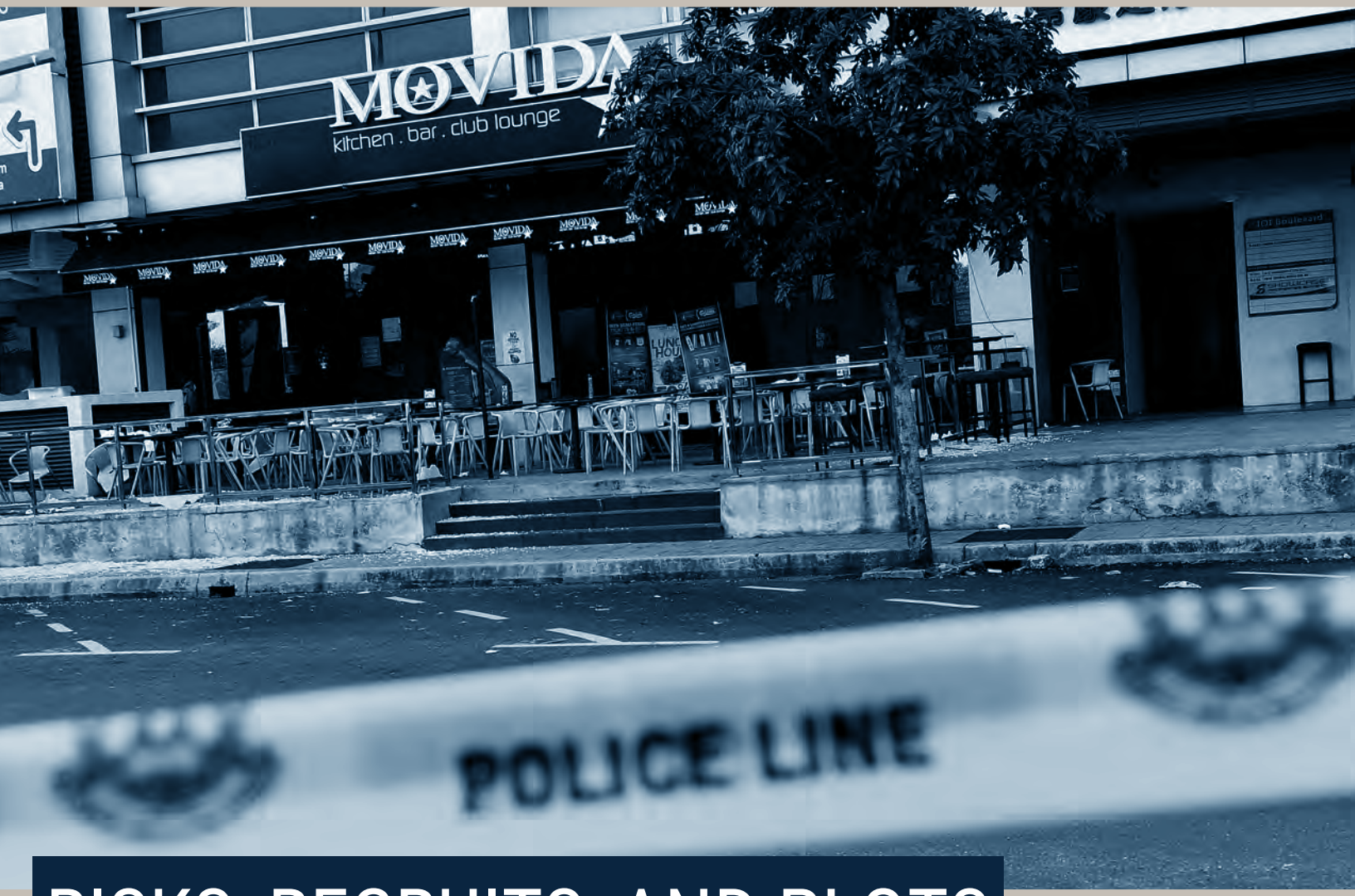

RISKS, RECRUITS, AND PLOTS

UNDERSTANDING AND MITIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN MALAYSIA

Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Elina Noor
With Marley Carroll and William Frangia | August 2022

Risks, Recruits, and Plots:
Understanding and Mitigating the Influence of the Islamic State in Malaysia

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

August 2022

Cover Photo: A general view of the site of a grenade attack at a restaurant in Puchong district outside of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on June 28, 2016. (Manan Vatsyayana/AFP via Getty Images)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the many individuals whose support and dedication made this report possible.

We are thankful to all members of the research team whose efforts contributed toward compilation of the data that underpins this report and helped push this project to completion. External reviewers of this report, Dina Zaman and Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, provided invaluable feedback that strengthened this report's overall contribution. We are also grateful to Dr. El-Muhammady for providing input on some of the specific profiles included in this report. We would like to thank CTC Director LTC Sean Morrow, Executive Director Brian Dodwell, and Research Director Daniel Milton for their support for this project throughout the development of this report. The detailed copyediting provided by Kristina Hummel and Madeline Field was of exceptional quality and enhanced the overall quality of the report.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary IV

Introduction..... 1

Methodology and Definitions..... 4

Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in Malaysia 6

Chapter 2: Attack Plots and Arrests..... 18

Chapter 3: Case Studies of Plots and Profiles of Arrested Militants..... 37

Chapter 4: Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism in Malaysia..... 54

List of Tables

Table 2.1 (a): Attack Plots by Location and Year 18
Table 2.2 (a): Total Arrests by Year 23
Table 2.3 (a): Description of Reported Reasons for Arrests 26
Table 2.3 (b): Reported Reasons for Arrests 27
Table 2.4 (a): Overall Nationalities of Individuals Arrested 32
Table 2.4 (b): Other Militant Affiliations 33
Table 2.5 (a): Age Groups of Arrested Individuals 34
Table 3.1 (a): Notable Characteristics about Various Plots 38
Table 3.2 (a): Notable Characteristics about Militant Profiles 45

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 (a): Geography of Attack Plots 19
Figure 2.1 (b): Target Types 22
Figure 2.2 (a): Reported Locations of Arrests 23
Figure 2.2 (b): Timeline of Arrests 25
Figure 2.3 (a): Women's Roles by Year 29
Figure 2.3 (b): Men's Roles by Year 30
Figure 2.4 (a): Arrests by Nationality (Excluding Malaysians) 32
Figure 2.4 (b): Militant Affiliations by Year 33

Executive Summary

The Islamic State publicly acknowledged a series of pledges of allegiance from Southeast Asian militant groups in 2016, when it also declared Isnilon Hapilon of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines as the region's emir.[1] In June of that year, Islamic State-affiliated militants in Malaysia managed to conduct a successful grenade attack on a nightclub in Puchong, Selangor, only a few miles from Kuala Lumpur, that injured eight people.[2] It was claimed as an Islamic State attack in a Facebook post by now-deceased Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, a Malaysian Islamic State militant fighting in Syria who is believed to have directed the attack.[3] In mid-2018, during the general election season, Malaysian authorities claimed to have detained 15 suspected militants, which included a 51-year-old woman who was allegedly planning an attack using her car and a gas cylinder as weapons.[4] These plots collectively portray the ways in which the Islamic State has exerted influence in Malaysia; the threat includes individuals, some with prior militant affiliations, traveling to Syria to fight with the Islamic State, as well as largely self-directed individuals inspired by the group to act on its behalf within Malaysia, either individually or in small cells. While the Islamic State has been less effective in conducting attacks with any casualties within Malaysia, relative to the Philippines and Indonesia, it still presents a perceptible threat in Malaysia in terms of both radicalization and recruitment.

As the third part in a series of reports that map the Islamic State's presence in Southeast Asia, this study traces the evolution of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia between January 2014 and December 2019. While the first report sought to provide a broad regional perspective and the second focused on the Philippines, this report examines the factors that contributed to the rise of the Islamic State specifically within the local context of Malaysia, analyzing historical and current environmental factors that created the Islamic State's brand of militancy and the ways it manifested itself in the country. This contextual background is important in grounding a more holistic understanding of the group's position within Malaysia's complex sociopolitical landscape in addition to an examination of plots, individuals, and their networked relations, which, of course, do not develop in a vacuum.

As such, in examining the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia, this report explores the following key questions:

- *How has the history of Islamist revivalism and associated political developments in Malaysia created space for the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia today?*
- *What do trends in Islamic State-linked attack plots and individual arrests in Malaysia between 2014 and 2019 reveal about the channels through which the Islamic State poses a threat to the country?*
- *And finally, what are the prospects for building robust counterterrorism infrastructure and societal resilience to tackle and prevent violent extremism in Malaysia?*

Highlighted below are some of the key findings of the report.

Nature of the Islamic State Threat in Malaysia

Unlike in the Philippines or Indonesia, the Islamic State has no "official" affiliates based in Malaysia. Instead, the Islamic State landscape in Malaysia is characterized by disparate cells and social media groups on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, some of which were set up by returnees from Syria. Individuals associated with the Islamic State within Malaysia (who act in accordance with, but

1 "ISIS Officially Recognises Pledges of Allegiance from Militant Groups in the Philippines," *Straits Times*, February 15, 2016.

2 Marc Lourdes, "Islamic State launches first successful attack in Malaysia," CNN, July 4, 2016.

3 Aditya Tejas, "Malaysians Identified in ISIS Beheading Video Of Syrian Man," *International Business Times*, March 4, 2015; Lourdes.

4 Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Student, housewife among 15 terror suspects held in Malaysia for planning attacks," *Straits Times*, June 1, 2018.

are not necessarily under the direction of Islamic State) belong to one of two main categories: those who belong to the older generation of Malaysian Islamist militants (some with prior affiliations) and those without a history of militant affiliation, largely inspired online. Although there are no official affiliates, Malaysian authorities have reported the formation of cells that appear to be influenced by the Islamic State: namely, the Kumpulan Briged Khalid al-Walid (KBKW), Daulah Islam Malizia (DIM), and Kumpulan Fisabilillah (KF).

Civil war in Syria has played a major role in Malaysia's militant landscape, both as a destination and as a source of radicalization and recruitment. While not all Malaysians traveling to Syria fought for the Islamic State, many of those who did joined Katibah Nusantara, an Islamic State combat unit in Syria composed primarily of Malaysians and Indonesians.

Attack Plots: Magnitude and Geography

Between 2014 and 2019, there were a total of 23 reported plots occurring in six Malaysian states or federal territories, with the highest number of plots (13) in or around the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The next highest number of plots occurred in the surrounding state of Selangor and the northeastern state of Kelantan.

Overall, the years 2016 and 2018 experienced the highest number of plots, amounting to six in each year. Only one of these 23 plots was considered to be 'successful' insofar as it actually resulted in casualties: the attack on the "Movida Bar" nightclub in Puchong, Selangor, in June 2016.

Suicide Attacks

Compared to the Philippines and Indonesia, Malaysian plotters did not turn to suicide attacks to the same extent; there was a single planned suicide attack (in May 2019) in the authors' arrest database. Although suicide attacks generally appear to remain unacceptable or off-limits among Muslims in the country, Malaysians have been involved in conducting or planning suicide attacks in Iraq, Syria, and the Philippines, which does not completely rule out possible attempts in the future.

Arrests of Islamic State-Affiliated Individuals

Per the authors' dataset, a total of 319 Islamic State-affiliated individuals were arrested in Malaysia—in at least 15 provinces—between 2014 and 2019.[5] Total annual arrests peaked at 79 arrests in 2015, with the highest numbers of arrests across the six-year period occurring in the areas of Selangor (78), Kuala Lumpur (55), and Sabah (50). The Kuala Lumpur region's concentration of population and economic activity makes it an attractive location for militants to attempt attacks, while strong security measures in the capital region enable high numbers of arrests. Sabah, on the other hand, is part of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, which comprises Sabah, the Philippines, and Indonesia and has long been plagued by violence, kidnappings, and other financially motivated criminal activities and has seen the presence of groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Finally, Selangor, which had the highest number of arrests across all regions, is the state surrounding Kuala Lumpur (and also the location of two international airports); as such, its proximity to the capital region and airports is one potential explanation for the large number of arrests there.

Arrests of Islamic State-Affiliated Individuals

Out of the total arrests, 92 individuals were in the process of planning an attack or threatened to do so, making up almost 29% of all arrests; perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of individuals in this category were men.

For men, the largest number of arrests was in the "planning/threatening attack" category; however, for women, the largest category across the six years was "attempted/planned travel." There were only three

5 Location was unreported in about 7.8% of the cases.

cases where women were arrested for planning an attack between 2014 and 2019. Though the cases are few, this may indicate that Islamic State-affiliated women tend to adopt more passive rather than active roles, especially in comparison to women in the Philippines and Indonesia. Women associated with the Islamic State in the Philippines and Indonesia have been implicated in attacks involving both suicide attacks and explosives.[6]

For men's arrests, there were notable changes in roles over time. The year 2014 started with a large proportion of arrests made for either individuals' links with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or attempts to travel, which is unsurprising given that the caliphate was declared in June 2014 and attracted sympathizers thereafter.[7] In 2016, individuals arrested for facilitating funding experienced the largest increase, rising from a single case in the dataset in 2015 to 22 individuals in 2016. A closer examination reveals that fundraising was done for various purposes and through different channels, including channeling funds to Muhammad Wanndy as well as to the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines. Between 2016 and 2019, the total number of arrests continued to decline steadily.

Nationalities and Affiliations

The arrest dataset consisted of at least 73% Malaysians,[8] indicating that locals comprise a large proportion of Islamic State sympathizers in the country. In terms of non-Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos dominated the arrests (about 8.8% and 6.9%, respectively), many of whom were planning to travel to Syria or the southern Philippines. A large presence of Indonesian and Filipino militants in Malaysia is worrisome, as it paves the way for Malaysia to be used as a transit hub for Islamic State activity in the region. In addition, the dataset recorded at least nine other nationalities or regions, including Bangladeshis, Iraqis, and North Africans.

Looking Forward: Developing Resilience to Violent Extremism

The findings of this report indicate that one of the most dangerous characteristics associated with the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia is its potential to radicalize and mobilize both men and women inspired by its extreme ideology without the existence of a formal Islamic State affiliate, which contrasts with the presence of formal affiliates in the Philippines and Indonesia. While the Malaysian counterterrorism apparatus has been effective in constraining the manifestation of the Islamic State in the form of successful attacks or official affiliates, the appeal of its ideology to Malaysian Muslims of various backgrounds remains undeniable. This calls for Malaysia to be more attentive to mechanisms and pathways that allow its society to build deeper resilience to violent extremism and address pre-existing social and political fissures that may have inadvertently created the space for the Islamic State's influence. One way the Malaysian government has sought to advance this resilience has been through terminology. Due to long-standing political debates about whether the country is an Islamic state or not as well as Malaysia's compositional mix of ethnicities and attendant sensitivities surrounding questions of race and religion, the government has deliberately used the term "Daesh" to refer to the Islamic State group in all official communication. This, in part, disassociates the justification of violent extremism in the name of religion.

In broader terms, the notion of cultivating resilience to violent extremism—whether to groups such as the Islamic State or others—in multicultural Malaysia is intricately linked to the strength of the nation's social fabric. The level of integration or intensity of polarization among Malaysia's different ethnic groups could determine the impact of extremist activity on its people. These social attitudes toward violent extremism are, in turn, a function of politics, policies, and social capital or what social

6 Amira Jadoon, Julia Maria Lodoen, Charmaine Noelle Willis, and Nakissa Puneh Jahanbani, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling? Female Participation in Militant Organizations in Islamic State Affiliates in Southeast Asia," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2020): pp. 1-23.

7 It must be noted that at times Malaysian authorities did not distinguish between Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra affiliations.

8 Nationalities were not reported in five percent of the data.

networks are willing and able to do for each other in times of crisis based on trust. Strengthening community resilience to violent extremism therefore requires addressing risks to prevailing social structures including cultural and religious practices as well as a sense of belonging. It also warrants responsive leadership at both the political and community levels.

Introduction

Although Islamist militancy is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Malaysia, in contrast to the Philippines and Indonesia, there have been no major Islamist militant groups active in Malaysia in recent years. The Islamic State's growing influence in Southeast Asia broadly, however, has generally contributed to the rise of Islamist militancy in Malaysia. On June 29, 2016, two years after the Islamic State officially announced its "caliphate" in June 2014, Malaysia experienced a terrorist attack on a nightclub in Puchong, Selangor, which was perpetrated by local supporters of the Islamic State.[9] But this was by no means the first indication that there was a resurgence of Islamist militancy gaining influence upon Malaysians.

The Islamic State's influence on Malaysians has been closely tied to militancy in Syria; it contributed substantially to the Islamic State landscape in Malaysia, as both a fighting ground and a source of recruitment. Malaysians, along with Indonesians, who traveled to Syria joined Katibah Nusantara, the Malay-speaking arm of the Islamic State.[10] Since 2014, there have been numerous arrests of militants attempting travel to Syria and several other successful trips; many prominent fighters and recruiters have since been killed in Syria, most notably Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi.[11] Malaysians' participation in the Syrian civil war came to light when two Malaysians, Mohd Razif and Muhammad Razin Sharhan, were arrested in Beirut in October 2012 with the goal of joining Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Syria.[12] In 2015, when they were brought back to Malaysia, the two individuals, aged 24 and 33, were reported to be a former civil servant from Selangor and an electrician from Kuala Lumpur, respectively.[13] This case represents a much broader pattern: In 2014, Malaysian authorities began to arrest Islamic State supporters at home.[14] Estimates in mid-2015 placed Malaysian members of the Islamic State between 80 and 150 (some of whom have since returned),[15] which included families as well.[16] At the start of 2020, over 100 Malaysians were reported to have remained in Syria.[17]

The civil war in Syria has thus played a major role in Malaysia's militant landscape, both as a destination and a source of radicalization and recruitment. While the overall number of attack plots affiliated with the Islamic State has remained low, especially compared to Indonesia and the Philippines over the same time period, a high number of arrests of both men and women suspected to be linked to the Islamic State highlights that the influence of the Islamic State's ideology poses a risk to the country. As this report shows, support for the Islamic State in Malaysia appears to exist in two key forms. The first group of supporters is made up of the older Malaysian 'jihadi' generation, some of whom have prior Islamist militant affiliations.[18] These individuals have played an important role in recruiting for

9 Lourdes; "US court papers reveal Filipino as Puchong terror attack funder," *Malay Mail*, October 8, 2017. Note: The Islamic State is referred to as "Daesh" within Malaysia, in part to disassociate the justification of violent extremism in the name of religion. This approach is also common in other countries, such as Pakistan. However, this report uses the term "Islamic State" for consistency with respect to the Combating Terrorism Center's style guide for publications.

10 "More than 200 Indonesians and Malaysians fighting for ISIS arm Katibah Nusantara," *Straits Times*, January 17, 2016.

11 "Malaysia's top Islamic State operative killed in Syria: police," Reuters, May 8, 2017.

12 "Lebanon Hands Over Two Suspected Al-Qaeda Operatives to Malaysia," BenarNews, November 2, 2015.

13 Ibid.

14 In 2013, "al-Qa`ida in Iraq" changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and after a split from al-Qa`ida, officially declared a caliphate in 2014.

15 "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State (Final Report)," USAID, January 6, 2016.

16 Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Aroisoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of 'Moderation': Understanding the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia," *Asian Security* 16:1 (2020): p. 1.

17 T.N. Alagesh, "Bringing home Malaysians held in Syria could be tough," *New Straits Times*, January 30, 2020. For more on Malaysia's repatriation policy, see Amalina Abdul Nasir, "Returning Foreign Fighters: Is Malaysia Ready?" Middle East Institute, May 26, 2020.

18 Osman and Arosoaie, p. 4.

the Islamic State.[19] Many of them see the Islamic State struggle as a continuation of previous struggles and as the only effective mechanism through which to pursue the establishment of a caliphate. But the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia is not limited to veterans of previous movements. The other key form of support for the Islamic State in the country comes from individuals from the wider public, both men and women, who have not necessarily engaged in militancy before and have been largely radicalized and recruited online. Some of these supporters were in touch with individuals who were members of Katibah Nusantara, which played an important role in recruitment through the dissemination of propaganda videos and leaflets published in Malay.[20]

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to answer the following questions:

- *How has the history of Islamist revivalism in Malaysia shaped the growth of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia?*
- *What do trends in Islamic State-linked attack plots and individual arrests in Malaysia between 2014 and 2019 reveal about the contours of the Islamic State's strength in the country, as well as the characteristics of recruits?*
- *Finally, given the current ethnic and religious schisms in Malaysia, what are the prospects of enhancing social capital in the country for resilience to violent extremism?*

Components and Layout of the Report

In an attempt to shed light on the above questions, the authors draw on an original dataset of Islamic State-affiliated attack plots and arrests in the time period of January 2014 to December 2019 compiled using open-source materials. Outlined below are the key components of the report:

Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in Malaysia

This chapter provides an overview of the history of Malaysian militancy and the emergence of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia. It begins with a brief discussion of the history of Islamist militancy in Malaysia and provides an overview of key groups and the broader sociopolitical context within the country, most notably the escalating politicization of Islam by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) political parties. It then provides an account of the rise of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia, highlighting connections between Malaysians and factions and individuals in Syria.

Chapter 2: Attack Plots and Arrests

This chapter of the report examines Islamic State-linked attack plots in Malaysia, as well as the arrests of Islamic State-affiliated individuals in Malaysia. Two datasets were compiled—one for attacks and one for arrests of individuals—covering the time period between January 2014 and December 2019. This chapter presents the data in the following order: (a) an overview of Islamic State activity across the country in terms of plots, targets, and tactics; and (b) an examination of the trends in the arrests of Islamic State-affiliated individuals, including their numbers, roles, prior affiliations, and other demographic information.

Chapter 3: Case Studies of Plots and Profiles of Arrested Militants

This chapter outlines several case studies of Islamic State-linked plots and profiles of arrested individuals associated with the Islamic State in Malaysia. The goal of this chapter is to provide a closer look at some of the cases to better understand the nature of the Islamic State threat in Malaysia.

19 Ibid., p. 4.

20 "More than 200 Indonesians and Malaysians fighting for ISIS arm Katibah Nusantara."

Chapter 4: Conclusion: Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism in Malaysia

Building on the previous chapters, in this final chapter, the authors examine the effectiveness and evolution of the Malaysian counterterrorism infrastructure, and explore the broader notion of building resilience to violent extremism in the Malaysian context. This chapter unpacks the country's persistent ethnic and religious schisms as vulnerability ripe for exploitation while looking forward by exploring the prospects of buttressing social capital to build resilience to violent extremism.

Methodology and Definitions

The data presented in this report is based on two original databases compiled by the authors. The first database analyzed and coded Islamic State-linked "attack plots" (defined as all attempted attacks, regardless of outcome) in Malaysia from January 2014 to December 2019. The second database gathered and coded information on all arrests of individuals in Malaysia who were linked to the Islamic State in some capacity. The sections below provide an overview of the methodology used for this report, the structure of databases, coding decisions, and, finally, data limitations.

Islamic State-Linked Attack Plots and Arrests

The event-level data was coded using English and Malaysian open-source materials on Islamic State-linked attacks and arrests in Malaysia. Attacks included in the database are those in which Islamic State-affiliated individuals or members of local Islamic State cells were the primary plotters of an attack as indicated by local officials in the open-source material.[21] Unlike in the Philippines and Indonesia, there are no official Islamic State groups in Malaysia at present. Arrests included in the database are those where local officials clearly reported arrested individuals as having a link with the Islamic State; the arrested individuals were usually involved in disseminating propaganda, moving funds, planning an attack, or had simply pledged *bay `a* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The authors did not account for outcomes of these arrests, and the database includes all individuals arrested, regardless of the eventual outcome.

To identify relevant attacks, the authors reviewed reports from regional experts, think-tanks, and academics. This was followed by searches (primarily through NexisUni) to obtain relevant news articles of reported Islamic State attacks. Among other variables, *date and location* of the attack were coded at the state, district, and city/town level. The *outcome of the attack plot* was coded as either successful (if it resulted in casualties), failed (i.e., the attack was unsuccessfully executed by attackers), or foiled (i.e., interrupted by counterterrorism forces before or during the attack). *Attack plot targets* were coded, including noncombatant targets (e.g., educational institution, media organization, religious institution, health institution, NGO or aid organization, public spaces, or private citizens/property) or state personnel (e.g., local law enforcement, local government, domestic national law enforcement, domestic national government, or federal government). The *lethality of each attack* was coded, including total killed and wounded in each attack plot, including civilians, domestic security and personnel, and international security and personnel.

Using the same time period as the attack plots database, the authors also gathered information on the individuals arrested across Malaysia via similar open sources, including academic and think-tank reports but with a special emphasis on NexisUni. The authors identified and coded incidents where individuals arrested were clearly identified by local authorities as having some type of link with the Islamic State. The arrest database codes a series of variables such as the arrest date, location, gender, role, and prior militant affiliation of arrested individuals. Additional information about the coding categories within the roles of such individuals is provided in Chapter 2. To conduct further analysis on a sample of arrests and attack plots in Chapter 3, the authors also referred to sources in the Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) and consulted with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, an assistant professor at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) at the International Islamic University Malaysia, to gain further insights into some of the cases.

21 The authors are aware of the potential that at times local officials may incorrectly attribute attacks to the Islamic State, which may lead to overestimates of the Islamic State's presence in the region. However, the authors have no reason to suspect that locals would intentionally misattribute unclaimed attacks to the Islamic State in significant numbers, and have relied on at least two or more sources to document the details of each attack.

Data Sources and Quality Control

Over the course of several months, research assistants coded Islamic State-linked attacks and arrests, which were then quality controlled by the authors. Attacks were coded from a variety of English-language open sources, including news reports, academic studies, and reports by think-tanks and researchers. For news reports, NexisUni was employed to obtain relevant news articles, using search strings for different variations of the Islamic State's name. The authors cross-referenced and supplemented the attacks coded for the report with other databases, including the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and Jane's Intelligence. Any events not captured by the report's methodology were individually researched and included in the database to ensure completeness.

As with other terrorism-related data collection efforts, there is a possibility for under- or over-reporting of events. In particular, while attacks and plots by the Islamic State generally attract much media attention, the authors do not expect all arrests of Islamic State-associated individuals/sympathizers by Malaysian police to be reported in the media. As such, the number of arrests captured by the authors' methodology is on the conservative side and below the aggregate numbers reported by Malaysian authorities per year. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the numbers generally reflect similar trends in terms of increases or decreases in the number of arrests between years. Relatedly, as this database is compiled from open-source coding, it may be possible that data from classified sources illustrate different trends. Additionally, because failed and foiled attacks (i.e., those that were not successful by fault of the perpetrator and those that were intercepted and stopped by counterterrorism forces, respectively) are coded, it is possible that open-source media failed to capture such attacks that were not deemed newsworthy or were kept out of the public eye.

The data collected for this report was primarily from English-language sources, although Malaysian news outlets in both English and Bahasa Malaysia (e.g., *Berita Harian*, Utusan Malaysia, and Bernama) were used to develop in-depth profiles of individuals and plots.

For data on overall numbers of attacks and arrests, while translated news sources are included in NexisUni searches, it is possible that NexisUni did not include the entire spectrum of local language newspapers, especially those not considered to be 'mainstream' newspapers. However, given the publicity generated by Islamic State-linked attacks, there are likely to be only a few instances, if any, that were not reported in national newspapers.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in Malaysia

This chapter provides an overview of the history of Malaysian militancy and the emergence of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia. A brief discussion of the history of Islamist militancy in Malaysia is important to understand the broader context in which the Islamic State began to exert its influence. While many factors contributed to the eventual influence of the Islamic State in the country, this chapter touches on the following key factors: a discussion of the history of militancy in Malaysia with a focus on the roles played by groups such as Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the broader landscape; external events that influenced Malaysians' view toward "jihad;" and sociopolitical elements and institutions within the country that intentionally or unintentionally facilitated Islamist militancy. As such, this chapter provides an overview of key groups and the broader sociopolitical context within the country, most notably the escalating politicization of Islam by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) political parties. The second part of the chapter provides an account of the rise of the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia, highlighting connections between Malaysians and factions and individuals in Syria.

1.1 Brief Historical Overview of Islamist Militancy in Malaysia

This section reviews the history of militancy in Malaysia, including the shift of focus in the second half of the 20th century from the communist threat (1948-1960) to the rising Islamist threat (starting in the 1970s). Understanding this history provides the contextual background to understand Malaysia's present-day militant landscape and counterterrorism structures.

The threat of terrorism in Malaysia is certainly not new; the country experienced terrorism perpetrated by communist insurgents between 1948 and 1989, as well as Islamist militancy, which emerged around the 1970s. However, although Islamist militancy is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Malaysia, there are important differences between the older generation of Malaysian Islamist militants and the new generation associated with the influence of the Islamic State. At present, there are no *major* Islamist militant groups in Malaysia that compare to those in the Philippines and Indonesia, although various militant cells have been identified by local authorities over the years.[22] Between 1967 and 2015, the Malaysian Special Branch division identified at least 22 homegrown militant groups belonging to different ideologies, which included well-known groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), but also others such as Gerakan al-Arqam, Crypto, Kumpulan Mohd Nasir Islam, Tanzim al-Qaeda Bahagian Asia Tenggara, and Daulah Islamiah Malaysia.[23] Groups such as KMM were largely pushed underground as part of a crackdown on JI in Malaysia. However, both KMM and JI continue to contribute to Islamist militancy in Malaysia, albeit in a more subtle fashion. The previous generation of Islamist militants in Malaysia played a key role in shaping militant ideologies in the country, exerting their influence via teachings at boarding schools while maintaining a hierarchical structure.[24] In contrast, the newer generation, primarily associated with the Islamic State, appears to be motivated by a moral righteousness and operates in small contingents and largely through social media.

Prior to the issue of Islamist militancy, the first sign of any sort of militancy in Malaysia was the Malayan Emergency, the communist insurgency that began in 1948—prior to Malaysian independence—and stretched until 1960 with a brief pause of eight years before the second iteration of the Emergency

22 For a list of a list of sanctioned individuals and groups connected to terrorism, see the Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia list at https://www.moha.gov.my/images/maklumat_bahagian/KK/kdndomestic.pdf

23 Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Countering the threat of Daesh in Malaysia," in *Countering Daesh Extremism; European and Asian Responses* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2016).

24 Osman and Arosoaie.

started back up again through to 1989. During their rule, the British supported and empowered Malayan forces against the communists, which led to the development of strict counterterrorism regulations such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the centralization of power with the federal government, both of which have shaped Malaysian counterterrorism policy to this day.[25]

The first signs of Islamist militancy came in the early 1970s, coinciding with a domestic, post-colonial struggle for national identity among some and an external Islamist revivalism catalyzed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as well as the Iranian revolution.[26] However, the first major uptick in Malaysian Islamist militancy occurred with the travel of Malaysians to join the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.[27] Around the 1980s, a new Islamist militancy threat emerged and challenged the legitimacy of the Malaysian state, engaging in confrontations such as the 1985 Memali incident. The Memali incident, which occurred in November 1985, involved a bloody clash between security forces and villagers in Kampung Memali Caruk Putih, Kedah, which resulted in the death of 14 villagers and four police officers. While various interpretations of what unfolded exist, the conflict did involve the Malaysian government's use of armed force in arresting religious teacher Ibrahim Libya and his followers for involvement in deviant Islamic teachings. Critics blamed the government for being excessive in its use of force against "simple village folk who were equipped with tapping knives, machetes, crude Molotov cocktails and catapults, and were trying to prevent Ibrahim's arrest."[28] Ibrahim's death led PAS to declare him and his deceased followers as *syuhada* (martyrs) despite the Kedah Fatwa Council's ruling to the contrary.[29] Ibrahim Mahmood was rumored to have received an education in Libya (in addition to India and Egypt), hence the name Ibrahim "Libya," and was believed to have radical views about Islam. But still, this threat was deemed to be a homegrown phenomenon borne of domestic politics rather than one influenced by transnational groups, and one that did not seem to direct violence toward civilians.[30] The birth of KMM, which the authors discuss further below, is often traced back to the Memali incident.[31]

In the late 1990s, the risk of transnational Islamist terrorist groups emerged with returning veterans from Afghanistan. While these militants did not operate in Malaysia, they returned from Afghanistan with an extreme interpretation of Islam that propagated and influenced the establishment of extremist and militant cells across Malaysia.[32] These cells included KMM,[33] formally formed in 1995, and JI, officially founded in 1993.[34] Both groups will be discussed in more depth in the following sections; however, it is important to note that JI in particular played a key role in the development of militancy in Malaysia, most notably through its connection with al-Qa`ida. Al-Qa`ida used Malaysia as a recruiting ground and safe haven, to include holding planning meetings for the 9/11 attacks there.[35]

25 Andrew Humphreys, "Malaysia's Post-9/11 Security Strategy: Winning 'Hearts and Minds' or Legitimising the Political Status Quo?" *Kajian Malaysia* 28:1 (2010): p. 22.

26 Mohd. Mizan Aslam, "The thirteen radical groups: Preliminary research in understanding the evolution of militancy in Malaysia," *Jati* 14 (2009): pp. 145-161.

27 Andrin Raj, "Militant Islam in Malaysia: Synergy between Regional and Global Jihadi Groups," Middle East Institute, January 16, 2015; Muhammad Izzuddin Jaafar and Elmira Akhmetova, "Religious Extremism and Radicalisation of Muslims in Malaysia: The Malay Ties with the Mujahidin, Al Qaeda and ISIS," *Journal of Nusantara Studies* 5:1 (2020): p. 110.

28 Elina Noor, ''Al-Ma'unah and KMM in Malaysia,'' in Andrew T.H. Tan ed., *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Cheltenham, England: Edward Elgar, 2007), pp. 167, 193.

29 Ibid.

30 Osman and Arosoaie.

31 Brendan Pereira, "PAS leader was at meeting that Bashir attended," *Straits Times*, February 9, 2003.

32 Humphreys.

33 For further information on the Al-Ma'unah and the KMM, see Noor, ''Al-Ma'unah and KMM in Malaysia.''

34 Jaafar and Akhmetova, p. 111; Raj.

35 Superintendent Craig Riviere, "The evolution of jihadist-Salafism in Indonesia, Malaysia and The Philippines, and its impact on security in Southeast Asia," *Indo-Pacific Strategic Papers*, November 2016, p. 9.

Following those attacks and the 2002 Bali bombings, Malaysian law enforcement cracked down on Islamist militancy, leading to the near-total suppression of JI and KMM.[36] However, though the groups largely disappeared in Malaysia, the start of the Syrian civil in 2011 reignited Islamist militancy in Malaysia, including that of disparate Islamic State-linked cells.[37]

Jemaah Islamiyah

While JI has publicly denounced the Islamic State, an accurate picture of the militant landscape in Malaysia is incomplete without discussing the group.[38] JI's ambition to create a pan-"Islamic state" across Indonesia, Malaysia, as well as the southern provinces of Thailand and the Philippines was a regional precursor to the ambitions of the Islamic State group a few years later. It captured the imagination of enough supporters in Malaysia and neighboring countries to become a serious regional threat by the early 2000s. JI originated in Darul Islam,[39] an Islamist organization that called for postcolonial Indonesia to become an Islamic state.[40] Two vocal and proactive leaders of the movement, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, who had relocated to Malaysia in 1985 to escape arrest on subversion charges,[41] formed Jemaah Islamiyah after setting up a religious school in Johor called Sekolah Tarbiyyah Islamiyah Luqmanul Hakiem.[42] Although the main goal of JI remained establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia, it also became more committed to a larger struggle for an Islamic state that went beyond Indonesia. Subsequently, this resulted in a meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2000 that was attended by members of KMM, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front of the Philippines, JI's Singapore Cell, Patani Islamic Liberation Front and Wa-Ka-Rae of Thailand, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka and Sulawesi Muslims Organisation of Indonesia, and Rohingya Solidarity Organization of Myanmar to discuss the goal of a broader Islamic state in the region.[43]

Although JI has always been based primarily in Indonesia, Sungkar and Ba'asyir sought to establish a Southeast Asian caliphate, organizing JI's governance into four regional *mantiqi*, with each one having a designated role. *Mantiqi* 1, consisting of Malaysia and Singapore, primarily served as a recruiter, fundraiser, and liaison to other groups, including al-Qa`ida and KMM.[44] Through a network that connected multiple religious schools across Southeast Asia, JI was able to expand its recruitment of individuals.[45] JI also sent recruited Malaysian fighters to train with al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and with the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Moro National Liberation Front in the southern Philippines.[46] Though designated "a non-operational cell" by JI leadership, *Mantiqi* 1 also covered a unit that waged attacks across Indonesia, including the 2002 Bali bombings.[47] The group also attempted two attacks on U.S. delegations visiting Putrajaya, Malaysia's administrative capital, in 2004 and 2007.[48]

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36 Nicholas Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia" in *Global Jihad in Southeast Asia: Examining the expansion of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019), p. 63.

37 Ibid., pp. 64-66.

38 Joseph Chinyong Liow, "ISIS in the Pacific: Assessing Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Threat to the Homeland," House Committee on Homeland Security, April 27, 2016.

39 For a more detailed discussion on this, see Quinton Temby, "Imagining An Islamic State In Indonesia: From Darul Islam To Jemaah Islamiyah," *Indonesia* 89 (2010): pp. 1-36.

40 Osman and Arosoaie.

41 Ibid.

42 Sidney Jones, "The changing nature of Jemaah Islamiyah," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 52:2 (2005).

43 "White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism," Ministry of Home Affairs, Republic of Singapore, 2003, p. 7.

44 Raj.

45 David Gordon and Samuel Lindo, "Jemaah Islamiyah," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Case Study Number 6, 2011.

46 Jaafar and Akhmetova, p. 113.

47 Ibid.; Kirsten E. Schulze and Julie Chernov Hwang, "Militant Islam in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41:1 (2019): p. 3.

48 Raj.

Despite being based in Malaysia, however, JI leadership's operational focus on conducting attacks largely remained outside Malaysia.[49] With regard to its relationships with other groups, while JI did have a close relationship with al-Qa`ida, it was never al-Qa`ida's franchise in the region. JI also retained a close relationship with KMM, although these were more personal links rather than structural links between the two;[50] one of the leaders of KMM's splinter group K3M, led by Marwan, reportedly took orders from JI leaders.[51] An unsuccessful bank robbery by K3M in 2001 resulted in the discovery of KMM and its affiliates, and ushered in a severe crackdown on both KMM and JI.[52] Perhaps one of the key effects of such efforts by JI was increasing the influence of the concept of a cross-national armed struggle; many prominent JI operatives were recruited from Malaysia, including now-deceased Noordin Mat Top, who later became the leader of a splinter group and was believed to be involved in a bombing campaign in Indonesia between 2002 and 2009.[53] However, as noted above, Malaysian authorities' 2001 crackdowns on JI, at least partly in connection with a botched KMM plot, severely curtailed JI operations in Malaysia.[54]

Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)

Like JI, KMM harbored ambitions of a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia and an antipathy for the West's discrimination against, if not oppression of, Muslims elsewhere. Additionally, several KMM individuals had personal linkages to and support from JI. But it is this shared vision of Islamic governance across physical territory that is common to all these groups. It also explains the sympathy and support for the Islamic State when the group exploded onto the scene more than a decade later.

While JI did not carry out violent attacks within Malaysia, KMM did. KMM, also known as Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, was set up in the mid-1990s with the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia and possibly beyond. A number of KMM members were linked to the Afghan mujahideen, even though many did not fight on the frontlines against the Soviets, "and were moved to transplant their experiences in Afghanistan to Southeast Asia."[55] Per Ahmad El-Muhammady, KMM's founder, Zainon Ismail, claimed that he was recruited precisely because of his experience with and knowledge of paramilitary trainings in Afghanistan. In addition to having links with the battle in Afghanistan, its membership also included students who had studied in Pakistan, which meant that they brought specific ideological frameworks, military training, and transnational connections.[56] As opposed to JI, which was founded by Indonesian clergymen, KMM was led by members of Halaqah Pakindo, an association of former Malaysian mujahideen who fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.[57] The group was founded in 1995 by Zainon Ismail, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan War, with the goal of overthrowing the government of Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's then-prime minister, and establishing its own vision of an Islamic state in Malaysia and eventually a region-wide caliphate.[58] Around 2001, KMM's leader, Nik Adli, who had replaced Ismail, was accused by the government of

49 For a further discussion, see Osman and Arosoaie.

50 See Kamarulnizam Abdullah, "Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI): The Links," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 4:1 (2009): pp. 29-46.

51 Mohammad Aslam and Mohd Mizan, "A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia," Victoria University of Wellington, 2009, p. 170.

52 For a more detailed discussion on the links between KMM and JI, see Abdullah, p. 43.

53 Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia," p. 63.

54 Nicholas Chan, "The Malaysian 'Islamic' State versus the Islamic State (IS): evolving definitions of 'terror' in an 'Islamising' nation-state," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11:3 (2018): pp. 421-422.

55 Wong Chun Wai, "Idealistic young men fired by call for jihad," *Star*, August 10, 2001.

56 Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia."

57 Abdullah.

58 Riviere, p. 8.

receiving military training in Afghanistan between 1990 and 1996 in addition to engaging in a number of other activities including recruiting other Malaysians, planning religious assassinations, purchasing weapons from southern Thailand, and sending Malaysians to fight in Ambon in Indonesia's Maluku islands.[59]

In October 1995, Ismail set up the steering committee of KMM with six others, with a goal to "seek religious purity among Malay-Muslims" and the long-term goal of implementing "*syariah* laws in Malaysia and subsequently to establish an Islamic state."[60] KMM's long-term vision included a much larger regional Islamic state, which could possibly include Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, and southern Thailand.[61] KMM set up cells in several states, including Perak, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Selangor, and Johor, with the Selangor cell the most active and militant. As discussed above, KMM, particularly its faction K3M in Selangor, had ties with JI, leading to its relative disappearance from the public scene following a 2001 crackdown in Malaysia.[62] None of Malaysia's Muslim parties or civil society organizations were considered to have any deep ties with the group.[63]

Generally, the group seems to have remained dormant, with some KMM members—many of whom fled Malaysia for Indonesia following the crackdown after 9/11—joining groups in Syria since the start of the war there.[64] Though some Malaysians went to Syria to fight with groups like Katibah Nusantara or Ajnad al-Sham, JI has publicly denounced the Islamic State, and "veteran KMM fighters who went to Syria all shifted allegiance to the Islamic State."[65] The KMM does not have any formal connections to the Islamic State, and its primary role in Islamic State propagation in Malaysia lies in its fighters returning from Syria. Most notably, KMM member and Syria returnee Murad Halimmuddin was arrested in April 2015 as the leader of a cell aiming to establish "an ISIS-like Islamic state in Malaysia;" another cell member was also a former KMM member.[66] While the exact degree of the threat posed by returning KMM fighters remains unclear, the Malaysian government assesses Islamic State returnees to be the primary threat to the country.[67] This concern is certainly not unfounded, as Halimmuddin's cell represents the threat posed by Malaysian returnees from Syria, some of whom attempted to form Islamic State cells within Malaysia upon their return.

1.2 Rising Extremism: Politics, Society, and the Malay-Muslim Identity

In Malaysia, the rise of religiously motivated terrorism in the country is often attributed to both internal and external factors. Externally, U.S. foreign policy with regard to the Muslim world is often viewed as a motivating factor for rising religious extremism, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. invasion of Iraq playing an important role in disillusioning Malaysians.[68] Extremism in the country is also frequently linked to the Cold War, which caused animosity toward both the West and the Soviet Union, and led Malaysians to travel to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union in support of their Muslim brethren against foreign—and specifically, communist—invasion.[69] The returning fighters arguably

59 Noor, "Al-Ma'unah and KMM in Malaysia."

60 Abdullah.

61 Ibid., p. 36.

62 Riviere, p. 9; Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia," p. 64.

63 Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia."

64 Ibid., p. 61.

65 Liow, "ISIS in the Pacific," p. 6; Chan, "From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia," p. 66.

66 Greg Fealy and John Funston, "Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State," Management Systems International, January 6, 2016, p. 10.

67 Ibid., p. 23.

68 Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum," Brookings Institution, April 21, 2015.

69 Jaafar and Akhmetova, p. 104.

brought with them a stricter interpretation of Islam that has since shaped the religious exclusionism that pervades Malaysia today.[70]

But rising levels of religious extremism in Malaysia are not just attributed to external events; it is often perceived as a misunderstanding of Islamic teachings, and linked to misguidance.[71] The rise of extremism and terrorism in Malaysia have been linked to distinct radicalization pathways, which studies indicate include a myriad of push and pull factors. On one hand, push factors in the Malaysian context have included personal grievances, including "detachment from family, inability to cope with personal problems ... a sense of unfairness regarding certain policies and practices, and perception toward the ruling government—whom they often view as un-Islamic because of their perceived failure to implement Islamic laws."[72] On the other hand, pull factors have included being drawn to an active conflict zone, being inspired by a certain ideological vision such as the creation of a caliphate, or fighting for the cause of Muslims oppressed globally.[73] The radicalization of some Malaysians has also often been linked to misguided understandings of Islamic concepts; it has been argued that many have experienced manipulation of their religious beliefs, which has also been attributed to the rise in the recruitment of women in the case of the Islamic State.[74]

Other researchers have looked beyond the immediate or individual level factors that have contributed to a rise in extremist violence in Malaysia. Some have argued that the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, although influenced by external events, is "foremost a response to developments within Malaysia's domestic politics."[75] That said, the coupling of religious exclusionism with ethnonationalism is unique to Malaysian society, as Malaysian political legitimacy revolves around the concept of the dual Malay-Muslim identity.[76] The centrality of the Malay-Muslim identity stems from the concept of a collective identity united against the Malay aristocracy and British colonialism.[77] Malay supremacy was reinforced by the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1970, an affirmative-action plan intended to address structural inequities.[78] Constitutionally, though, being Muslim is a prerequisite to being considered Malay, thus effectively linking the ethnic supremacy of Malays with religion.[79] Therefore, local tensions between Malay Muslims and other non-Muslim ethnic groups likely interacted with U.S. foreign policy to influence Malaysian extremism.[80]

In the late 1970s, Islamic revivalism seemed to gain political momentum "through a tacit alliance between the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, PAs)."[81] In the 1980s, Islamic resurgence was recognized by the government in the form of its Islamization drive, which was problematic given that nearly half of the country's

70 Ibid., p. 110.

71 "PM Najib's speech at the International Conference on Deradicalisation and Countering Violent Extremism," *New Straits Times*, January 25, 2016.

72 Murni Wan Mohd Nor and Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Radicalisation and Paramilitary Culture: The Case of Wanndy's Telegram Groups in Malaysia," in *Militarization and the Global Rise of Paramilitary Culture* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), pp. 95-122.

73 Ibid.

74 Kirsten E. Schulze and Joseph Liow, "Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad: Transnational and local dimensions of the ISIS phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Journal of Asian Security* 15:2 (2018): pp. 1-18.

75 Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Ahmed Shabery Cheek, "The Politics of Malaysia's Islamic resurgence," *Third World Quarterly* 10:2 (1988).

76 Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum."

77 Joseph Chinyong Liow and Aida Arosoaie, "The Sound of Silence: Nuancing Religiopolitical Legitimacy and Conceptualizing the Appeal of ISIS in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 41:1 (2019): p. 95.

78 Raj.

79 Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160, Clause 2.

80 Liow and Arosoaie, p. 99.

81 Sundaram and Cheek.

population was non-Muslim.[82] An increasingly acute awareness and recognition of the Islamic identity over the last several decades appears to have been a response to social and economic changes within Malaysia, within which the political dimension is important.[83] Malaysia's religious conservatism, adherence to a "purist" version of Islam, competed with the narratives propagated by the Islamic State for support.

More generally, the race toward religious conservatism among Malay political parties, which dates back to the 1970s, has arguably mitigated militancy in Malaysia by providing Malays with a legitimate political outlet at the ballot box.[84] While the Islamic State communicates directly with Malaysians, publications such as *Al-Fatihin* have focused on Middle Eastern politics and conflict, failing to address the Malay-Muslim community directly.[85]

Further, because the Malaysian state promotes anti-Western narratives and shuns sectarian identities but does so with the framing of Malay empowerment, it fills the same gap that the Islamic State purports to fill by specifically targeting Malay Muslims.[86] Of course, the Islamic State's narrative differs in that it tends to label all nationalist organizations and state actors, including the Malaysian government, as *taghut* (worship other than God) and pro-Western, which is similar to how the Islamic State has framed governments in other parts of the world, such as in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, narratives from the Islamic State do not adequately address Malay-Muslim-specific grievances to compete with narratives coming from the state, suggesting that internal factors play a greater role in facilitating Islamic State incursion into Malaysia.

As a constitutionally enshrined concept, the Malay-Muslim identity necessarily became politicized,[87] with United Malays National Organization (UMNO) using Malaysian ethnic Chinese as a scapegoat to depict Islam as being "under threat by secular and non-Muslim forces."[88] In the context of Malaysia, the Islamization race between the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS/Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and UMNO was underpinned by a desire to attain both political power and legitimacy. However, many scholars have attributed this to "the emergence and normalization of a conservative turn in Islam in Malaysia."[89] The race between the two main Muslim political parties in Malaysia began in the early 1980s, when religious leaders assumed the leadership of PAS and shifted its approach away from a nationalist agenda and toward an Islamist one, institutionalizing its ideology among members.[90] To keep pace, UMNO has also sought to strengthen its political position by expanding its religious bureaucracy and co-opting religious figures into government.[91] By positioning itself as the champion of the Malay-Muslim identity, UMNO takes responsibility for Islam in Malaysia, which empowers the party to define what is considered Islamic but also opens itself up to religious challenges. Particularly

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Liow and Arosoaie, p. 98.

86 Ibid., p. 99.

87 For further reading on the politicization of the Malay-Muslim identity, see Helen Ting, "The Politics of National Identity in West Malaysia: Continued Mutation or Critical Transition?" *Southeast Asian Studies* 47:1 (2009); Anthony Milner, A.R. Embong, and Tham Siew Yean, *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014).

88 John Hudson, "Why Does Malaysia Have an Islamic State Problem?" *Foreign Policy*, September 9, 2015.

89 Osman and Arosoaie.

90 Ibid. Over time though, perhaps as a result of the competitive political landscape, PAS has cooperated with other secular parties like the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which mainly comprises of local Chinese with secular positions. For further reading on PAS and its evolution, see William Chase and Liew Chin-Tong, "How Committed is PAS to Democracy and How Do We Know it?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 28:3 (2006); Wan Saiful Wan Jan, "Islamism in Malaysian Politics: The Splintering of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Spread of Progressive Ideas," International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) *Malaysia* 9:4 (2018).

91 Mohamed Osman and Mohamed Nawab, "The Islamic Conservative Turn in Malaysia: Impact and Future Trajectories," *Contemporary Islam* (2016).

after UMNO president and Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad declared the country to be an Islamic state in September 2001, UMNO faced accusations from PAS of not being Islamic enough.[92] These accusations have led to an escalation by UMNO of religious rhetoric and stricter policing of Islamic practice, both a means of reinforcing their religious authority and a method to combat PAS' argument that UMNO is insufficiently Islamic.[93] Mahathir's declaration, however, also forced PAS into more extreme positions, including expressing support for Usama bin Ladin and the Taliban, in order to prove its Islamic credentials.[94] This competition between UMNO and PAS to out-Islamize one another creates space for a "radical fringe," providing an ideological foundation that would likely be more tolerant of narratives propagated by the Islamic State.[95] Overall, the increasingly extremist rhetoric in the country promoted through the government's politicization of Islam, UMNO's increasing concessions to conservative Islam for political gains, the political race between UMNO and PAS over the 'right' version of Islam, and the xenophobic and sectarian attitudes toward Christians, Jews, and Shi`a Muslims fostered the seeds of violent Islamist extremism in the country.[96]

From a bureaucratic standpoint, the Malaysian government has established multiple government institutions to enforce the state-sanctioned definition of Islam, most notably the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM). JAKIM defines Sunni Islam for Malaysians, both theologically and practically. This responsibility includes writing all Friday sermons, which have become increasingly hostile toward Shi`as and non-Muslims.[97] In partnership with UMNO, the International Islamic University of Malaysia, and the Islamic Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia, the group also established a sharia index, "a supposedly scientific measure of the extent to which Malaysia was adhering to Islamic law."[98] Salafis, among other Islamists within UMNO, also wield substantial power to push a strict interpretation of Islam thanks to the consequent political capital afforded to UMNO.[99] Though the Malaysian government does not enforce Islamic criminal law (*hudud*) and democracy is considered un-Islamic, a faction of salafis support UMNO in order to avoid being labeled extremists themselves and to project their stance on Islam into governance.[100] From UMNO's perspective, the salafis confer religious legitimacy upon the party and use their religious standing to discredit PAS, UMNO's Islamist opposition.[101] Like JAKIM, the salafis encourage the anti-Shi`a sentiment often used as a recruitment tool by the Islamic State.[102]

Both UMNO and PAS have given Malaysians reason to think that neither party adequately represents their interests. For UMNO, accusations of elitism and authoritarianism have alienated youth from the party; the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, wherein now-former Prime Minister Najib Razak was accused of siphoning over $700 million from the investment project to his personal bank

92 Ibrahim Abu Bakar, "The Theories of Islamic State as Advocated by the Two Malay Muslim Political Parties in Malaysia," *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 6:1 (2011): p. 92.

93 Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum."

94 Chan, "The Malaysian 'Islamic' State versus the Islamic State (IS)," p. 424.

95 Adri Wanto and Abdul Mateen Qadri, "Islamic State: Understanding the Threat," *Eurasia Review*, October 29, 2015, p. 2.

96 Osman and Arosoaie.

97 Chin, "Malaysia: Clear and present danger from the Islamic State."

98 Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Shariaization of Malay-Muslim Identity in Contemporary Malaysia," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 91:3 (2018): p. 59.

99 Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Salafi Ulama in UMNO: Political Convergence or Expediency?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 36:2 (2014): p. 214.

100 Ibid., pp. 219-220.

101 Ibid., p. 214.

102 Afif Pasuni, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, and Farish A. Noor, "The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and Malaysia: Current Challenges and Future Impact," *RSIS Malaysia Update*, July 17, 2014, p. 3.

accounts, has further disillusioned Malaysian citizens.[103] As previously discussed, UMNO also faces challenges from PAS on religious grounds, most notably due to its failure to enforce Islamic criminal law and the contention that the Malaysian Constitution is inherently secular.[104] At the same time, though, PAS also faces challenges on religious grounds, as the party has increasingly compromised on its pursuit of an Islamic state in order to maintain broader political appeal.[105] This compromise exposes PAS to critiques that the party no longer prioritizes and pushes "issues affecting the interests and sovereignty of Islam."[106] The fact that the Islamist party PAS faces critiques of not being Islamic enough indicates a religious vacuum, one that could be filled by the Islamic State.

1.3 Islamic State in Malaysia: Syrian Combat Unit and Recruiters

Islamic State activity in Malaysia is more decentralized than in the Philippines and Indonesia, with no formal affiliates existing in the country. Instead, much of the initial Malaysian involvement with the Islamic State consisted of Malaysians traveling to join the group in combat in the Syrian civil war; Malaysian militants and units in Syria have played a significant role in shaping Islamic State activity in Malaysia. Additionally, there are several cells, factions, and social media-based networks operating in Malaysia that take inspiration from the Islamic State but do not always have direct connections to individuals in the Middle East, suggesting that support has been able to spread even without formal affiliates.

Malaysians' participation in the Syrian civil war came to light in October 2012 when two Malaysians, Mohd Razif and Muhammad Razin Sharhan, were arrested in Beirut as they attempted to join Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Syria. Syria contributed substantially to the Islamic State landscape in Malaysia, as both a fighting ground and a source of recruitment. Since 2014, there have been numerous arrests of militants attempting travel to Syria and several other successful trips; several prominent Malaysian fighters and recruiters have since been killed in Syria, most notably Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi.[107]

Taking a broader perspective, support for the Islamic State in Malaysia exists in two forms. The first group of supporters is made up of the "older Malaysian 'jihadi' generation," some of whom have prior militant affiliations and have played an important role in recruiting for the Islamic State.[108] As Osman and Aroisoaie state, many of these supporters see the Islamic State struggle as a continuation of the previous struggle of al-Qa`ida. For them, the Islamic State was a more effective platform for achieving the aim of establishing a caliphate. The other category consists of individuals who collectively represent the wider public, individuals who typically do not have a history of jihadi affiliation and were largely inspired online; some of these supporters were in touch with individuals who were active members of Katibah Nusantara (discussed below).

Most of the initial Islamic State activities in Malaysia consisted of travel to Syria, with little focus on operations within Malaysia.[109] For example, in December 2013, Islamic State training camps were established as an intermediate point in areas such as Port Dickson, south of the capital Kuala

103 David Martin Jones, "The Rise of Islamism and Single-Party Rule in Malaysia," Middle East Institute, August 2, 2016; Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "1MDB scandal explained: a tale of Malaysia's missing billions," *Guardian*, October 25, 2018.

104 Abu Bakar, pp. 99-100.

105 Mohd Izani Mohd Zain, "From Islamist to Muslim Democrat: The Present Phenomenon of Muslim Politics in Malaysia," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 6 (2014): p. 41.

106 Ibid., p. 42.

107 Rohan Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy, Malaysia's Top IS Recruiter," BenarNews, May 16, 2017.

108 Osman and Arosoaie.

109 Ibid., p. 5.

Lumpur, and Kuala Kangsar in Perak for vetting and preparation before transit to Syria.[110] Unlike in the Philippines or Indonesia, the Islamic State has no 'official' affiliates based in Malaysia. In lieu of formal affiliates, the Islamic State landscape in Malaysia consists of social media groups, particularly on WhatsApp and Telegram, and disparate cells on the ground.[111] Islamic State-linked cells have formed across the country, many of which contain members who seek to travel to Syria or are directed by Islamic State operatives abroad. As an additional recruitment source, by 2015 the Islamic State had launched a Malay-language newsletter called *Al-Fatihin*.[112] The newsletter targeted both existing Malay-speaking Katibah Nusantara fighters in Syria and supporters in Southeast Asia, providing updates from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq but also encouraging supporters to wage jihad abroad.[113] *Al-Fatihin* sought to unite all Southeast Asian fighters through their support for the Islamic State, despite their cultural and linguistic differences.[114]

Although there are no official affiliates, the Malaysian authorities have reported the formation of new cells that appear to be influenced by the Islamic State, namely the Kumpulan Briged Khalid al-Walid (KBKW), Daulah Islam Malizia (DIM), and Kumpulan Fisabilillah (KF).[115] KBKW, led by Mohd Khairil bin Mi, was first detected in 2014; the group has only about 50 members, some of whom have connections with former members of JI and KMM.[116] According to Malaysian authorities, DIM was started by Malaya University lecturer Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, a high-profile member of the pro-Islamic State ASG faction.[117] KF was led by Murad Halimuddin and his son Abu Daud Murad Halimuddin Hassan, both of whom were arrested in 2015. Murad Halimuddin[118] was a former senior KMM fighter and JI member with experience fighting in the Syrian civil war, while Abu Daud recruited cell members through the WhatsApp group "Fisabillah;" the cell sought to conduct attacks within Malaysia.[119]

Syria plays a major role in Malaysia's militant landscape, both as a destination for militants and as a source of recruitment and radicalization. Malaysian authorities have arrested several people attempting to travel to Syria, some of whom will be discussed in Chapter 3, but many have made it to Syria. As of January 30, 2020, there were reportedly over 100 Malaysians in Syria, at least 92 of whom were in refugee camps or prisons.[120] However, not all Malaysians in Syria fought for the Islamic State: Rival groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ajnad al-Sham have their own Malaysian contingents.[121] Below, the authors discuss Katibah Nusantara, an Islamic State combat unit in Syria, and the individual Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, who played an important role in growing the influence of the Islamic State within Malaysia. They discuss the organization and the role of Wanndy as an influential recruiter to illustrate the mechanisms through which the Islamic State exerted its

110 "Malaysia Terrorism Risk Review," Intelligent Security Solutions Limited, September 2017, p. 3; Phill Hynes, "From Syria to Malaysia: Tentacles of Terror Are Spreading," *Frontera*, April 11, 2016; Ahmad Johari Mohd Ali, "Latih pengganas, peladang dipenjara 5 tahun," *Berita Harian*, February 4, 2016.

111 Mohd Mizan bin Mohammad Aslam, "Threat of Daesh in Universities: Malaysia's Experience," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9:4 (2017): p. 15.

112 Liow and Arosoaie, p. 89.

113 Yenni Kwok, "ISIS Has Launched a Newspaper to Recruit Southeast Asian Fighters," *TIME*, July 11, 2016.

114 Jasminder Singh, "Al-Fatihin: Islamic State's First Malay Language Newspaper," *RSIS Commentary*, June 23, 2016.

115 El-Muhammady, "Countering the threat of Daesh in Malaysia."

116 Ibid.

117 Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT)* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016), p. 73.

118 Halimuddin is also spelled as Halimmuddin in some sources.

119 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts," *Straits Times*, July 1, 2015; "Two terror suspects jailed," *New Straits Times*, July 1, 2015.

120 Alagesh.

121 See "Malaysian girls not spared, now militant groups eyeing schoolchildren," *Star*, October 13, 2014; "Not all Malaysian militants are with Islamic State," *Star*, January 24, 2016.

influence on Malaysians.

Katibah Nusantara (KN) was established as an Islamic State combat unit in Syria comprised primarily of Malaysian and Indonesian militants. Per one author's discussions with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, the creation of KN was somewhat driven by pragmatism. It was intended to be used as a platform to gather Southeast Asian fighters who shared cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to train Malay-speaking recruits in the art of warfare, and finally, to equip recruits with operational skills that they could employ in Southeast Asia. KN provided religious and Arabic-language instruction as well as military training for Southeast Asian arrivals to Syria.[122] The unit also contributed to Islamic State efforts to recruit Malays in Southeast Asia through its Malay-language propaganda materials.[123] Through these materials and the unit's success in Syria, KN has facilitated Islamic State recruitment of more Malays and has connected disparate extremist networks local to the Malay Archipelago.[124]

Within Syria, the group provided a sense of familiarity for Malaysian and Indonesian fighters, both linguistically and culturally.[125] However, Joseph Liow explains in his testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security that some Malaysians in Syria decided to fight with foreign fighters of other nationalities rather than join KN, likely due to "rivalry and disagreement with the Indonesian leadership."[126]

In January 2016, KN posted a video threatening the Malaysian government in response to the arrest of Islamic State supporters in Malaysia. The first Malay-language video posted by the Islamic State directly called on Malaysians to fight against Malaysia's democratic system in an effort to replace it with a caliphate. Interestingly, the Malay-language video also called for al-Shabaab to pledge *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi, suggesting that there are Malay-speaking militants in al-Shabaab.[127] KN then declared war on Southeast Asia in May 2016, spurring speculation that the Islamic State would shift its focus to KN and its militants in the region.[128]

In addition to KN serving as a conduit for Malaysians to support the Islamic State in Syria, some key Malaysian recruits also played a role in expanding the Islamic State's influence in the country. One of the most prominent recruits was Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, hereafter referred to as Wanndy, who was a Malaysian militant who served as Malaysia's top Islamic State recruiter in Syria. Arriving in Syria with his wife in January 2015 and involved in an Islamic State beheading video posted the following month, Wanndy directed the militants responsible for the first successful Islamic State attack in Malaysia, a grenade attack at a nightclub in Selangor in June 2016.[129] Wanndy is said to have crafted a "jihadist-celebrity" persona online, recruiting and inspiring Malaysians through his Facebook account and through Telegram.[130] He also established and managed "highly decentralized networks

122 Liow and Arosoaie, p. 89.

123 "List of Individuals, Entities and Other Groups and Undertakings Declared by the Minister of Home Affairs as Specified Entity Under Section 66B(1)," Ministry of Home Affairs, May 31, 2019, p. 9; Jasminder Singh, "Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit," *RSIS Commentary* 126, May 26, 2015, p. 1.

124 Jaafar and Akhmetova, p. 116; Singh, "Katibah Nusantara," p. 2.

125 "More than 200 Indonesians and Malaysians fighting for ISIS arm Katibah Nusantara."

126 Liow, "ISIS in the Pacific," p. 4.

127 Rozanna Latiff, "Malaysia says Islamic State threat 'very real' as video warns of attacks," Reuters, January 26, 2016; "Malay-speaking wing of ISIS sends video warning to Malaysia," *Straits Times*, January 25, 2016. In 2021, Malaysian Ahmad Mustakim Abdul Hamid was sentenced to 15 years in prison by a Somali court for facilitating al-Shabaab. See "Malaysian man sentenced to 15 years' jail for assisting Al-Shabaab terrorist group," *Star*, September 24, 2021.

128 Francis Chan, "Danger of ISIS targeting South-east Asia," *Straits Times*, July 8, 2016.

129 Tejas; Lourdes.

130 Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, "Malaysia's 'Jihadist Celebrity': Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi," *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analyses* 8:11 (2016): pp. 15-16. For more on Wanndy's role as an administrator for one of the social media groups, see Nor and El-Muhammady, pp. 95-122.

and cells" tasked with carrying out attacks in Malaysia.[131] This goal of orchestrating attacks in Malaysia itself necessitated a break between Wanndy and Al Qubro Generation, a Telegram group with which he initially worked that sought to recruit individuals to the Islamic State and fund their travel to Syria.[132]

Wanndy's online recruitment efforts—encouraging and facilitating both travel to Syria and attacks in Malaysia—substantially contributed to the proliferation of Islamic State support in Malaysia. Between 2016 and his death in a drone strike on April 29, 2017, an average of one Islamic State supporter arrested in Malaysia each week had links to Wanndy; overall, reports indicate that he could be connected to a third of the Islamic State-linked arrests in Malaysia from 2013 to 2016.[133] With his and other notable online recruiters' deaths, along with the suppression of their recruits and supporters, the number of public Malaysian jihadi social media accounts has decreased dramatically and terrorists' communications have shifted to more secure, private platforms.[134]

Additionally, Malaysia is used as a transit point for foreign fighters traveling to either Syria or the southern Philippines. Over 300 Chinese nationals traveled through Malaysia to join the Islamic State, while the Malaysian state of Sabah reportedly served as a transit point for foreigners, including Indonesians, seeking to get to Mindanao.[135] Foreign fighters exploit Malaysia's lax visa policy, which does not require visas from most countries, including much of the Middle East and Central Asia.[136] Sabah's location on the island of Borneo, with a land border with Indonesia and proximate to the southern Philippines by boat, makes it a practical route for Indonesians and other foreigners seeking to get to the southern Philippines.[137] However, Malaysia has partly stemmed such travel through police crackdowns and cooperation with Indonesian and Philippine authorities, with varying degrees of success.[138]

131 Bin Jani, "Malaysia's 'Jihadist Celebrity,'" p. 16.

132 Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy;" Muzliza Mustafa, "Malaysia: Ex-IS Cell Leader Says Rehabilitation Changed his Life," BenarNews, October 1, 2019.

133 Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy."

134 Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, "The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9:7 (2017): p. 10.

135 "300 Chinese nationals used Malaysia as transit point to join ISIS: Minister," *Straits Times*, January 21, 2015; Zam Yusa, "Malaysia and Indonesia foreign fighter transit routes to Philippines identified," *Defense Post*, November 20, 2018.

136 Alfian Z.M. Tahir, "Malaysia's Diverse Community Can Help Foreign Militants Hide, Expert Says," BenarNews, June 26, 2018.

137 Yusa, "Malaysia and Indonesia foreign fighter transit routes."

138 Farik Zolkepli, "Malaysia cuts off route used by militants to join IS in Syria," *Star*, January 13, 2015; "Islamic State: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia pledge to thwart penetration of South-East Asia," ABC News, June 22, 2017.

Chapter 2: Attack Plots and Arrests

This chapter of the report examines Islamic State-linked attack plots in Malaysia, as well as the arrests of Islamic State-affiliated individuals in Malaysia. Two datasets were compiled—one for attacks and one for arrests of individuals—covering the time period between January 2014 and December 2019. This chapter presents the data in the following order: (a) an overview of Islamic State activity across the country in terms of plots, targets, and tactics; and (b) an examination of the trends in the arrests of Islamic State-affiliated individuals, including their numbers, roles, prior militant affiliations, and other demographic information.

2.1 Attack Plots: Lethality, Targets, and Tactics

In this section of the chapter, the authors present the key findings from their attack plots dataset. Table 2.1 (a) shows the overall number of attack plots in Malaysia between 2014 and 2019 that were associated with or inspired by the Islamic State, while Figure 2.1 (a) maps out the plots. Overall, as the table shows, over six years there were a total of 23 plots that occurred in six Malaysian states or federal territories. The map indicates that most of the attack plots came from the capital region, with 13 plots targeting Kuala Lumpur. The next highest number of plots (four) came from the surrounding state of Selangor and the northeastern state of Kelantan. Over time, Islamic State-affiliated plots were the most geographically dispersed in years 2017 and 2018.

The sole successful attack occurred in June 2016 in a nightclub in Puchong, Selangor, only a few miles from Kuala Lumpur; the rest of the attacks either failed or were foiled by Malaysian security forces.[139] The attack, a grenade attack that injured eight people, was claimed as an Islamic State attack in a Facebook post by Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, a commander of KN in Syria.[140] Authorities later confirmed this link and reported that the attack was not initially intended to hit that particular nightclub, but that it was more likely just a convenient soft target for the perpetrators.[141] In Chapter 3, the authors take a closer look at some of these plots.

Table 2.1 (a): Attack Plots by Location and Year

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Johor	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Kedah	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Kelantan	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Kuala Lumpur	1	2	5	3	2	0	13
Perak	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Selangor	0	0	1	0	1	2	4
Total	**1**	**2**	**6**	**5**	**6**	**3**	**23**

139 Lourdes.

140 "Investigation, Prosecution and Adjudication of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Cases for South and South-East Asia," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, June 2018, p. 14.

141 Thasha Jayamanogaram, "Police: Movida wasn't IS first target," *Malay Mail*, July 6, 2016.

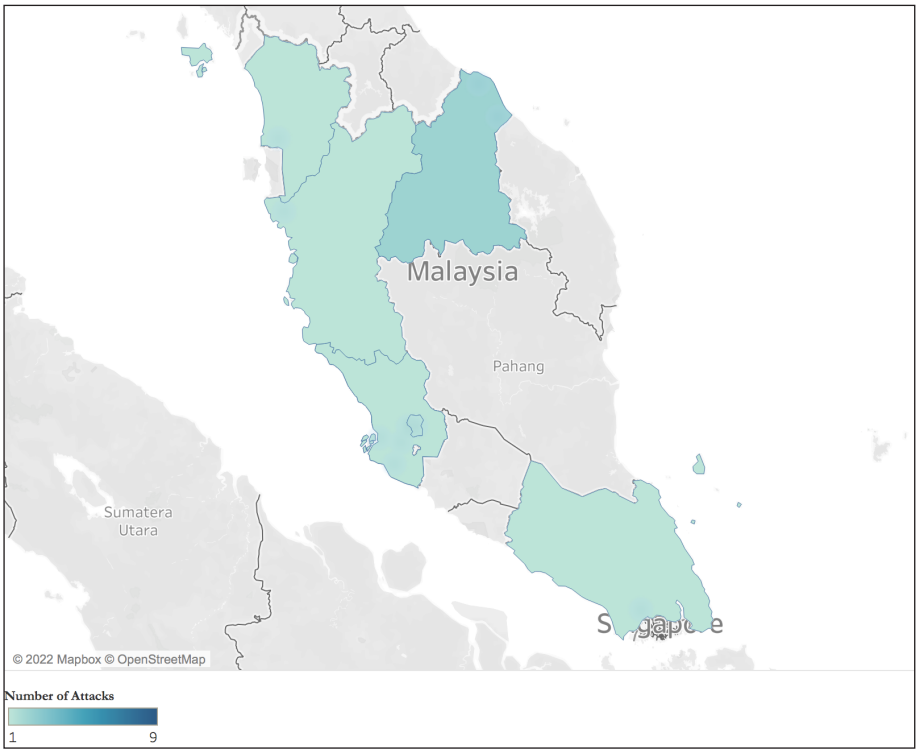

Figure 2.1 (a): Geography of Attack Plots

In terms of trends, the years 2016 and 2018 experienced the highest number of plots, amounting to six in each year, as shown in Table 2.1 (a). These trends roughly correlate with Islamic State-linked attacks in Southeast Asia more broadly (namely the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia), where attacks peaked between 2016 and 2018.[142]

In Malaysia though, the number of plots discovered or disrupted in the last three years of the period of analysis was significantly higher than in the first three years; there were only nine plots between 2014 and 2016. This fact can perhaps be explained by incentives for Malaysians to travel to the Middle East rather than conduct attacks at home in the earlier period. Malaysia had no official legislation banning travel to the Middle East to support terrorism until the passing of POTA, which went into effect on September 1, 2015.[143] In August 2014, only a few months after the declaration of the caliphate, around 40 Malaysians were believed to have joined groups in Syria and Iraq, per the Malaysian police.[144] In the latter three years, there were 14 plots discovered or disrupted, with the higher tempo indicating a rise in attempts to launch attacks within Malaysia.

The authors' attack dataset also noted the outcomes of Islamic State-related plots per year in terms of successes (i.e., attacks conducted); foiled plots (i.e., interrupted by counterterrorism forces before or during the attack); and failed plots (i.e., attempted but improperly executed). Overall, plots in Malaysia have been largely unsuccessful, with only one successful attack in mid-2016, while Malaysian counterterrorism forces foiled the vast majority of plots. Overall, out of the 23 plots reported, approximately 87% of plots were foiled by authorities, with 8% constituting failed efforts. This is another point of divergence between Islamic State activity in Malaysia versus Islamic State activity

142 Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, *Rising in the East: A Regional Overview of the Islamic State's Operations in Southeast Asia* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020).

143 "Malaysia passes controversial anti-terror bill," BBC News, April 7, 2015.

144 James Brandon, "Syrian and Iraqi Jihads Prompt Increased Recruitment and Activism in Southeast Asia," *CTC Sentinel* 7:10 (2014).

in the Philippines and Indonesia: Not only did Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines and Indonesia far exceed the number of plots in Malaysia, but they were also more likely to be successful and lethal than in the former. For example, the numbers killed and wounded in Islamic State-linked attacks across the three countries amounted to a total of 990 between January 2014 and July 2019 but only eight of these casualties were attributable to an attack in Malaysia in 2016, as discussed below.[145]

As mentioned above, the sole successful attack was a grenade attack executed by two militants at a nightclub in Puchong, Selangor, near Kuala Lumpur in June 2016.[146] However, the 2016 attack did not reach the original target; militants had originally planned to target a more prominent entertainment venue. Because Malaysian security personnel had received information about a possible attack, the police increased their presence in areas of potential targets, which likely led the perpetrators to redirect their attack to throwing a grenade at the Movida nightclub, an easier target.[147] Counting this one attack as a 'success' puts Islamic State attacks in Malaysia at a success rate of 8%, which is much lower than the overall success rates of attacks in the Philippines (96%) and Indonesia (50%).[148]

When it comes to the tactics of potential attacks, in addition to the nightclub attack, four other plots involved grenades, though each of those foiled attacks also involved firearms. Overall, six plots involved non-grenade explosive devices, including one improvised explosive device and one vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. In early 2017, two individuals, a Malaysian and an Indonesian, were reportedly involved in a plot for which they had received instructions from Wanndy to conduct an attack using a "vehicle-borne" explosive device.[149]

Diverging from trends in the Philippines and Indonesia, Malaysian plotters did not turn to suicide attacks to the same extent; there was a single planned suicide attack in the authors' arrest database. In May 2019, Malaysian police thwarted a potential suicide attack when they arrested Muhammad Syazani Mahzan and Muhamad Nuurul Amin Azizan, both of whom had "recced a few churches in Jogjakarta for potential targets. Muhammad Syazani had also planned to launch a suicide bomb attack at a non-Muslim house of worship in Malaysia," according to national police chief Abdul Hamid Bador.[150] According to authorities, the two individuals had bomb-making experience and had tested the explosives near their homes in Kuala Muda.

The lack of suicide attacks in Malaysia once again stands in contrast with Islamic State activity across the region. Suicide attacks across the three countries collectively increased from no suicide attacks in 2014 to 54% of all Islamic State-linked attacks in the first seven months of 2019 (seven out of 13 attacks).[151] In the Philippines, for example, there has been a notable rise in the occurrence of suicide attacks as the influence of the Islamic State has grown, especially in 2018 and 2019. Many of the post mid-2018 suicide attackers have been foreigners, not just from other Southeast Asian countries but also from Morocco and Egypt.[152] Therefore, one possible explanation for the lack of suicide attack attempts in Malaysia could be the lack of foreign fighters from beyond the Southeast Asian region, as discussed further in the section on arrests.

145 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

146 Lourdes.

147 Nadirah H. Rodzi, "3 suspects linked to ISIS 'wolf pack' cell arrested in Malaysia," *Straits Times*, May 17, 2019; Jayamanogaram.

148 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

149 "Malaysia nabs 7 terror suspects, foils car bomb plot," Japan Economic Newswire, March 5, 2017.

150 The authors did not include the arrest of a 51-year-old woman in mid-2018 who allegedly had plans to conduct a 'suicide attack' by using her car for an attack, but reports provided statements from the police that "she had plans to launch attacks on non-Muslims by using her car to run over them at polling centres during the 14th general elections." Whether this amounted to an actual plot or simply an idea was unclear, therefore the authors decided to be conservative and exclude this arrest as a thwarted suicide attack. See Rodzi, "Student, housewife among 15 terror suspects held in Malaysia for planning attacks."

151 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

152 Zachary Abuza, "Suicide Bombings Take Root in the Southern Philippines," BenarNews, November 12, 2019.

This is not to say that Islamic State-affiliated Malaysian cells or individuals may not attempt suicide attacks in the country in the future. Malaysians supporting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, as well as in the Philippines, have indeed been reported to have engaged in suicide attacks. For example, it was reported that Mohamad Syazwan Mohd Salim was one of seven suicide bombers who carried out an attack at Speicher military base in Iraq.[153] Reportedly, Salim and his brother had both been trained "in the Katibah Nusantara cell in Syria for their suicide operations."[154] Additionally, in July 2018, six Malaysians were reported to be involved in the plotting of a suicide bombing in Basilian, Philippines, although the perpetrator himself was a Moroccan.[155] These incidents suggest that *perhaps* the lack of attempted suicide attacks in Malaysia is attributable to a lack of training or opportunity and perhaps a relative lack of commitment to the cause, in addition to being a significant religious taboo for Muslims in the country.

Finally, Figure 2.1 (b) depicts and categorizes target choices of all attack plots, showing that most plots in Malaysia targeted either public spaces (such as markets or parks) or religious institutions. For example, an attack foiled in August 2016 by Malaysian police was intended to target a prominent Hindu temple, Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur; the perpetrators had reportedly received instructions from Wanndy as well as weapons via courier.[156] In another plot, Malaysian police arrested a 21-year-old who had "received instructions from a Malaysian Islamic State member in Syria to buy a pistol, an M-16 rifle, an AK-47 rifle, and hand grenades from a neighboring country with the aim of launching attacks on non-Muslims and their places of worship."[157] Reportedly, the individual had also been in touch with Mahmud Ahmad of the pro-Islamic State faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group, as well as with a Saudi bomb expert.[158]

Overall, of the 23 plots from 2014 to 2019, 20 were directed at civilian targets. By contrast, only two plots targeted state institutions. In general, the focus on civilian targets deviates from the general trends in Islamic State-affiliated attacks across Southeast Asia. When examining attacks across the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia over the same time period, state targets made up between 38% and 50% of all targets each year. However, in contrast, about 87% of Islamic State-linked attacks in Malaysia targeted civilians, which could be a result of weak militant infrastructure within the country, especially with regard to the Islamic State, which makes attacking hard targets more difficult.[159]

153 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Malaysian Islamic State Suicide Bombers Kill More Than 30 in Middle East," *Diplomat*, January 11, 2016.

154 Ibid.

155 Zam Yusa, "Six Malaysians were involved in Basilan suicide bomb plot, expert says," *Defense Post*, December 24, 2018.

156 James Hookway, "Suspected Islamic State Militants Arrested by Malaysian Police," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2016.

157 Amy Chew, "Malaysia foils Islamic State terror plot to attack places of worship," Channel NewsAsia, September 14, 2017.

158 Ibid.

159 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

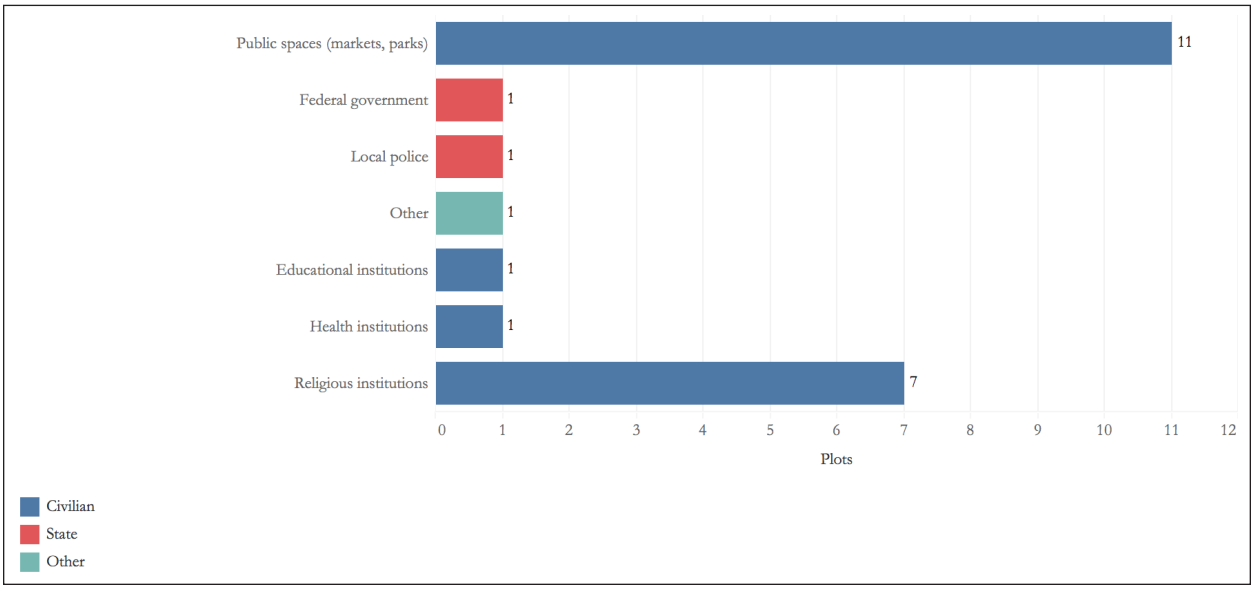

Figure 2.1 (b): Target Types

2.2 Arrests: Geography and Timeline

Although an examination of Islamic State-affiliated plots and attacks indicates the extent of the Islamic State's strength in the country, it is only one metric. While it is a useful metric to gauge the extent of the Islamic State's operational capacity in the country, it may be impacted by various factors, including the effectiveness of the Malaysian counterterrorism structure in using intelligence-driven operations to disrupt planned attacks in their early stages. Another metric that provides additional insight into the potential strength of the Islamic State in the country is the number of individuals who have been arrested within Malaysia due to their links to the Islamic State. These links vary in their nature, as individuals have been arrested based on evidence of: (a) their connections to the Islamic State in the Middle East; and/or (b) connections to regional Islamic State affiliates, or (c) attempts to independently act on behalf of the Islamic State or (d) possession of Islamic State propaganda or emblems.[160]

The following sections present an analysis of the data on individuals who were arrested by Malaysian authorities over a span of six years—between 2014 and 2019—due to their links to the Islamic State; it explores changes in numbers and locations over time, the various roles of men and women, prior militant affiliations, and other demographic information. Below, Table 2.2 (a) presents the total number of individuals arrested in Malaysia over the six years, while Figure 2.2 (a) depicts the geographical locations of these arrests. Figure 2.2 (b) shows the arrests over a quarterly timeline.

160 See, for example, Yantoultra Ngui and Celine Fernandez, "Malaysian Police Arrest 14 for Suspected Bomb Plot," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2016; Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Malaysia arrests 8 suspected militants, including Filipino asked to recruit children as 'human shields,'" *Straits Times*, November 16, 2018; "Two university students in Malaysia detained over bomb threat video," *Straits Times*, February 18, 2015; "Malaysian soldier gets seven months' jail for ISIS image on mobile phone," *Straits Times*, October 20, 2015.

Table 2.2 (a): Total Arrests by Year

Province/Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Johor	0	3	4	6	12	0	25
Kedah	1	7	8	5	1	2	24
Kelantan	0	0	3	17	4	0	24
Kuala Lumpur	0	26	9	13	5	2	55
Malacca	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Melaka	0	2	0	2	0	0	4
Negeri Sembilan	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Pahang	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Penang	0	1	5	1	0	0	7
Perak	2	2	7	3	1	0	15
Perlis	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Putrajaya	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Sabah	4	0	6	2	21	17	50
Selangor	19	19	17	11	7	5	78
Terengganu	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
Unknown	0	13	9	1	2	0	25
Total	**26**	**79**	**70**	**61**	**55**	**28**	**319**

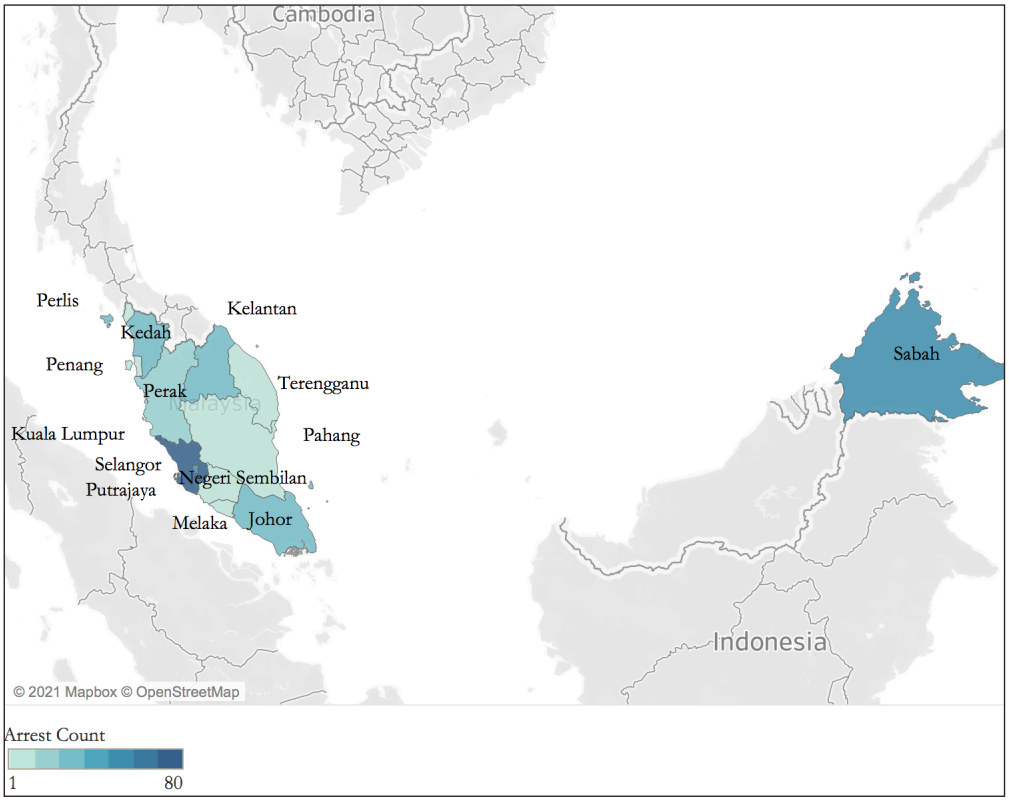

Figure 2.2 (a): Reported Locations of Arrests

Overall, per the authors' arrest dataset, a total of 319 individuals were arrested in Malaysia in at least 15 provinces (location was unreported in about 7.8% of the cases). As discussed earlier, the authors' dataset of arrests likely represents a conservative figure because it excludes cases that remain sealed, do not have clear connections to the Islamic State in public records, or did not receive press attention. Numbers reported directly by Normah Ishak, head of the Malaysian CT division, Special Branch appear to be slightly higher than the authors' numbers.[161] However, the increase and decrease in arrests reported by Malaysian authorities generally align with the authors' data (except for between the years 2015-2016), showing a steady decline between 2016 and 2019.

As shown in the table and the figures, total annual arrests peaked at 79 arrests in 2015, and the areas of Selangor (78), Kuala Lumpur (55), and Sabah (50) had the highest number of arrests across all six years. In other words, about 24% of total arrests occurred in 2015 and the aforementioned three locations accounted for 57% of total arrests across all locations and years.

What explains the high number of arrests in these three regions? With regard to Kuala Lumpur, the capital region's concentration of population and economic activity makes it an attractive location for militants to attempt attacks or engage in recruitment and logistical efforts, while high security measures in the capital region enable high numbers of arrests. Sabah, on the other hand, is part of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, which comprises Sabah, the Philippines, and Indonesia and has long been plagued by violence, kidnappings, and other financially motivated criminal activities.[162] Sabah is also the second-largest state in Malaysia, with its maritime zone extending up to 2,100 square nautical miles, and the TBA includes several islands, inlets, porous borders, dense jungles, and proximity to international borders.[163] The TBA has seen the presence of militants of various groups, including the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which exploit well-established travel networks between Sabah and Mindanao.[164] In sum, Sabah's porous borders and proximity to the southern tip of the Philippines make it particularly difficult to contain the movement of potential perpetrators there.[165] Finally, Selangor, which had the highest number of arrests across all regions, is the region surrounding Kuala Lumpur; as such, its proximity to the capital region may explain in part the large number of arrests there.

161 The numbers reported by the authors are on the conservative side, due to their reliance on open sources. Numbers reported directly by Normah Ishak, head of the Malaysian CT division, Special Branch, appear to be slightly higher (2015: 82; 2016: 119; 2017: 106; 2018: 85; 2019: 72). See "ICVE Symposium - Opening Remarks & Panel: U.S. and Malaysia Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism," START, January 12, 2021. Overall though, the general increase and decrease in arrests except for between the years 2015 and 2016 reflect the authors' data as well, showing a steady decline between 2016 and 2019.

162 Amalina Abdul Nasir and Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Implications for Malaysia's Border Security," Middle East Institute, November 24, 2020.

163 For more on the general security situation in Sabah and the TBA, see Samuel Henkin, Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad, Ramli Dollah, Wan Shawaluddin Wan Hassan, Jagroop Singh, and Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Divergent Dimensions of Radicalization Risk: Migration and Violent Extremism in Sabah, Malaysia," *Desk Study Report to the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, U.S. Department of State* (College Park, MD: START, 2020).

164 Nasir and Dass.

165 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Confronting Threats in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas: Opportunities and Challenges," *Diplomat*, June 10, 2016.

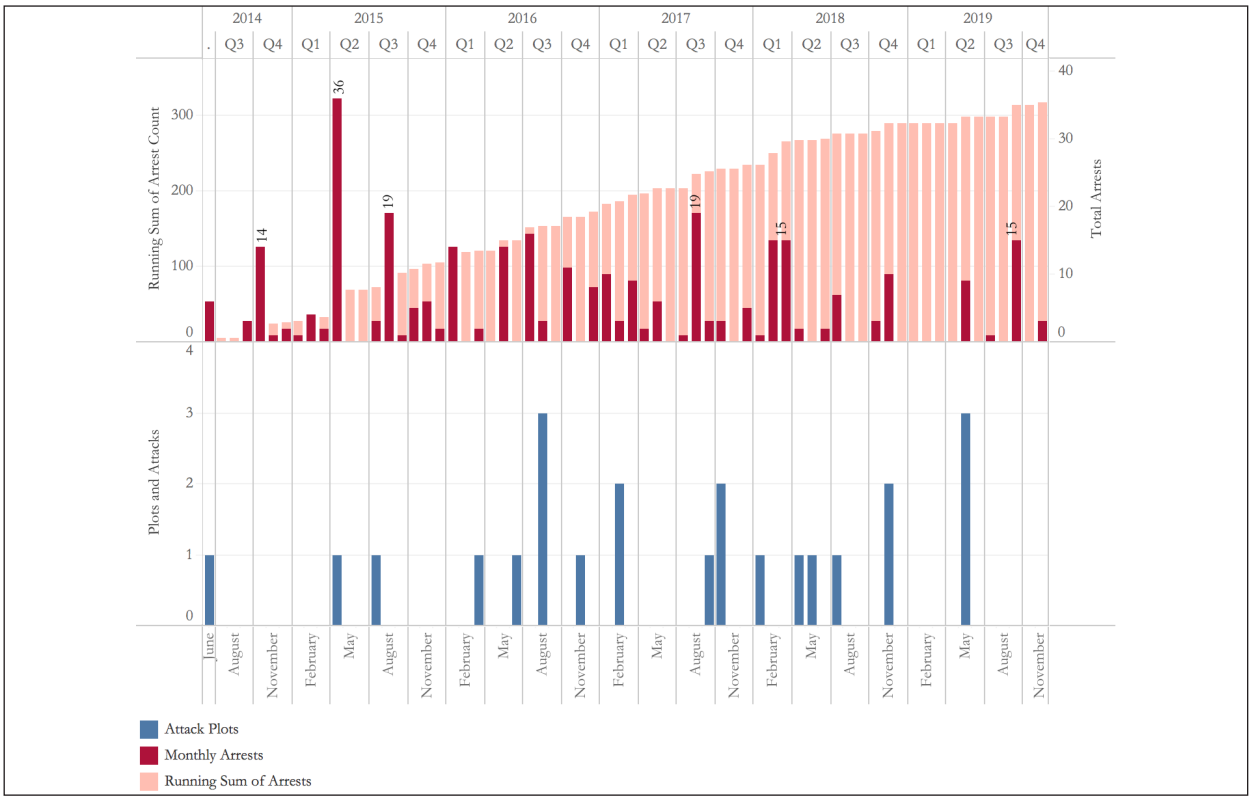

Figure 2.2 (b): Timeline of Arrests

In Figure 2.2 (b), the arrest data for individuals is presented alongside the various attack plots in Malaysia over the same time period. The timeline in Figure 2.2. (b) demonstrates that the first drastic increase in arrests occurred in April 2015, which was the same month as the second plot in Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. During this month, 36 suspected militants were arrested, in contrast to the previous high of 14 in a month. The second spike in 2015 occurred in August 2015, when 19 arrests were made after a plot was foiled in the previous month; it was reported in July 2015 that members of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria had directed Malaysian militants to conduct attacks in Klang Valley, which were disrupted when the Malaysian police arrested two suspects.[166] According to the police, such links with the Islamic State raised concerns about externally directed attacks, which could explain the crackdown in August 2015.

After the second spike in 2015, however, arrests dropped substantially for the remainder of the time period, with the highest number of arrests per month never rising above 19. During 2016, the year with the second highest number of attack plots, arrest patterns roughly corresponded to plots, with large numbers of arrests coming in the months immediately before and after each plot. In 2017, the months with the most arrests came before the plots; this trend carried over into the beginning of 2018 but inverted in March, when sustained arrests were followed by plots in April and May. Arrests began to trail off a bit after March 2018, although there were spikes in arrests in November 2018. In 2019, in general both the number of plots and arrests remained low.

2.3 Arrests: Gender and Roles

The authors' dataset of arrests in Malaysia also coded arrested individuals' genders and the specific

166 Amy Chew, "ISIS eyes Western targets in KL," *Straits Times*, July 10, 2015.

activities or reasons for which each individual was arrested. The following sections take a closer look at the overall reasons for individuals' arrests, as well as variation over time and by gender. This allows an assessment of not only the overarching trends in the roles adopted by individuals, but also the variation in roles between men and women.

Overall, the authors identified 12 distinct types of activities that individuals had engaged in up until the time of their arrest, in addition to the "unknown" and "other" categories. In nine of the 12 categories, individuals tended to be linked to one core activity, while three of the categories capture clusters of activities in which individuals were involved. Before presenting the data, the authors provide brief descriptions of these categories.

Table 2.3 (a): Description of Reported Reasons for Arrests

	Role	Description
1	Attempted/planned travel	Any individual arrested for planning or attempting to travel abroad to join the Islamic State or an Islamic State affiliate
2	Travel	Any individual arrested for returning from traveling to join the Islamic State or an Islamic State affiliate
3	Funding	Any individual arrested for collecting, providing (direct financial support), moving (e.g., wire transfers, money laundering), and/or procuring funds for the Islamic State or affiliated groups or individuals, or otherwise facilitating such funding
4	Harboring and facilitating travel	Any individual arrested for providing shelter to suspected or confirmed militants, or for assisting such militants in transit between provinces or countries
5	Link to Islamic State affiliate	Any individual arrested due to suspected or confirmed links to regional Islamic State-affiliated terrorist organizations, including Abu Sayyaf Group, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, Jemaah Islamiyah (with an unspecified role)
6	Link to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria	Any individual arrested due to suspected or confirmed links to the Islamic State in the Middle East (with an unspecified role)
7	Planned or threatened attack	Any individual arrested for planning or threatening a terrorist attack in the name of the Islamic State; at any stage of attack planning (e.g., target selection, weapons procurement or development, funds procurement—including theft)
8	Recruitment and propaganda	Any individual arrested for involvement in attempts to recruit in person or online, or disseminating or possessing propaganda materials
9	Weapons acquisition or smuggling	Any individual arrested for possessing or facilitating the transport of weapons to Islamic State affiliates, whether through smuggling or dealing, or for making weapons for use by Islamic State affiliates
10	Multiple Activities 1	Individuals involved with both kidnapping and robberies
11	Multiple Activities 2	Individuals involved with the promotion of propaganda, facilitating recruitment, and financing
12	Multiple Activities 3	Individuals involved with facilitating recruitment and travel
13	Unknown/Other	No clear role or activity reported. Some arrested for being affiliated with/pledging *bay`a* to the Islamic State.

Overall, individuals were involved in a wide range of activities, from attempted travel to Syria or the Philippines to planning attacks or fundraising. Below, Table 2.3 (b) shows the overall numbers in the aforementioned categories between 2014 and 2019, by gender. Out of the total number of 319 individuals arrested, 288 (90%) were men, whereas only 31 (10%) were women.

Without accounting for gender differences, the following categories emerged as the front runners when it came to the highest number of arrests: planning or threatening an attack; recruitment and promoting/possessing Islamic State propaganda; fundraising; and attempted travel. Out of the total arrests, 92 individuals were in the process of planning an attack or threatened to do so, making up almost 29% of all arrests; perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of individuals in this category were men (although it included at least three women). Women, in general, appeared to adopt more noncombatant roles. For men, the largest number of arrests was made in the planning/threatening attack category; however, for women, the largest category across years was attempted/planned travel. Below, the authors look more closely at roles by gender and how these evolved over time. Figures 2.3 (a) and 2.3 (b) depict roles of women and men, respectively, by year.

Table 2.3 (b): Reported Reasons for Arrests

	Role	Men	Women	Total
1	Planned or threatened attack	89	3	92
2	Recruitment and propaganda	38	4	42
3	Funding	32	3	35
4	Attempted/planned travel	27	6	33
5	Multiple 1: Kidnapping and robberies	17	0	17
6	Multiple 2: Propaganda, recruitment, & financing	15	1	16
7	Weapons acquisition or smuggling	16	0	16
8	Link to a regional Islamic State affiliate (e.g., Abu Sayyaf Group, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah)	14	0	14
9	Link to Islamic State in Iraq & Syria	13	0	13
10	Harboring militants/facilitating travel	10	2	12
11	Multiple 3: Recruitment and travel	8	0	8
12	Travel	2	1	3
13	Other/Unknown	18	0	18
14	**Total**	**299**	**20**	**319**

Overall, Figure 2.3 (a) shows that women's arrests slowly increased between 2014 and 2016, then remained low, between three and five arrests per year, after 2017. Overall, no drastic changes were observed in the number of female arrests.

The year 2014 marked the initial push for Malaysians to join Katibah Nusantara, an Indonesian-Malaysian contingent of the Islamic State in Syria, which explains why both female arrests in 2014 were made for attempted travel. Between 2014 and 2017, women arrests were made primarily for passive roles—attempted travel, disseminating propaganda, facilitating recruitment, and harboring militants—with the largest category being attempted or planned travel, whereas there was only a single woman arrested for planning an attack (in 2016). Between 2018 and 2019, there were at least two women arrested for involvement in planning an attack.

Regarding attempts to travel, in total, there were six female arrests for travel attempts across all years; many of them sought to join their husbands or fiancés overseas. For example, in 2014, a 25-year-old woman from Negeri Sembilan was detained at the Kuala Lumpur airport for attempting to travel

to Syria. Reportedly, her fiancé Muhammad Aqif Heusen Rahizat (alias Abu Dubais), a Malaysian militant based in Syria, sent her money for her ticket.[167] In late 2014, a 27-year-old woman was arrested; she had reportedly married a North African Islamic State fighter over Skype and had been persuaded to join him in Syria.[168] The year 2015 saw the detention of a 14-year-old girl who was attempting to join her fiancé in Cairo and then travel to Syria with him via Turkey.[169] This arrest was particularly worrisome since it suggested that the Islamic State not only influenced women, but may also be effective in radicalizing the younger Malaysian population.[170] The Islamic State uses social media as well as religious teachers to spread propaganda to youth.[171] Concerns continue to rise about the recruitment and radicalization of the thousands of children and women residing in Malaysia.[172] But women in Malaysia have not just attempted travel to Syria; in January 2017, in a case that saw the arrests of four individuals that included three foreigners, a 31-year-old Filipino man was held responsible for recruiting a Malaysian woman from Sabah who intended to marry him and travel to the southern Philippines.[173] Reportedly, the Filipino man was a part of an Islamic State cell based out of Mindanao in the Philippines that intended to use Sabah as a transit point for militant recruits.[174] Collectively, these cases illustrate that Malaysian women have not only attempted to travel to Syria to support the Islamic State, but may also be willing to travel more locally to provide support to the regional Islamic State affiliate.

Finally, as mentioned above, between 2014 and 2019 there were only three cases in which women were arrested for planning an attack. This might indicate that Islamic State-affiliated women tend to adopt more auxiliary than active roles, especially in comparison to women in the Philippines and Indonesia—the reasons for which remain unexplored and could include a lack of interest among women in participating in violence directly. Women associated with the Islamic State in the Philippines and Indonesia have adopted a much wider range of roles in comparison; for example, in both countries, Islamic State-affiliated women were implicated in attacks involving suicide attacks and explosives, suggesting that country-level dynamics matter when it comes to the specific roles women adopted.[175]

167 "Arrested Malaysian woman believed to be leaving for Syria to join Islamic State," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, October 9, 2014.

168 "Malaysia arrests woman who married ISIS fighter over Skype," *Straits Times*, January 3, 2015.

169 "Malaysian police detain 14-year-old girl trying to join ISIS," *Straits Times*, February 19, 2015.

170 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response," Middle East Institute, May 3, 2016.

171 Jessica Trisko Darden, "Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth," American Enterprise Institute, May 2019, p. 10.

172 Drei Toledo, "The Invisible Women and Children of Malaysia: The Vulnerability of Stateless Persons to Terrorism and Violent Extremism," Stratsea, December 14, 2020.

173 "Malaysia arrests four linked to Islamic State cell in Philippines," Reuters, January 23, 2017.

174 Ibid.

175 Jadoon, Lodoen, Willis, and Jahanbani.

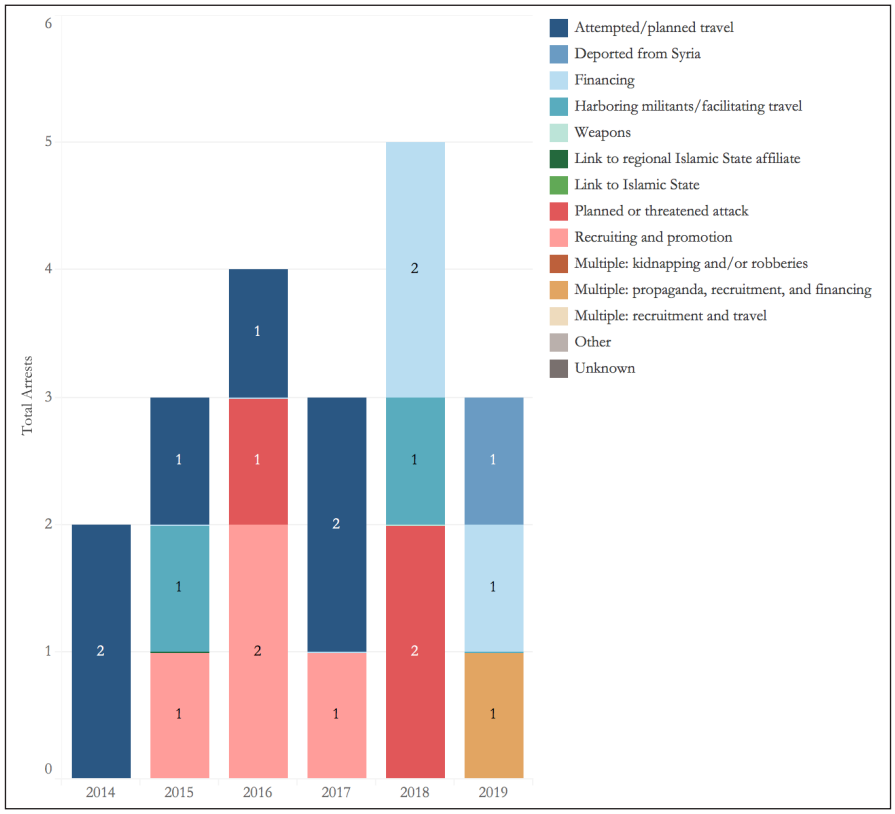

Figure 2.3 (a): Women's Roles by Year

Figure 2.3 (b) depicts the roles of men by year. In terms of the total number of arrests per year, 2015 stands out as the year with the highest number of arrests, with a total of three times as many as that of 2014. However, starting in 2016, the number of arrests fell steadily until 2019. Total arrests in 2019 were only 25, almost down to the same number as in 2014.

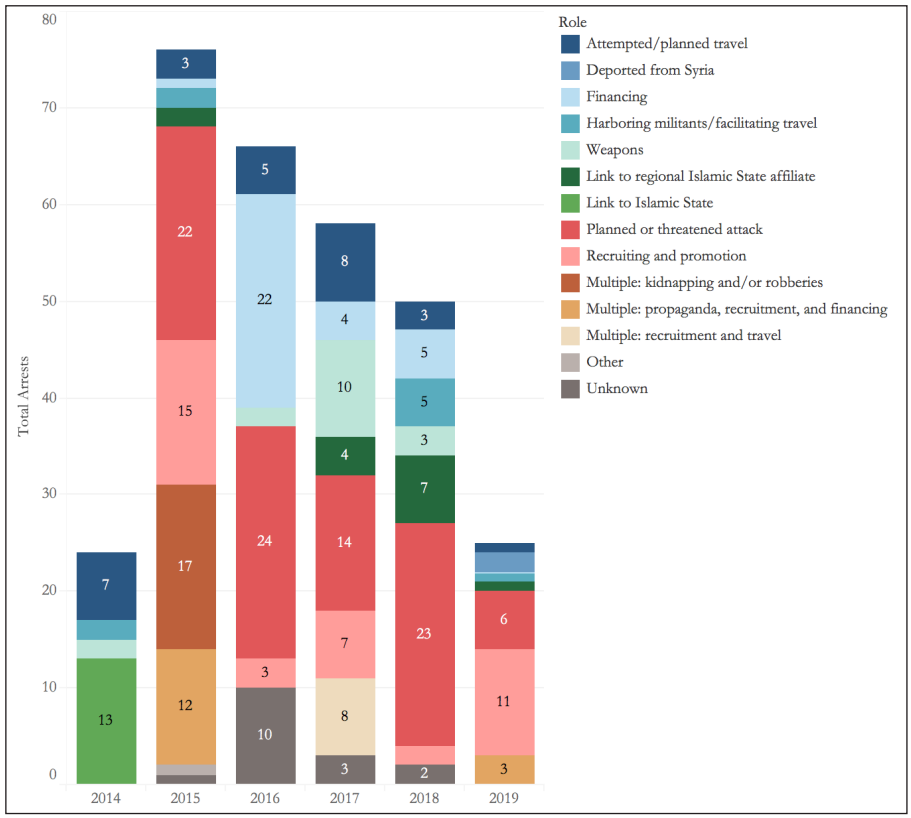

Figure 2.3 (b): Men's Roles by Year

In comparison to women's roles, the composition of activities that men were arrested for encompassed a much wider range, although between 2015 and 2018, the largest category was made up of planning or threatening an attack. The year 2014 started with a large proportion of arrests made for either individuals' links with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or attempts to travel, which is unsurprising given that the caliphate was declared in June 2014 and attracted sympathizers thereafter. However, in subsequent years, there appeared to be a stronger focus by Islamic State-affiliated individuals within Malaysia to attempt to conduct attacks at home. In Chapter 3, the authors discuss some of these attempts in greater detail.

In 2015, as arrests peaked with Malaysian authorities becoming more attentive to Islamic State travelers and the Islamic State gaining momentum, the categories of roles for which arrests were made became much broader. The largest arrest categories were planning/threatening an attack; recruitment/promotion; and the multiple-role categories of kidnapping and robberies, propaganda, recruitment, and financing.

In 2016, individuals arrested for facilitating funding experienced the largest increase, rising from a single case in the dataset in 2015 to 22 individuals in 2016. A closer examination of the data reveals that fundraising was undertaken for various purposes and through different channels. For example, in an effort by the Malaysian police that resulted in the arrests of 14 Islamic State-linked individuals across multiple states, eight of the individuals were actively involved in channeling funds to both Wanndy and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines.[176] In another arrest made in May 2017 in Kedah, a 54-year-old retired army personnel was believed to be channeling money to the Islamic State in Syria; he was

176 Trinna Leong, "Malaysian police nab 14 ISIS suspects in 4-day operation," *Straits Times*, May 22, 2016.

reported to have sent around 20,000 Malaysian ringgits through multiple transactions.[177]

Although the total number of male arrests in 2016 dropped from 76 to 66, the number of arrests for planned/threatened attacks increased slightly, indicating the sustained focus of militants on perpetrating attacks at home, as well as the heightened security measures. Between 2016 and 2019, the total number of arrests continued to decline steadily.

2.4 Arrests: Nationalities and Affiliations

To the extent possible, the authors also coded the nationalities (or ethnicities) of arrested individuals, as well as other affiliations they may have with militant groups beyond the Islamic State. In terms of the nationalities of individuals arrested, in about 5% of the cases, nationalities were not reported nor was there any indication if the individuals were locals or foreigners.[178] Table 2.4 (a) and Figure 2.4 (a) depict the relative numbers of all reported nationalities of individuals arrested within Malaysia.

Overall, the arrest dataset consisted of at least 73% Malaysians, indicating that locals comprise a large proportion of Islamic State sympathizers in the country. In terms of non-Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos dominated the arrests (making up about 8.8% and 6.9%, respectively) and appear to be playing a consequential role in the proliferation of the Islamic State's influence within Malaysia. In terms of changes over time, the highest numbers of Indonesians were arrested in 2015 (six arrests) and 2019 (15 arrests), whereas Filipinos were only arrested in the years 2017 and 2019, with three and 19 arrests, respectively. A large presence of Indonesian and Filipino militants in Malaysia is worrisome, as it reinforces the concern that militants may use Malaysia as a transit hub for Islamic State activity in the region. Moreover, it leaves open the door for regional militants to bring their own new ideas and tactics into the country and boost recruitment, which could influence the behavior of Malaysian Islamic State supporters and recruits. In addition to regional militants, the dataset recorded at least nine other nationalities and/or regions, including Bangladeshis, Iraqis, and North Africans. Overall, based on the reported nationalities, there were only a handful of foreigners from beyond the Southeast Asian region, suggesting that Malaysia could potentially serve as a hub for other regional militants as opposed to fighters from beyond the region.

177 "Malaysia Anti-Terror Police Arrest Six Suspects for ISIL Ties," FARS News Agency, May 27, 2017. Per discussions with El-Muhammady, it appears that the retired army personnel had sent the money to his son who was living in Islamic State-controlled territory, although the charge brought against him was based on the channeling of funds to the Islamic State.

178 As a note, nationalities and/or ethnicities were based on the available sources. If sources did not state an individual's nationality explicitly, it was not coded.

Table 2.4 (a): Overall Nationalities of Individuals Arrested

Nationality/Ethnicity of Arrested Individual	Total	Percentage of total
Malaysian	233	73.04
Indonesian	28	8.78
Filipino	22	6.90
Unknown	15	4.70
Bangladeshi	4	1.25
Unspecified Foreigner	4	1.25
Iraqi	3	0.94
Maldivian	2	0.63
North African	2	0.63
Rohingya	2	0.63
Indian	1	0.31
Kosovar	1	0.31
Moroccan	1	0.31
Palestinian	1	0.31
Total	**319**	**100**

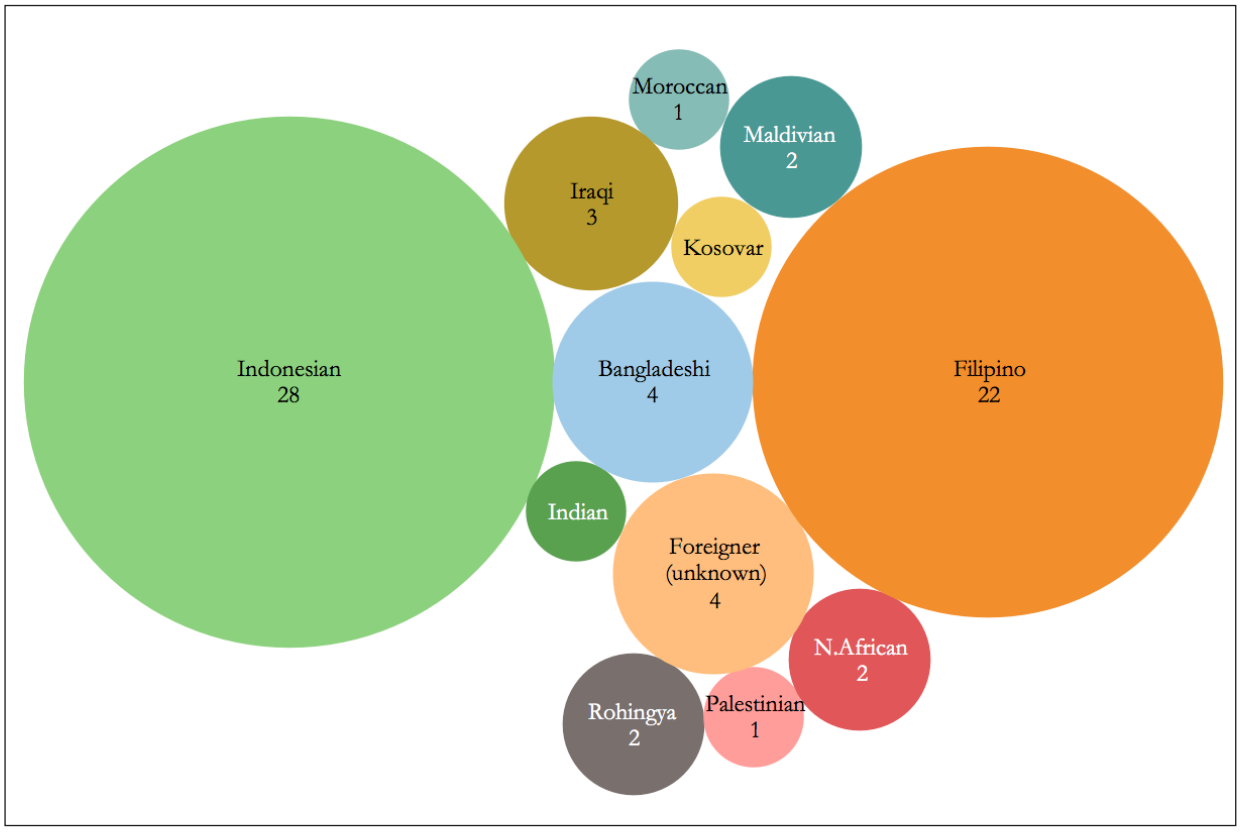

Figure 2.4 (a): Arrests by Nationality (Excluding Malaysians)

The arrest dataset also captured any other militant affiliations of individuals reported at the time of

their arrest, as presented in Table 2.4 (b) and Figure 2.4 (b), although a large proportion of these in the dataset were not reported.

Table 2.4 (b): Other Militant Affiliations

Other affiliation	Total
Abu Sayyaf Group	12
Al-Qa`ida	2
Albanian Islamic State-linked affiliate	1
Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army	1
Islamic State-Bangladesh	2
Jamaah Ansharut Daulah	4
Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh	1
Jemaah Islamiyah	3
Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia	1
Maute Group	1
Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT; suspected)	1
Negara Islam Indonesia	1
None/Unknown	289
Total	**319**

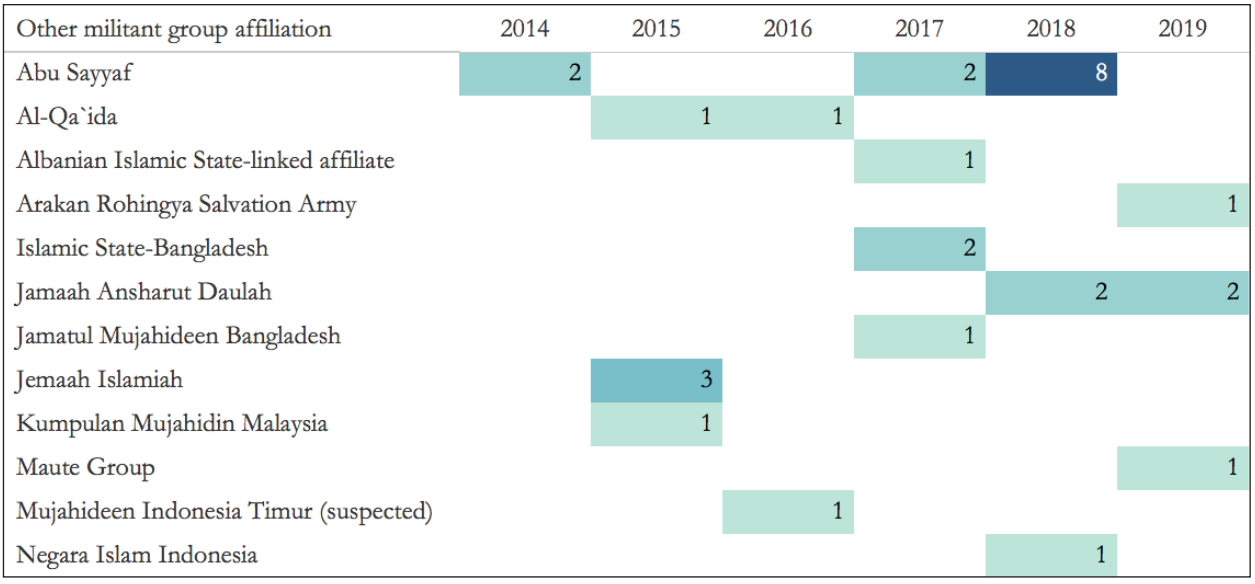

Figure 2.4 (b): Militant Affiliations by Year

The vast majority of reported affiliations (besides the Islamic State) belonged to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), with 12 cases. As shown in Figure 2.4 (b), eight of these arrests were made in 2018. The second highest number of affiliations fell in the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) category, with associated arrests in the years 2018 and 2019. While affiliations with other regional groups can be expected, the dataset also recorded affiliations with groups beyond Southeast Asia, such as Islamic State-Bangladesh and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.

JAD and ASG are two of the Islamic State's key operational alliances in Southeast Asia, which explains why those two groups would have the highest number of individuals operational in Malaysia. JAD is the main Islamic State affiliate in Indonesia, having started as an umbrella organization comprising two dozen Indonesian extremist groups.[179] Between January 2014 and July 2019, the group was linked to about 10 attacks that were also claimed by the Islamic State.[180] JAD's most notable attacks included the May 2018 Surabaya bombings, which shocked the world as it was a coordinated suicide attack that included an entire family unit.[181] Factions of ASG, including one led by Isnilon Hapilon based in Basilan and later Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan's faction out of Sulu/Jolo, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State soon after its declaration, although the pledge was only formally accepted by the Islamic State in 2016 when Hapilon was declared the group's regional emir.[182] In its affiliation with the Islamic State, ASG is well known for its role in the Battle of Marawi, which lasted between May and October of 2017.

2.5 Other Insights: Age Groups and Professional Backgrounds

The authors' dataset also captured arrested individuals' ages and professional backgrounds, to the extent possible. Table 2.5 (a) presents the age brackets of both men and women; however, this data is limited, as the information was only reported in about 46% of the cases. Overall, out of all cases where ages were reported, about 48% were in the 20-29 age group, whereas about 31% were in the 30-39 age bracket, suggesting that individuals involved in militancy in Malaysia tend to be on the younger side. At the extreme ends, four individuals were reported to be teenagers, whereas five individuals fell in the over-50 category. Although the authors did not conduct a comparison of the ages of Islamic State-affiliated Malaysians with those who joined JI and KMM historically, some Malaysian scholars such as Ahmad El-Muhammady argue that individuals mobilizing on behalf of the Islamic State have tended to be on the younger side. One potential explanation for this trend could be Islamic State's heavy use of social media, which typically tends to gain more traffic among the younger generation.

Table 2.5 (a): Age Groups of Arrested Individuals

Age Group	Men	Women	Total
14-19	3	1	4
20-29	65	6	71
30-39	42	3	45
40-49	19	3	22
50-65	4	1	5
Not reported	155	17	172
Total	**288**	**31**	**319**

In addition to age, the dataset captured individuals' prior professional backgrounds for about 48% (153) of the cases where backgrounds were clearly identified. Individuals arrested were reported to have a large variety of professional backgrounds that included housewives, students, religious teachers, businessmen, technicians and laborers, civil servants, and members of the armed forces. The sheer variety of professional backgrounds suggests that the Islamic State's influence within Malaysia is broad, and the group may appeal to people from all walks of life. Again, one reason for this simply could be

179 Alexander Sehmer, "Indonesia: Influential Islamic State Cleric Goes on Trial," Jamestown Foundation, February 26, 2018; Karina Tehusijarana and Moses Ompussungu, "What Is JAD? Terror Group behind Mako Brimob Riot, Surabaya Bombings," *Jakarta Post*, May 14, 2018.

180 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

181 "Sidoarjo Bomb Also Involved Family of Six: E. Java Police," *Jakarta Post*, May 14, 2018.

182 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

the heavy use of social media by Islamic State recruiters, which allows them access to a much broader segment of the Malaysian population than would be possible through direct in-person recruitment. While the authors did not compare the professional backgrounds of Islamic State-affiliated individuals in other Southeast Asian countries, other sources indicate that Islamic State recruits may be equally diverse in terms of their professional backgrounds in other places as well.[183]

The one interesting and concerning trend that emerged in terms of professions was that there seemed to be a meaningful number of active and former security forces members captured. Out of the total number of cases where professions were known, about 21 were reported to be security personnel;[184] this included 10 unspecified military personnel, three Navy officers, two Air Force members, and six reported as "security force personnel." The bulk of the charges levied against military personnel did not relate to a specific terrorist attack; eight of the military personnel arrested, and one Navy officer, were detained under accusations of either possessing Islamic State propaganda or encouraging Islamic State membership. The other two Navy officers, one of whom was reported to have trained with the Abu Sayyaf Group, were suspected of having harbored and smuggled militants traveling to Malaysia following training with ASG in the southern Philippines. Eight security force personnel engaged in multiple forms of militant activity, with two allegedly connected with both kidnappings and robberies and six involved with the promotion of propaganda, facilitating recruitment, and financing. Notably, only the two Air Force members were arrested on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks in Malaysia, although they were eventually acquitted of these charges.[185] This relative lack of military participation in Islamic State-linked attack planning or other weapons-related charges to date suggests that the threat of Islamic State-inspired violence originating from the military is less urgent than the raw numbers imply, as does the fact that there has been only one military-affiliated arrestee reported since 2015.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the data on Islamic State-affiliated plots and arrests of individuals linked to the Islamic State in Malaysia between 2015 and 2019. The analysis reveals several insights. In terms of Islamic State-affiliated plots in the country, the data revealed that overall the years 2016 and 2018 experienced the highest number of plots, amounting to six in each year; the majority of these took place in the capital region of Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding state of Selangor and Kelantan. Interestingly, only one of these 23 plots was considered to be 'successful' insofar as it actually resulted in casualties: the attack on the Movida club in Puchong, Selangor, in June 2016.[186]

In terms of tactics and targets, operations in Malaysia seem to differ in several ways compared to Islamic State operations in the Philippines and Indonesia. For one, Malaysia has not witnessed a proliferation in the use of suicide attacks (with only attempted case), and the majority of the plots were noted to be directed toward civilian targets. As noted earlier, one possible explanation for the lack of suicide attack attempts in Malaysia could be the lack of foreign fighters from beyond the Southeast Asian region in Malaysia. In comparison to the plots, which were limited to about six regions, arrests of Islamic State-linked individuals were observed in at least 15 provinces, with Selangor (78), Kuala

183 See, for example, "Inside the Mind of ISIS: Understanding Its Goals and Ideology to Better Protect the Homeland," Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, 114th Congress, Second Session, January 20, 2016; Lauren Vogel, "Why are doctors joining ISIS?" *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 188:3 (2016); Hardin Lang and Muath Al Wari, "The Flow of Foreign Fighters to the Islamic State: Assessing the Challenge and the Response," Center for American Progress, March 2016.

184 The authors' dataset relies on open-source reports of each arrest; however, these numbers may be higher as indicated in other sources. For example, see "70 army personnel found involved with ISIS: Malaysian parliament told," *Straits Times*, April 13, 2015.

185 Shanti Gunaratnam, "High Court discharges, acquits three of terrorism charges," *New Straits Times*, June 19, 2017. The authors did not account for outcomes of these arrests, and the database includes all individuals arrested.

186 Lourdes.

Lumpur (55), and Sabah (50) seeing the highest number of arrests across all six years. The first two regions correspond with locations where the highest number of plots were observed, but as noted before, Sabah is part of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, which has long been plagued by violence, kidnappings, and other financially motivated criminal activities[187] and has seen the presence of militants of various groups, including ASG, MILF, and JI.[188]

An examination of the arrest data also revealed several other insights about the nature of the roles of individuals affiliated with the Islamic State. Overall, as expected the male-female ratio of these arrests was 90% to 10%, with women arrested primarily for passive roles (e.g., disseminating propaganda, facilitating recruitment) and men arrested most frequently for planning or threatening an attack. The arrests also showed that the vast majority of Islamic State-linked individuals in Malaysia are locals, with about 27% of the arrests comprising non-Malaysians, a category that was dominated by Indonesians and Filipinos (making up about 8.8% and 6.9%, respectively). As such, the data suggests that the foreign influence in Malaysia with regard to the Islamic State is largely limited to other Southeast Asian countries, although this does seem to indicate that the Islamic State threat in Southeast Asia is interconnected. Most of the individuals with a Filipino or Indonesian background were associated with ASG and JAD, two of the Islamic State's key operational alliances in Southeast Asia.

Overall, while the attacks and plots observed in Malaysia suggest that the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia is well contained, the number of arrests between 2015 and 2019 indicate that the Islamic State has been able to expand its influence in the country, largely using online and social media platforms. Overall, the Islamic State has managed to influence a wide variety of individuals of various ages and backgrounds and has impacted both men and women. The next chapter takes a close look at some illustrative case studies of plots, as well as the profiles of some men and women who chose to engage in militancy that was linked to the influence of the Islamic State in the country.

187 Nasir and Dass.

188 Ibid.

Chapter 3: Case Studies of Plots and Profiles of Arrested Militants

This chapter outlines four case studies of Islamic State-linked plots (to include successful, failed, and foiled attacks) and seven profiles of arrested individuals associated with the Islamic State in Malaysia. The goal of this chapter is to provide a closer look at some of the cases and to better understand the nature of the Islamic State threat in Malaysia. In the following section, plots are described followed by a general discussion. This chapter concludes with profiles of arrested individuals and a brief discussion of notable elements from the different cases. For both plots and militant profiles, cases were selected with an eye toward presenting a diversity of cases as well as depth based on available information.

3.1 Case Studies of Plots

Cases were selected with an eye toward diversity of circumstances but were limited by the quality and number of open sources available to studying them. The discussion focuses on relevant factors, such as the target and counterterrorism activities surrounding the plots. It is important to note this is a convenience sample of cases and by no means representative of all such plots in Malaysia for the time period. Additionally, time lapses between cases do not delineate lulls in militant activity. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the plots discussed in this chapter.

Table 3.1 (a): Notable Characteristics about Various Plots

Title	Date	Target	CT Activities
Plot 1: 26th ASEAN Summit Plot	April 2015	ASEAN Summit; kidnap international leaders	Arrested 17 people. Many of the arrested individuals had left the year prior for Syria to gain military training and had just recently returned.
Plot 2: Movida Bar Attack	June 2016	Nightclub; persons "conducting sinful activities during Ramadan"	Royal Malaysia Police increased intelligence capabilities. Successful attack: claimed by the Islamic State; perpetrators arrested; first successful attack by the Islamic State in Malaysia.
Plot 3: 59th Independence Day Plots	August 2016	Alleged plans to attack tourist, religious, entertainment, and government sites (e.g., entertainment center in Kuala Lumpur; Hindu temple in Selangor); persons at tourist sites; government officials	The police foiled the plots by arresting 16 individuals. Fourteen of them were members of "Black Crow," a Malaysian cell founded by Wanndy.
Plot 4: Plots Against Non-Muslim Houses of Worship	Ramadan 2019	Non-Muslim houses of worship (e.g., Hindu temple in Subang Jaya)	A foiled attack where seven were arrested. Foiled the cell's plans in multiple raids resulting in the arrest of all seven members of the cell and the confiscation of six improvised explosive devices, along with a 9mm CZ pistol and 15 bullets.

Plot 1: 26th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit Plot – April 2015

Overview. Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, hosted the 26th ASEAN Summit on April 26, 2015. Leaders from countries throughout Asia attended the conference to discuss changes in policy and relations within Southeast Asia.[189] Just a few weeks before the event, on April 6, 2015, the Royal Malaysian Police Force raided houses in Kedah and Kuala Lumpur, arresting 17 suspected Islamic State-affiliated individuals for plotting to attack the ASEAN Summit.[190]

Plot Background. The plot's main goal was to kidnap dignitaries at the ASEAN Summit.[191] The attackers planned to target strategic locations, including government buildings throughout Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, with explosives made from 20kg of both ammonium nitrate and potassium

189 "Percaturan menakutkan 17 disyaki pengganas, kata KPN," *Malaysian Insider*, April 7, 2015.

190 "Militants in Malaysia planned raids for guns, attacks in capital: police," Reuters, April 6, 2015.

191 Given the various components of this plot, it may also be considered a series of plots. However, as it was reportedly in efforts to target a single target—the summit—the authors think it is reasonable to discuss them as a single plot.

nitrate.[192] Using the expertise of its members, the group planned to steal weapons from an army camp and multiple police stations.[193] This would have enabled them to rob a bank, which along with external aid and finances from terrorist groups in neighboring countries, would allow for continued operations throughout Malaysia, ultimately allowing the Islamic State to gain a foothold in the region.[194]

Counterterrorism Activities. The raid conducted by the Royal Malaysia Police force disrupted this plot and potential future operations by these individuals. In total, the police arrested 17 men, aged 14 through 49.[195] The oldest was the former leader of Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM). He was the leader and most experienced of the 17 individuals arrested, having received military training in Afghanistan and fought for the Islamic State in Syria before returning to Malaysia. Many of the arrested individuals had left for Syria the year prior to gain military training and had recently returned to Malaysia. A security guard and a few military personnel arrested with the group hoped to use their security access to gain weapons and materials in support of operations. Other members of the group arrested included religious teachers and former senior members of KMM.

Plot Significance. The day following the raid, the Malaysian Parliament passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) with a vote of 79 to 60.[196] Much controversy surrounded the bill, which has similarities to the Internal Security Act (ISA) abolished in 2012.[197] Initially used to curb the communist movement in the 1960s, the ISA eventually evolved to combat terrorism and political opponents, allowing for the arrest and detention of individuals for an indefinite period based solely on the judgment of likelihood to commit a crime affecting national security.[198] A major point in the POTA is the allowance of detainment for up to 59 days without charge if suspected of terrorism. This allows the Royal Malaysian Police to arrest individuals without proof and hold them in prison for two months. Many argued that this violated human rights and tainted the legitimacy of democracy in Malaysia.[199] The Malaysian government has been known to arrest political opposition, and this law further expanded the abilities of the prime minister to act in such a manner. However, the law shows the seriousness of the terrorism threat to Malaysia, as the effects of the raid pushed the passing of the bill through considerable opposition.[200] The Islamic State remains the most pressing threat to Malaysian security, and the bill also bans travel associated with terrorism.[201]

This plot represented the larger hope of the Islamic State to establish itself within Malaysia.[202] Before the raid that foiled the ASEAN Summit Plot, multiple attacks occurred throughout Southeast Asia, in particular Thailand.[203] The events surrounding the plot caused regional counterterrorism efforts to be the central focus of the 26th ASEAN Summit.[204] The returning fighter problem, as exemplified by those involved in the plot, raised concerns across the region, as individuals returning from Syria and Iraq come with wartime experience and training. This plot also brought concerns to Malaysia about

192 "Malaysian authorities arrest 12 people in suburbs of Kuala Lumpur for Isis links," *Guardian*, April 26, 2015.

193 "Percaturan menakutkan 17 disyaki pengganas, kata KPN."

194 Ibid.

195 The information in this paragraph comes from "Percaturan menakutkan 17 disyaki pengganas, kata KPN."

196 "Parliament passes controversial anti-terrorism law by 79 to 60 votes," *Malaysian Insider*, April 7, 2015.

197 "Malaysia: New anti-terrorism law a shocking onslaught against human rights," Amnesty International, April 7, 2015.

198 "FACTBOX: Five facts on Malaysia's Internal Security Act," Reuters, December 13, 2007.

199 "Malaysia: New anti-terrorism law a shocking onslaught against human rights."

200 "Parliament passes controversial anti-terrorism law by 79 to 60 votes."

201 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015* (Kuala Lumpur: United States Embassy in Malaysia, 2016).

202 Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad, "Malaysian Foreign Fighters from Past to Present: Different Pathways to Terror," Middle East Institute, August 16, 2016.

203 Based on results from the Global Terrorism Database, in terms of terrorist attacks in the Southeast Asia region between March 7 and April 6, 2015, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar all experienced terrorist attacks.

204 Prashanth Parameswaran, "The 26th ASEAN Summit: What Are Malaysia's Priorities?" *Diplomat*, April 23, 2015.

individuals receiving external support in the form of training, resources, weapons, and other materials transported throughout Southeast Asia. Overall, the summit discussed action to counter radicalization and extremism as stated in the Langkawi Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates.[205]

Plot 2: Movida Bar Attack – June 2016

Overview. At 2:00 AM on June 28, 2016, Malaysia experienced its first successful terrorist attack by the Islamic State, as terrorists threw a grenade into the Movida Bar in Puchong, just outside of Kuala Lumpur.[206] Around 20 people were inside the bar at the time of the explosion watching the UEFA European Football Championship match between Italy and Spain.[207] The attack injured eight patrons of the bar, and authorities quickly worked to locate those responsible.[208]

Plot Background. On June 21, 2016, Mohammad Rafi Udin, a member of the Islamic State, released a video while in Syria threatening the Malaysian police.[209] In response, on June 25, Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar announced that Udin only made threats because he was far away and felt safe.[210] The response apparently outraged Udin, and is believed to have triggered the Islamic State's campaign against individuals who were deemed to be "conducting sinful activities during Ramadan."[211]

The plan focused on conducting an attack against top government officials and entertainment centers that were "un-Islamic."[212] The attackers originally chose the Pitbull nightclub for the attack; however, on June 27, the club closed for the night before the attackers arrived. Instead, the terrorists settled for the Movida bar and entertainment center. At 2:00 AM, two individuals on a motorcycle drove by the bar and tossed in a grenade,[213] resulting in eight injuries.[214] The police originally thought of the attack as the result of a business dispute.[215] However, Muhammad Wanndy Muhamad Jedi[216] claimed Islamic State responsibility for the attack on Facebook,[217] with Wanndy claiming that two of his followers had conducted the attack.[218]

Counterterrorism Activities. After investigation, the police confirmed Wanndy's claim and declared the Islamic State to be behind the attack.[219] In total, the police arrested 15 members of Wanndy's group for conspiring in the attack. All were Malaysians aged 19 to 52, including two policemen. Throughout

205 *Langkawi Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates* (Langkawi: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2015).

206 "Bom Movida: Dua lelaki dipenjara 25 tahun," Astro AWANI, March 27, 2017.

207 Lourdes.

208 "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil," *Straits Times*, July 4, 2017.

209 "Investigation, Prosecution and Adjudication of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Cases for South and South-East Asia," p. 15; Joe Liaw Siau Chi, "Expansion of ISIS in Malaysia: root causes and countermeasures," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 3 (2017): pp. 6-7.

210 Chi, pp. 6-7.

211 Rohan Gunaratna, "Islamic State's First Terror Attack in Malaysia," *RSIS Commentary no. 163* (2017): p. 1; "Penyokong IS dakwa letupan Puchong balasan tak hormat Ramadan," PenangKini, June 29, 2016.

212 "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil."

213 "Bom Movida: Dua lelaki dipenjara 25 tahun."

214 "Islamic State launches first successful attack in Malaysia."

215 "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil."

216 Muhammad Wanndy Muhamad Jedi was born on November 16, 1990, in Durian Tunggal, Malacca. His father died when he was young, and his mother passed away in 2013. Wanndy was known for having a temper, and after his mother's death, his family accused him of stealing. Through these struggles, Wanndy became radicalized, and in February 2015, he and his wife left to join the Islamic State in Syria. Wanndy became a top recruiter for the Islamic State, hoping to spread its ideology back home in Malaysia. Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy;" Gunaratna, "Islamic State's First Terror Attack in Malaysia," p. 2.

217 Chi, pp. 6-7.

218 "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil."

219 Chi, pp. 6-7.

the various arrests, the police seized sharp weapons, balaclavas, Islamic State flags, and propaganda.[220] The two individuals responsible for carrying out the attack were factory workers Jonius Ondie Jahali, 24, and Imam Wahyuddin Karjono, 21.[221] In March 2017, each received a sentence of 25 years in prison for the attack, with an additional 10 years for supporting the Islamic State.[222]

Plot Significance. As the first successful attack by the Islamic State in Malaysia, the attack served as a reminder of the potential threat associated with a new wave of terrorism in the country. Previously, a terrorist attack was considered to be unlikely in Malaysia.[223] In response to the event, the Royal Malaysian Police Force increased their intelligence capabilities, hoping to proactively identify targets and prevent terrorism through intelligence and counter-messaging.[224] Overall, the police attempted to stem Wanndy's recruitment efforts, which consisted of over 100 WhatsApp group chats he had started with youth throughout Malaysia.[225] Using Facebook, Wanndy targeted individuals making racist or anti-government posts, and his efforts to recruit and radicalize for the Islamic State made him a highly wanted Malaysian operative.[226] However, given that the Movida attack failed to go as planned, Islamic State leaders reportedly became displeased with him.[227] After the Movida attack, Wanndy promised that, given more time, he would be able to stage multiple bombings across Malaysia.[228] However, over the next year, the Royal Malaysian Police Force foiled numerous attempts by Wanndy to create another successful attack in Malaysia, and on April 29, 2017, Wanndy was killed in an airstrike in Syria.[229]

Plot 3: 59th Merdeka Day[230] Plots – August 2016

Overview. As Malaysia prepared to celebrate the 59th anniversary of its independence from Great Britain on August 31, 2016, the Royal Malaysia Police force was busy conducting a two-week counterterrorism operation throughout the peninsula against an Islamic State-affiliated cell.[231] The police arrested 16 individuals and "foiled a number of attacks in the final planning stages, including a series of attacks on tourist sites and entertainment outlets that were allegedly planned to take place."[232]

Plot Background. The Islamic State generally hoped that these plots would help increase its influence in Malaysia and the Southeast Asia region.[233] Attacks on independence day were intended to symbolically undermine the Malaysian government, while larger targets intended to expand the reach of Islamic State ideology.[234] The plan included multiple attacks on a variety of targets. Attacks were planned against an entertainment center in Kuala Lumpur, a Hindu Temple in Selangor, and a

220 "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil."

221 Ibid.

222 Maizatul Nazlina, "Movida bombers sentenced to 25 years' jail," *Star*, March 29, 2017.

223 "One year after first terror attack in Malaysia, a victim remains in anguish," *Straits Times*, June 28, 2017.

224 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016* (Kuala Lumpur: United States Embassy in Malaysia, 2017).

225 R. S. N. Murali, "IS leaders 'infuriated over Wanndy's failure to carry out attacks in Malaysia,'" *Star*, April 26, 2017.

226 Ibid.

227 Ibid.

228 Ibid.

229 Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wanndy."

230 Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia established August 31, 1957, as Merdeka Day, the day the constitution was published and the country of Malaysia was established. Merdeka Day, also referred to as Hari Merdeka or Hari Kebangsaan, loosely translates to independence day or national day.

231 "Malaysia tangkap 16 suspek pengganas," *Berita Harian*, October 10, 2016.

232 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016*.

233 Murali.

234 Ibid.; "Three arrested in Malaysia over planned attacks on eve of independence day," Reuters, August 30, 2016; "Malaysia Foils Alleged IS Terror Plot on Eve of Independence Day," BenarNews, August 31, 2016.

police station on the eve of independence day.[235] These areas typically host thousands of people during celebrations and festivities. Another attack would then target a multitude of government buildings in the capital city, culminating in assassinations of the prime minister and other state officials.[236] Attackers planned to use grenades and handguns to cause most of the damage; officials found K75 grenades and a CZ 2075 Rami pistol on one of the suspects when arrested.[237]

Counterterrorism Activities. The police foiled the plots by arresting 16 individuals. Fourteen of them were members of "Black Crow," a Malaysian cell founded by Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, the mastermind behind the Movida bar attack.[238] These individuals planned to leave for Syria upon the successful completion of the independence day attacks.[239] The other two individuals arrested were a North African with connection to Jabhat al-Nusra and a deported Turkish citizen, both with records of past terrorist activity.[240]

Plot Significance. Recent measures by Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia to share biometric information on suspected terrorists allowed for the success of this raid.[241] The increased international cooperation arguably allowed Malaysia to focus on foreigners entering the country.[242] With the arrival of the Islamic State in the region, Southeast Asia has seen an increase in deportations of individuals with any Islamic State affiliation as a result of increased counterterrorism cooperation.[243] Such cooperation between Southeast Asian countries has been driven in part by Malaysia's creation of the Counter Messaging Center. Created in mid-2016, the center focuses on information-sharing between nations and Interpol, and on counter-radicalization measures on social media,[244] with social media efforts focusing on blocking accounts and tracking recruiters.[245] The focus on social media recruitment and radicalization efforts increased after the finding that all of the individuals arrested for their involvement in the independence day plots took an oath of allegiance online.[246]

The independence day plots, along with the increase of terrorist activity in Malaysia in 2016, encouraged the government to create the National Special Operations Force (NSOF).[247] An interagency force comprised of 170 personnel from the Malaysian Armed Forces, Royal Malaysian Police, and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, the NSOF focused entirely on a rapid response to combat threats of terrorism against the sovereignty of Malaysia.[248] However, in 2018 with the new incoming prime minister, the NSOF was quietly disbanded and replaced by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), an exclusively military organization with a larger mission no longer focused solely on counterterrorism.[249] The move focused on shutting down excess government agencies—the NSOF was not effectively used to respond to any terror incident—and NSOF personnel returned to their

235 "Malaysia Foils Alleged IS Terror Plot on Eve of Independence Day."

236 "Malaysia tangkap 16 suspek pengganas."

237 "Malaysia: Tiga Militan IS Ditahan Cuba Lakukan Serangan Ambang Merdeka," *Berita Benar*, August 31, 2016.

238 "Malaysia tangkap 16 suspek pengganas."

239 "Malaysia: Tiga Militan IS Ditahan Cuba Lakukan Serangan Ambang Merdeka."

240 "Malaysia tangkap 16 suspek pengganas."

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid.

243 Ibid.

244 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Where Is Malaysia's New Counterterrorism Center in Its Islamic State Fight?" *Diplomat*, March 15, 2018.

245 Ibid.

246 "Malaysia tangkap 16 suspek pengganas."

247 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016*.

248 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Malaysia's New Anti-Terror Force," *Diplomat*, November 1, 2016.

249 "Joint Special Operations Command," Malaysian Defense, January 4, 2019. JSOC was later changed to the Defence Operations Special Forces Division.

parent units, thus allowing the Royal Malaysian Police's Unit Tindak Khas to again focus on terrorism, with JSOC support if necessary.[250]

Plot 4: Non-Muslim Houses of Worship – Ramadan (May-June) 2019

Overview. At the start of Ramadan in 2019, a series of Royal Malaysia Police raids resulted in the arrest of seven members of a Malaysian Islamic State cell.[251] The group hoped to attack a variety of non-Muslim houses of worship during Ramadan in response to heightened religious tension and social protests in Malaysia.[252]

Plot Background. At 2:15 AM on November 26, 2018, a year prior to the plot, around 100 masked assailants stormed the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Subang Jaya. They held the priests at knifepoint as they burned vehicles and destroyed various items.[253] When word spread about the storming of the temple, thousands of local Hindus went to the temple, exacerbating the violence.[254] Frustrations stemmed from a dispute about the relocation of the Hindu temple.[255] Many of the Hindus believed that the land developer had hired the thugs as a scare tactic.[256] By 4:15 AM, law enforcement had secured the area, and the rioters dispersed.[257] The events not only led to the destruction of property, but amid all the turmoil, Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim, a Muslim firefighter, died. By May, the investigation into the riots and death of Adib provided inconclusive results. Many held the police responsible for not fully controlling the riot and demanded justice, asserting that Hindus had killed the firefighter.[258] The Islamic State capitalized on these grievances, inspiring the cell to avenge the death of Adib.[259] Although Adib had no connection to the group and the Islamic State had no ties to the original incident, the deeper aim of the Islamic State was to exploit the religious tensions that grew from these events.[260] According to the Inspector General of Police Abdul Hamid Bador, the Islamic State cell hoped to strike on the first week of Ramadan,[261] targeting Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist places of worship with improvised explosive devices smuggled in from Syria.[262] They also planned to hit other high-casualty targets such as entertainment centers.[263]

Counterterrorism Activities. The police foiled the cell's plans in multiple raids resulting in the arrest of all seven members of the cell and the confiscation of six improvised explosive devices, along with a 9mm CZ pistol and 15 bullets.[264] On May 5 and 7, 2019, the police arrested four members of the cell, including the leader, a 34-year-old Malaysian construction worker. The leader had a relationship with Akil Zainal, a Malaysian militant leader for the Islamic State in Syria.[265] The other members included

250 Dzirhan Mahadzir, "New Malaysian government disbands NSOF," *Shephard*, October 5, 2018.

251 "Malaysian police foil terror attacks with arrests of four suspects," Channel News Asia, May 13, 2019.

252 "Death of Malaysian fireman injured during rioting at Hindu temple caused by unknown persons," *Straits Times*, September 27, 2019.

253 "Petaling Jaya temple violence: It felt like a scene out of a Tamil movie, says chief priest," *Straits Times*, November 27, 2018.

254 "Death of Malaysian fireman injured during rioting at Hindu temple caused by unknown persons."

255 "Four charged with rioting and using dangerous weapons over Malaysian temple issue," *Straits Times*, December 4, 2018.

256 "Death of Malaysian fireman injured during rioting at Hindu temple caused by unknown persons."

257 "Petaling Jaya temple violence: It felt like a scene out of a Tamil movie, says chief priest."

258 "Death of Malaysian fireman injured during rioting at Hindu temple caused by unknown persons."

259 Nadirah Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship," *Straits Times*, May 13, 2019.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid.

262 R. Loheswar, "Police nab four over Ramadan terror, assassination plot to avenge fireman Adib's death," *Malay Mail*, May 13, 2019.

263 Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

264 "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

265 Fitri Nizam and Fazrik Kamarudin, "4 disyaki rancang serang rumah ibadat, pembunuhan ditahan," *Berita Harian*, May 13, 2019.

two Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in their twenties who planned to attack the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur later in the month and a 49-year-old Indonesian hoping to travel to Syria after the attack.[266] Upon arrest, they admitted to being a part of the Islamic State terrorist cell and gave up the names of the other three members.[267] The police arrested the other three on May 13. Two of them were 27-year-old Malaysians who received bomb-making training in Indonesia with the chemical triacetone triperoxide, specifically used in car bombs; the other was an Indonesian who became radicalized while in prison.[268]

Plot Significance. These plots on houses of worship brought renewed concern for societal factors potentially enabling radicalization. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism created new counter-messaging programs on social media, along with educational resources for youth. In collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs Prison Department, the Center conducted interviews with inmates and evaluated the prison system to investigate methods to prevent radicalization in jails.[269]

These plots also affected the way Malaysia treated Rohingya refugees. Previously, Malaysia served as a haven for these refugees, as former Prime Minister Najib professed that Malaysia must do everything in its power to defend Rohingya refugees and their rights.[270] However, public and government sentiment quickly turned negative as the two Rohingya refugees faced terrorism-related indictments with the cell.[271] Misinformation flowed through social media and calls grew louder for mass deportations. During the 36th ASEAN Summit in 2020, Malaysia announced it would no longer accept refugees.[272] Refugee ships began being denied entry, and the government declared that Rohingya refugees did not have any rights in Malaysia.[273] These events have renewed cries of human rights violations in Malaysia as the fine line between national security and human decency blurs.[274]

With these plots on non-Muslim houses of worship, the Islamic State displayed its full capabilities of terror, even in a country that for the most part has successfully countered terrorism. The Islamic State used social grievances to inspire terrorism through the means of social media applications.[275] While the terror attacks themselves were unsuccessful, the Islamic State wreaked havoc in Malaysian society, spreading even into the refugee crisis.[276] The Islamic State also proved its ability to successfully smuggle weapons and terrorists into the country.[277] These plots draw attention to the destructive nature of terrorism in the social and political spheres, even when the physical events themselves are prevented.

3.2 Profiles of Arrested Islamic State-linked Individuals

In the following section, seven profiles of arrested militants or groups of militants are described to offer a view into the circumstances surrounding certain arrestees' radicalization and desire to join the

266 Ali Nufael and Hadi Azmi, "Etnik Rohingya Antara Empat Suspek Pengganas Ditahan Malaysia," *Berita Benar*, May 13, 2019.

267 Nizam and Kamarudin.

268 Fazrik Kamarudin, "3 individu rancang serangan rumah ibadat dan operasi pembunuhan ditahan," *Berita Harian*, May 16, 2019.

269 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Malaysia*, United States Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism.

270 Piya Sukhani, "The Shifting Politics of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia," *Diplomat*, July 10, 2020.

271 Ibid.

272 Ibid.

273 Christine Kim, "Challenges to the Rohingya Population in Malaysia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 10, 2020.

274 Ibid.

275 Nufael and Azmi.

276 Sukhani.

277 Loheswar, "Police nab four over Ramadan terror, assassination plot to avenge fireman Adib's death."

Islamic State. These profiles are followed by a short discussion of similarities and differences among the cases.

The cases selected for this study illustrated interesting aspects of militants involved with the Islamic State in Malaysia. Cases were selected to be as diverse as possible, in terms of age, profession, and other circumstances, to illustrate circumstances surrounding certain fighters' radicalization and desire to join the Islamic State. The selection also examines how different types of cells and networks operate in Malaysia. That said, these cases do exhibit some commonalities, most notably the presence of online radicalization (whether experienced by the arrestee or used by them to recruit). It is important to reiterate that, much like the case studies on the plots, this is a convenience sample of cases and by no means representative of all Islamic State militants in Malaysia for the time period.

Table 3.2 (a) provides an overview of the militant profiles discussed in this chapter, focusing on major factors that are of relevance, such as areas of arrest or activity, the plot(s) they were linked to, and their pathway to radicalization. Directly following this table are case studies of each of the militants mentioned in Table 3.2 (a), followed by a section that examines some similarities and differences between the plots.

Table 3.2 (a): Notable Characteristics about Militant Profiles

Profile	Date	Age/ Gender	Geography	Plot	Radicalization Pathway
1. Mohamad Yusoffe	September 2014	27, M	Arrested in Kuala Lumpur	No; arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport for attempting to travel to Syria, to join the Islamic State; arrested along with architect Mohd Syafrein Rasid.	The individual was reportedly radicalized online: He became interested in jihad after watching videos depicting the mistreatment of Muslims, particularly Muslim children in Syria.
2. 27-year-old woman joining Moroccan Islamic State militant husband	December 2014	27, F	Kuala Lumpur	No	The individual was reportedly radicalized while searching for a former love interest. Later, she was arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport attempting to travel through Turkey to join her husband, a Moroccan Islamic State militant.
3. 14-year-old girl traveling to Cairo from Muar, Johor	February 2015	14, F	From Johor; bound for Cairo	No	The individual was recruited by a 29-year-old housewife and intended to marry a 22-year-old Malaysian.

4. Murad	April 2015	25, M 49, M	Royal Malaysian Police arrested 17 members of an Islamic State-linked cell in a sequence of raids in Kedah and the Klang Valley.	Yes; in January 2015 meeting with the cell, Abu Daud presented the idea of kidnapping government officials to exchange for detained individuals; steal firearms from various military camps in Kedah; rob a security van transporting money in Genting Highlands.	The father, Murad Halimmuddin Hassan, was a former senior member of KMM and a former member of JI. No specific information on the radicalization pathway for the son, Abu Daud Murad, but could potentially be linked to father's involvement with two groups.
5. 21-Year-Old Man Intended to Attack Non-Muslim Places of Worship	September 2017	21, M	Arrested in Perak	Yes; directed by a Malaysian Islamic State member in Syria to commit attacks on non-Muslim places of worship.	There is no specific information about the individual's radicalization, but he was taught by Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, a prominent member of the pro-Islamic State faction of ASG. The individual also reportedly had ties to ASG and al-Qa`ida.
6. 51-Year-Old Malaysian Housewife	May 2018	51, F	Puchong, Selangor	Yes; sought to attack polling station with a car full of explosives.	The individual was reportedly radicalized via social media after her husband suffered from a stroke, three years before attempted attack.
7. Four Militants Avenging Death of Muhammad Adib	May 2019	20, M 25, M 34, M 49, M	Militants were arrested in various locations.	Yes; suspected of planning attacks on non-Muslim houses of worship for Ramadan.	The cell's plots were intended to avenge the death of Muhammad Adib, a Malay-Muslim firefighter who died in November 2018. The cell was established in January 2019 and communicated using WhatsApp. The individuals reportedly received instruction from a Malaysian in Syria.

Profile 1: Mohamad Yusoffe – September 2014

Mohamad Yusoffe, a 27-year-old technician at a sugar factory, was arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on September 25, 2014, for attempting to travel to Syria, via Turkey, to join the

Islamic State.[278] Yusoffe, who was arrested along with architect Mohd Syafrein Rasid, was radicalized online: He reportedly became interested in jihad after watching videos depicting the mistreatment of Muslims, particularly Muslim children in Syria.[279] Via Facebook, where he posted under the pseudonym "Soffie Panji Hitam," he met other individuals concerned about the Syrian civil war and discussed the prospect of waging jihad in Syria; he also joined two WhatsApp groups, "Jihad Fisabilillah" and "Melancong," dedicated to discussing support for the Islamic State in Syria.[280] Yusoffe told his mother and family that he was going to fight in Syria and expressed a desire to become a martyr for the Islamic State.[281]

In September 2015, Yusoffe changed his plea to guilty.[282] In arguing for leniency with regard to sentencing, Yusoffe's attorneys presented him as having misunderstood the concept of jihad due to a lack of prior religious education.[283] His counsel stated that he came to better understand Islam and the concept of jihad through religious talks while at Sungai Buloh Prison in Selangor.[284] He reportedly learned that the jihad being waged by the Islamic State in Syria "'is not a real jihad'" and that actions such as taking care of his single mother would be considered a form of jihad.[285] Given his regret and willingness to engage in religious education, his counsel argued that he deserved a second chance, to rehabilitate himself and to pursue further religious education.[286] Yusoffe was ultimately sentenced to two years in prison (effective the date of his arrest) for attempting to support the Islamic State.[287]

This case is notable in that it represents an early example of a Malaysian being radicalized online, to the point where Yusoffe decided to travel to Syria to wage jihad. Notably, Yusoffe's attorneys portrayed their client as having been brainwashed by these online communities, falling victim to their misrepresentation of Islam.[288] This suggestion, with the caveat that it was motivated by a desire to minimize their client's sentence, brings up the question of the role of education, especially religious education, in promoting resilience to violent extremism.

Profile 2: 27-Year-Old Woman Joining Moroccan Islamic State Militant Husband – December 2014

On December 24, 2014, a 27-year-old woman was arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport while attempting to travel through Turkey to join her husband, a Moroccan Islamic State militant she had married over Skype two weeks earlier, in Syria.[289] The woman, from the western Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan, was a student pursuing a bachelor's degree in graphic design at Limkokwing University of Creative Technology.[290]

278 "Two Malaysian men jailed for supporting Islamic State group," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, September 10, 2015.

279 "Architect, Technician Jailed Two Years For Attemping [sic] to Support IS," Malaysian Government News, September 8, 2015; "Two Malaysian men jailed for supporting Islamic State group."

280 "Architect, Technician Jailed Two Years For Attemping [sic] to Support IS." Another source says the group is called "Melancong2." For more information, see "Malaysian architect, technician jailed two years over ISIS involvement," *Straits Times*, September 9, 2015.

281 "Malaysian architect, technician jailed two years over ISIS involvement."

282 "Two Malaysian men jailed for supporting Islamic State group;" Hata Wahari, "Arkitek Dan Jurutera Dihukum Penjara Dua Tahun Terlibat IS," *Berita Benar*, September 9, 2015.

283 Farah Marshita Abdul Patah, "Dua lelaki cuba sokong militan IS kena 2 tahun," *Berita Harian*, September 10, 2015.

284 "Architect, Technician Jailed Two Years For Attemping [sic] to Support IS;" "Sokong IS: Arkitek, Juruteknik Dihukum Penjara Dua Tahun," *mStar*, September 9, 2015.

285 "Two Malaysian men jailed for supporting Islamic State group."

286 Ibid.; "Architect, Technician Jailed Two Years For Attemping [sic] to Support IS."

287 "Two Malaysian men jailed for supporting Islamic State group."

288 Patah.

289 "Malaysia arrests woman who married ISIS fighter over Skype."

290 Ibid.

There is relatively little open-source information about this woman, but some information was collected through interviews of practitioners who have interacted with her. According to Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, who interviewed the individual while she was detained, the woman's path to radicalization began with a dream about her deceased college roommate.[291] Prior to this, she was not particularly strong in her Islamic faith and did not strictly practice the religion, but she often asked her roommate from Saudi Arabia to teach her more about Islam.

Both her search for religion and romantic interests contributed to her radicalization.[292] She met an Egyptian in Malaysia and they planned to get married; however, the marriage never materialized and the Egyptian man eventually left for Syria to become a suicide bomber for the Islamic State. After losing contact with him, she searched online to find more information about his whereabouts. It was during this search that she is believed to have first engaged with Islamic State propaganda on YouTube in November 2014; she began communicating with a Moroccan militant via Facebook in mid-November 2014.[293] The Moroccan knew her ex-boyfriend, and she learned from him that her ex-boyfriend had been shot before he could detonate his bomb.

According to Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, a carefree and friendly girl, she became "reclusive" shortly after meeting the militant.[294] Around a month after her first interaction with him—roughly a month and a half after first viewing Islamic State propaganda videos—the woman married the Moroccan via Skype.[295] After one week of marriage, she withdrew her money and packed all of her things, with her husband coaching her through all of the travel arrangements regarding how she would go on a "vacation" to Turkey and eventually meet him in Syria. As soon as her father realized she was missing, he called the police, resulting in her arrest at the airport. Detained under the Security Offences Special Measures Act of 2012, the resulting investigation concluded that she would not be charged but must go through rehabilitation. She agreed to go through the deradicalization program, and the police continue to monitor her movements.[296]

As with the previous profile, this case draws attention to online radicalization and religious education. The accessibility of terrorist propaganda online is a threat to the young adult population of Malaysia.[297] The Islamic State has used religious teachers as a means to spread ideology.[298] In an effort to combat this, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia counsels those detained for terrorist activity on their misinterpretations of Islam.[299]

Profile 3: 14-Year-Old Girl Traveling to Cairo from Muar, Johor – February 2015

On February 17, 2015, police detained a 14-year-old girl from Muar, Johor, as she attempted to board a plane bound for Cairo, Egypt, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The girl intended to marry

291 All of the information in this paragraph was collected during an interview William Frangia conducted with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady in June 2021. Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady personally interviewed the individual while she was detained.

292 The majority of the information in this paragraph was collected during an interview William Frangia conducted with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady in June 2021. Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady personally interviewed the individual while she was detained.

293 Ibid.; "Cops arrest duo bound for Syria," *New Straits Times*, January 3, 2015.

294 Discussion William Frangia had with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady in June 2021. Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady personally interviewed the individual while she was detained.

295 Ibid.; "Cops arrest duo bound for Syria."

296 The majority of the information in this profile comes from a discussion William Frangia had with Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady in June 2021. Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady personally interviewed the individual while she was detained.

297 Kumar Ramakrishna, "Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis," E-International Relations, February 11, 2016.

298 Darden.

299 Mohd Mizan Bin Mohammad Aslam, "Deradicalization Programs for SOSMA, POTA, and POCA Detainees in Malaysia," Middle East Institute, June 23, 2020.

a 22-year-old Malaysian studying at Al-Azhar University in Cairo before continuing with him to Turkey and then Syria to join the Islamic State.[300] Upon arrest, the police immediately launched an investigation and intelligence gathering drive to identify her recruiter and potential financiers.[301] Eleven days later, on February 28, 2015, the Bukit Aman Special Branch Counterterrorism Division arrested a 29-year-old housewife in her home in Muar, Johor. The woman was responsible for recruiting the 14-year-old girl through Facebook; they had begun communicating the previous November.[302] In the following days, the police also arrested the financier of the girl's travel.[303] All three were detained under Chapter VI-a of the Penal Code and investigated under the Security Offenses Special Measures Act of 2012.[304] Police continued to investigate other possible targets recruited by the woman.[305]

The girl had received RM 2,000 and a plane ticket to make the trip to Egypt under the pretext of furthering her religious studies, as she was a student at a Tahfiz Institute in Shah Alam.[306] Despite having a good relationship with her family and friends at school, she attempted to go to Cairo without her family's consent.[307] She is the eldest of three children, and her mother died a few years before the girl's arrest.[308] The girl even threatened to kill herself if her family did not let her travel to Cairo. According to the police, she was hard-headed during her interrogation; she was eventually sent to the Juvenile Detention Center in Jinjang, Selangor.[309]

This profile illustrates the functioning of smaller, lower-level networks of Islamic State supporters in Malaysia. It demonstrates how recruiters are able to operate with little organizational support, and that the prospect of joining the Islamic State in Malaysia is an effective appeal to potential recruits. The case also centers on two women, including a teenager, with different types of involvement with the Islamic State, offering an example of women in Malaysia supporting the Islamic State independently of male influence.

Profile 4: Murad Halimmuddin Hassan and Abu Daud Murad – April 2015

On April 5, 2015, the Royal Malaysian Police arrested 17 members of the Islamic State-linked cell Kumpulan Fisabillah in a sequence of raids in Kedah and the Klang Valley. [310] Among those arrested was Murad Halimmuddin Hassan, the leader of the group, and his son, Abu Daud Murad.[311]

Murad, a 49-year-old hardware shop owner at the time of his arrest, was a former senior member of KMM. He participated in conflicts in Afghanistan, Sulawesi, and Syria.[312] As a former member of Jemaah Islamiyah, he served detention in June 2001 for attempting to steal firearms from the Guar Cempendak police station in February 2001.[313] Murad left for Syria in August 2014, traveling through

300 "Malaysian police detain 14-year-old girl trying to join ISIS."

301 "Three held in anti-terror raids," *New Straits Times*, March 5, 2015.

302 "Senior IS member among 3 Malaysians nabbed," *Jakarta Post*, March 4, 2015; Farik Zolkepli, "Gadis IS Dibiayai Lelaki KL – Bukit Aman," *mStar*, February 21, 2015.

303 "Senior IS member among 3 Malaysians nabbed."

304 "Three held in anti-terror raids."

305 "Senior IS member among 3 Malaysians nabbed."

306 Zolkepli, "Gadis IS Dibiayai Lelaki KL – Bukit Aman;" Abdul Hakim Rahman, "Pelajar 14 tahun ditahan cuba sertai IS – Ketua Polis Negara," *Astro AWANI*, February 18, 2015.

307 Zolkepli, "Gadis IS Dibiayai Lelaki KL – Bukit Aman."

308 Ibid.

309 "Malaysian police detain 14-year-old girl trying to join ISIS;" Zolkepli, "Gadis IS Dibiayai Lelaki KL – Bukit Aman."

310 "6 charged for plotting terror attacks in Malaysia," Millennium Post, May 1, 2015.

311 Ibid.

312 G. C. Tan, "Six suspected militants charged with promoting terror," *Star*, May 1, 2015.

313 "Two terror suspects jailed;" "Six suspected militants charged with promoting terror."

Blackwood Hill to Bangkok, Thailand, then on to Istanbul. Lotfi Ariffin, a member of the militant group Ajnad As-Shams, had introduced Murad to Abu Nour, a Syrian citizen who smuggled Murad into Syria through Turkey.[314] Upon his arrival, Murad joined Ajnad As-Shams and then joined the Islamic State as a soldier.[315] He eventually returned to Malaysia in December of the same year and became a spiritual leader, encouraging others to wage jihad.[316] Murad's son Abu Daud, 25 years old at the time of his arrest, became a key correspondent between his father and the cell, planning attacks and recruiting members[317] through WhatsApp groups such as the chat group "Fisabilillah," which recruited 20 people.[318] Another WhatsApp group called "Secure" included all of the individuals who were present during the arrests in Pendang, Kedah.[319]

The meeting on January 30, 2015, in Pendang consisted of 12 members of the cell.[320] During the meeting, Abu Daud presented the idea of kidnapping the prime minister, minister of Home Affairs, and defense minister.[321] The plan was to then exchange these hostages for individuals detained under the Security Offences Special Measures Act.[322] The cell also planned to steal firearms from various military camps in Kedah and to rob a security van transporting money in Genting Highlands.[323]

Murad and his son were both charged under Section 130G(a) of the Penal Code, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years.[324] Murad was also charged under Section 130J(1)(b),[325] and received 18 years for both offenses,[326] whereas Abu Daud received a 12-year sentence for his involvement in the group.[327] Murad died of heart complications on October 21, 2016, at Teluk Intan Hospital in Perak. Abu Daud tried to appeal and reduce his own sentence, arguing that he had never been to Syria.[328] However, the court felt that his plans for terrorist activity were serious enough to warrant such a long sentence.[329]

The importance of this father-son duo lies in their recruiting ability, extensive operational plans, and prior fighting experience. Though the number of disrupted plots in Malaysia is small relative to those in the Philippines and Indonesia, there remain individuals and cells in Malaysia with the desire, resources, and expertise to plot—and possibly execute—complex attacks, including against the Malaysian government.

314 "The two jihadist missions have failed," *Daily Metro*, July 1, 2015.

315 Ibid.

316 Mohd Hamizar Hamid, "IS attempt to kidnap PM, minister exposed," *Daily News*, March 9, 2016; "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts."

317 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts."

318 "Two terror suspects jailed."

319 "The two jihadist missions have failed."

320 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts;" "IS attempt to kidnap PM, minister exposed."

321 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts;" "IS attempt to kidnap PM, minister exposed."

322 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts."

323 "IS attempt to kidnap PM, minister exposed."

324 "Six suspected militants charged with promoting terror."

325 "Malaysian father and son jailed for planning ISIS-inspired terrorist acts."

326 Ibid. One of Murad's sons, Abu Ayub, did not believe his father and eldest brother were guilty. Those in Murad's village of Kampung Batu Hampar saw Murad as a successful businessman and very religious. He was well respected as he led prayers in the village mosque. They also found it hard to believe that he was involved in terrorist activity. For more information, see "Militant suspect well respected by villagers," *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2016.

327 "IS attempt to kidnap PM, minister exposed."

328 "Appeals Court upholds jail sentence on son of former IS militant," *Borneo Post*, February 4, 2017.

329 Ibid.

Profile 5: 21-Year-Old Man Intended to Attack Non-Muslim Places of Worship – September 2017

On September 8, 2017, Malaysian police arrested a 21-year-old unemployed man who was directed by a Malaysian Islamic State member in Syria to commit attacks on non-Muslim places of worship.[330] The man, arrested in Perak, also received instruction from this Malaysian Islamic State member to obtain a pistol and hand grenades, as well as M-16 and AK-47 rifles, from a neighboring country for use in these attacks; police also seized chemicals to be used in improvised explosive devices (IEDs), from his house.[331] He admitted to having been taught how to construct IEDs for large-scale attacks by Dr. Mahmud Ahmad—a high-profile Malaysian fugitive who joined the pro-Islamic State faction of Abu Sayyaf Group—and a Saudi Islamic State bomb specialist, and made three attempts to assemble such IEDs.[332]

The 21-year-old reportedly had additional ties to Abu Sayyaf Group and al-Qa`ida members, and had only joined the Islamic State and pledged *bay`a* in early 2017.[333] This timeline surprised Malaysian investigators, as the Islamic State tends not to trust new members with executing large-scale attacks without first assigning them more minor tasks.[334] Thus, this incident—particularly the training given to this arrestee by high-level operatives—indicated to police the Islamic State's desire to rapidly ramp up attacks in Malaysia and cause the maximum possible amount of damage.[335]

Profile 6: 51-Year-Old Malaysian Housewife – May 2018

On May 9, 2018, the morning of Malaysia's general election, a 51-year-old Malaysian housewife was detained by Malaysia's Special Branch's Counterterrorism Division for her plot to run voters over with her car at a polling station.[336] The woman planned to fill her car with gas canisters and explosives, and then drive to a polling station near her house in Puchong, a town in the state of Selangor; she also sought to attack other non-Muslim places of worship using her car.[337] The woman, who Malaysian intelligence officials cite as the first Malaysian female mastermind of a terrorist plot, was reportedly inspired by Islamic State attacks in France and the United Kingdom that had used cars as weapons.[338] Intelligence sources reported that she had been in contact with Islamic State leadership about her planned attack and believed that an attack on a polling place would symbolize a total rejection of "'un-Islamic democracy'" by the Islamic State.[339] She planned to travel to Syria after the attack.[340]

The woman started joining Islamic State-affiliated chat groups in 2014 but became increasingly

330 Chew, "Malaysia foils Islamic State terror plot to attack places of worship."

331 "Three Men Nabbed Over Daesh Links – IGP," Malaysia General News, September 15, 2017; "Well-trained militant planned large-scale attacks," *Malay Mail*, September 14, 2017.

332 "Three Men Nabbed Over Daesh Links;" Chew, "Malaysia foils Islamic State terror plot." These two sources differ on whether the man succeeded in assembling IEDs; the first one says that "the suspect had built three IEDs," but the second one says that "the suspect tried three times to assemble IEDs."

333 "Three Men Nabbed Over Daesh Links."

334 "Well-trained militant planned large-scale attacks."

335 Ibid.

336 "Housewife in Malaysia gave ISIS the polling day attack plan: Source," *Strait Times*, June 4, 2018.

337 Amy Chew, "Malaysia police arrest 15 terror suspects, including housewife, for planning attacks during elections," Channel NewsAsia, June 1, 2018.

338 Ibid. In its publications, the Islamic State has repeatedly advocated for the use of vehicles to run over pedestrians. Such rhetoric as "run them down with your vehicles" appears in its English-language propaganda, first appearing in the first issue of the group's English-language online magazine Rumiyah. For more information, see Greg Myre, "As ISIS Promotes Vehicle Attacks, Terrorists Strike In Europe And U.S.," NPR, November 1, 2017, and "Among the Believers are Men: Abu Mansur al-Muhajir," Rumiyah 1, September 5, 2016.

339 "Housewife in Malaysia gave ISIS the polling day attack plan."

340 Ibid.

radicalized after her husband suffered from a stroke, three years prior to her attempted attack.[341] Following his stroke, the woman became increasingly focused on the Islamic State's teachings and began more actively calling for attacks in Malaysia and supporters' travel to Syria.[342] Her husband and two sons did not participate in her actions, but a younger sibling of hers was involved.[343] In addition to her planned attack, the woman allegedly worked to recruit others to join the Islamic State via Facebook, Telegram, and a 20-member WhatsApp group named "Makan Makan dgn Kak Nor," or "Eat with Sister Nor."[344] Her identity as the first Malaysian female plotter, combined with her prolific recruitment, raises the question of whether female involvement in attack plotting in Malaysia will increase.

Profile 7: Four Militants Avenging the Death of Muhammad Adib – May 2019

Between May 5 and 7, 2019, Malaysian authorities arrested four militants—a Malaysian laborer (34 years old), an Indonesian (49 years old), and two Rohingya (20- and 25-years old)—suspected of planning attacks on non-Muslim houses of worship during Ramadan; police also sought three other suspects.[345] The Malaysian was arrested in Kuala Berang, Terengganu, the Indonesian in Subang Jaya, Selangor, and the Rohingya men in Kuala Lumpur.[346] The cell's plots were intended to avenge the death of Muhammad Adib, a Malay-Muslim firefighter who died in November 2018 in a riot following a government decision to move a Hindu temple.[347] The cell, established in January 2019, communicated via WhatsApp and reportedly received instruction from a Malaysian in Syria.[348] According to Malaysia's Inspector-General of Police, Abdul Hamid Bador, the cell sought to target Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist houses of worship; assassinate high-profile individuals who they saw as having failed to "'protect the sanctity of Islam;'" and attack entertainment centers.[349] The suspects were found with explosives and weapons; police seized six improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—which Malaysian police claimed were smuggled from a neighboring country—along with a pistol and bullets.[350]

Notably, this cell included two Rohingya men. One, a 20-year-old waiter with refugee status, admitted to supporting the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, an armed group fighting on behalf of Rohingya in Myanmar with alleged Islamist ties.[351] He reportedly had plans to attack the Embassy of Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur and then fight in the Rakhine State.[352] The second Rohingya suspect, a 25-year-old laborer, admitted to having ties to the Islamic State.[353] However, the Rohingya militants' motives for planning these attacks are disputed: While Malaysian authorities presented them as being tied to the death of Muhammad Adib, there is no specific information in the open source to suggest that is in

341 Ibid.

342 Ibid.

343 Chew, "Malaysia police arrest 15 terror suspects."

344 Ibid.; Melissa Goh, "More women radicalised by ISIS to conduct attacks in Malaysia: Counterterror chief," Channel NewsAsia, July 24, 2018.

345 "Malaysia arrests 4 Islamic State-linked militants, foils terror plot," dpa-AFX, May 13, 2019; "Malaysia police arrest four over Ramadan attack plot," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, May 13, 2019.

346 Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

347 "Malaysia arrests 4 Islamic State-linked militants."

348 Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

349 "Malaysian police foil terror attacks with arrests of four suspects;" "Malaysia arrests 4 Islamic State-linked militants."

350 Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

351 Ibid.; C. Christine Fair, "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Not the Jihadis You Might Expect," Lawfare, December 9, 2018.

352 Rodzi, "Malaysia foils plot by suspected militants to 'avenge' fireman's death by targeting VIPs, houses of worship."

353 "Malaysia police arrest 4 linked to ISIS bomb plot," *Defense Post*, May 13, 2019.

fact true.[354]

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

While the case studies of four plots and seven profiles illustrate some interesting aspects of Islamic State militant behavior in Malaysia, there are a few limitations to note. This is a convenience sample of cases and by no means representative of all such plots or Islamic State militants in Malaysia for the time period. Nonetheless, even with this limitation, a few insights discussed in the chapter bear mentioning.

Turning first to the plots, in terms of attacks' success rates, only one case study plot—the Movida bar attack—was 'successful,' as it resulted in injuries. The first Islamic State plot, the ASEAN Summit, was foiled, as were all the other plots discussed. Across the plots, targets varied considerably. Only one plot had an international target (ASEAN Summit), while two focused on non-Muslim houses of worship. These locations were seemingly selected for a variety of reasons, including targeting domestic and international government officials, tourists, and, in the case of the Movida bar attack, those "conducting sinful activities during Ramadan."[355] In general though, Islamic State-linked plots in Malaysia seemed to be overwhelmingly focused on civilian targets, notably in public spaces and religious institutions, whereas attacks against state targets were in the minority.

Across the different plots, there seem to be some similarities in counterterrorism implications. The day after the raid that preempted the ASEAN Summit plot (April 2015), the Malaysian Parliament passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). As the Movida Bar attack (June 2016) did not go as planned, its primary architect, Wanndy, assuaged reportedly frustrated Islamic State leaders by vowing that he would stage multiple attacks across Malaysia. Yet, over the next year, the Royal Malaysia Police foiled numerous attempts by Wanndy to create another successful attack in Malaysia. Several months later, the Merdeka Day plot (August 2016) was thwarted due to the sharing of biometric information on suspected terrorists between Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Turning to the profiles, a notable similarity among these profiles is the important role of social media: Many of the men and women arrested were either radicalized online and found online communities or communicated with Islamic State members online, whether to travel to Syria or conduct operations within Malaysia. Additionally, it seems from these case studies that individuals did a large part of the planning through social media platforms; for example, one of the cases—regarding the four militants avenging the death of Adib, a Malay-Muslim firefighter—indicated how the cell communicated via online applications such as WhatsApp. The two women profiled in this study who sought to travel did so for marital reasons, intending to either get married or join their husbands. But only one of the cases here involved a woman in an active role; the woman arrested in May 2018 was involved in a failed plot, where she sought to attack a polling station with a car full of explosives.

For the male profiles, sources reported individuals' involvement in plots concerning a variety of targets, ranging from houses of worship to government officials. Unlike the women featured here, some of the men had prior involvement in other terrorist groups, such as KMM or JI. A notable similarity among these profiles with those of the women is the important role of social media: Many of the men arrested were either radicalized online and found online communities or communicated with members based in Syria for either traveling to Syria or conducting operations within Malaysia. Additionally, it seems from these case studies that individuals did a large part of the planning through social media platforms; for example, one of the cases—regarding the four militants avenging the death of Adib, a Malay-Muslim firefighter—indicated how the cell communicated via online applications such as WhatsApp.

354 R. Loheswar, "Iman Research: Re-examine two detained Rohingya suspects if they were indeed plotting to avenge fireman Adib's death," *Malay Mail*, May 14, 2019.

355 Gunaratna, "Islamic State's First Terror Attack in Malaysia," p. 1.

Chapter 4: Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism in Malaysia

In the previous chapters, the authors assessed the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia by examining associated attacks and plots, as well as trends in the arrests of affiliated individuals acting either through small cells or independently. This chapter takes a step back—and forward—to examine the broader measures undertaken by Malaysian authorities to develop a counterterrorism infrastructure, and tackle both regional and local violent extremism. Such measures are critical to ensure that militant groups are prevented from exploiting the historical context of the politicization of Islam and societal grievances in Malaysia, as well as its geographical vulnerabilities. Additionally, this chapter takes a deep dive into the notion of resilience to violent extremism in the Malaysian context by unpacking the country's persistent ethnic and religious schisms as vulnerability ripe for exploitation. While the Malaysian government has implemented a bevy of legislative and law enforcement measures to stem the growth of militant activity in the country, an important component remains building resilience among its population to violent extremism. This aspect is perhaps even more important in the context of Malaysia, where Islamic State-influenced plots and attacks have remained low, especially in comparison to the Philippines and Indonesia, but there are high levels of radicalization, as depicted by the findings of this report and other research.[356]

Containing the Islamic State's Influence in Malaysia

Overall, the findings of this report indicate that between 2014 and 2019, Islamic State-affiliated activity in Malaysia featured a wide range of activities, including but not limited to proactive recruitment of a diverse pool, actual and attempted travel to Iraq and Syria, planning of plots within Malaysia, and fundraising for Islamic State affiliates. Over the years, about 23 attack plots and 319 arrests affiliated with the Islamic State were reported in the open source, with the arrests occurring in at least 15 provinces. Among men and women arrested due to links to the Islamic State, a large proportion of men (29%) were arrested for planning or threatening an attack, whereas women were largely arrested for participating in more passive roles and for attempted or planned travel overseas. While the large majority of the arrests included Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos had a notable presence as well (about 8.8% and 6.9%, respectively, of all arrests), suggesting that Malaysia may continue to be used as a transit hub for regional militants, especially those with links to the Islamic State. Additionally, the lack of an official Islamic State affiliate in Malaysia and the emergence instead of disparate cells and social media groups affiliated with the Islamic State means that preventing growth in the Islamic State's influence within the country will require a more holistic CVE approach, one which is able to reach the most vulnerable Malaysian communities and build resiliency to radicalization.

Although there was only one Islamic State-affiliated plot that resulted in casualties between 2014 and 2019, the presence of regional militants in the country suggests that Malaysia may serve as a logistical hub in the future for groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group, al-Qa`ida, and Jemaah Islamiyah.[357] In particular, Sabah's proximity and shared borders with the southern Philippines and Indonesia places it in a precarious position as far as controlling the movement of militants is concerned. Of particular concern are security gaps along land and sea borders, a large number of informal cross-border channels, and issues in migration policies.[358] In general, Philippines-based groups, such as ASG, have tended to exploit these vulnerabilities and have played a role in recruiting Malaysians.[359] Such movement of militants calls for continued enhanced border security, especially at airports and around the Sulu Sea.

356 See, for example, Chan, "The Malaysian 'Islamic' State versus the Islamic State (IS)," pp. 415-437.

357 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Malaysia*.

358 Mauro Testaverde, Harry Moroz, Claire H. Hollweg, and Achim Schmillen, *Migrating to opportunity: Overcoming Barriers to Labor Mobility in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2017).

359 Shashi Jayakumar, "The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia," *CTC Sentinel* 10:2 (2017).

Criminal activities such as illicit and illegal smuggling, piracy, and kidnapping have generally been on the rise in the Sabah region.[360] In this way, the lack of security in the Sulu Sea has provided militants with the opportunity to engage in criminal activities, such as kidnap-for-ransom activities, which can provide militant groups with much-needed funds to conduct operations. For example, in June 2019, 10 gunmen with suspected links to ASG kidnapped 10 fishermen off the coast of Sabah, Malaysia, an area known for pirate attacks.[361] Relatedly, the authors' dataset, which shows a significant number of individuals arrested for fundraising and channeling funds, also highlights the need for Malaysian authorities to remain focused on countering the financing of terrorism. According to the authors' data, for example, individuals arrested for facilitating funding experienced the largest increase between 2015 and 2016, rising from a single case in 2015 to 22 individuals in 2016.

Collectively, the Malaysian government has focused on legislative measures, law enforcement, cooperation with international partners, and enhancement of border security to mitigate the risk of the Islamic State's influence in the country.[362] Malaysia has historically had a strong counterterrorism apparatus, in terms of both law enforcement and legal capabilities, which has partially contributed to the high number of Islamic State-affiliated arrests seen in the country. The primary counterterrorism force, the Special Branch Counterterrorism Division, operates out of the Royal Malaysia Police's headquarters in Bukit Aman, Kuala Lumpur. Its operational success in preventing terrorist attacks over the past two decades can be attributed to effective intelligence collection and cooperation with other regional and international agencies.[363] Perhaps most important, though, are the expansive powers granted to the Special Branch by Malaysian counterterrorism laws.

Malaysia's original counterterrorism law, the Internal Security Act (ISA), was enacted in 1960 in response to the communist insurgency in Malaysia.[364] It empowered the Malaysian government to detain anyone deemed to be a likely threat to Malaysian security before the commission of a crime and to extend their detention indefinitely.[365] Officials, however, frequently used it to detain political opponents and suppress human rights activism.[366] The ISA was repealed in 2012 and was replaced with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) in 2015.[367] A response to the threat posed by the Islamic State and its supporters in Malaysia, POTA authorizes detaining terrorism suspects without charges for up to 59 days and for up to two years without a trial.[368] Indefinite detention of suspects is possible with the approval of a largely unsupervised panel, the Prevention of Terrorism Board.[369]

As noted above, Malaysian counterterrorism forces rely on POTA to suppress militant activity through detentions, and in general, the Malaysian police have been at the forefront of constraining the activities of Islamic State sympathizers and supporters, with E8—the counterterrorism division of the Special

360 Samuel D. Henkin, *Dynamic Dimensions of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Sabah, Malaysia* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021).

361 "Ten Fishermen Kidnapped by Suspected Abu Sayyaf Militants," Maritime Executive, June 18, 2019.

362 Nicholas Chan, "The Malaysian State Responds to IS: Force, Discourse, and Dilemma," Middle East Institute, August 15, 2017.

363 Riviere, p. 9.

364 Bilveer Singh, "Prevention of Terrorism: Relevance of POTA in Malaysia," *RSIS Commentary no. 75*, March 31, 2015, p. 1.

365 Humphreys, p. 24.

366 "Creating a Culture of Fear: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Malaysia," Human Rights Watch, October 26, 2015.

367 Ibid.; Singh, "Prevention of Terrorism," p. 2.

368 Emma Broches, "Southeast Asia's Overlooked Foreign Fighter Problem," Lawfare, June 5, 2020.

369 Riviere, p. 16.

Branch—playing the most active role in counterterrorism efforts.[370] Malaysian authorities also rely quite a lot on the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code for terrorism-related detentions.[371] The Special Measures Against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act allows Malaysian authorities to appropriate and suspend travel documents if an individual is suspected of having intentions to "engage in the commission or support of terrorist acts."[372] Such legal instruments have been coupled with a counter-messaging effort, an intensive campaign that has sought to discredit the Islamic State. For example, the police have relayed to the public information on Islamic State-related plots and charges, which has helped raise awareness.[373] In October 2014, the National Fatwa Council released a *fatwa* (religious rulings) prohibiting Malaysians from fighting for the Islamic State and challenging its notions of martyrdom and jihad.[374] Stepping in the right direction, in October 2019, the Malaysian government passed legislation to set up the National Anti-Financial Crime Centre (NAFCC) to coordinate foreign and domestic financial crime investigations that include activities such as drug trafficking and kidnapping, among others.[375] The government also launched MyFINet in late 2019, a public-private partnership that connects multiple institutions such as the Royal Malaysia Police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Royal Malaysian Customs with the purpose of sharing financial intelligence across institutions in order to detect and dismantle terrorist financing.[376] In addition, the government has also been eager to facilitate counterterrorism efforts more broadly and has continued to engage internationally through various platforms such as the United Nations, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, ASEAN, and the East Asia Summit.[377] These efforts can be even more fruitful if they are coupled with parallel efforts to uncover the exact routes and channels used by militant and criminal networks to move individuals and funds.

However, Malaysian immigration law has loopholes that enable the country to serve as a safe haven and transit point for foreign fighters, also opening the country to the challenge/threat of Malaysian fighters returning from Syria. In 2019, the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism* highlighted the concern that Malaysia remained a potential transit point for members of various terrorist groups, including "ISIS, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), al-Qa'ida, and Jemaah Islamiya," especially to enter the southern Philippines.[378] Weak border security also opens up the risk that foreign fighters may at some point attempt to conduct attacks within the country. For example, in 2019, Malaysian security services arrested Egyptian nationals who were reported to be members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and had plans to conduct several large-scale attacks.[379]

Malaysia allows for repatriation of its foreign fighters provided that they submit to a rehabilitation program. Former Deputy Prime Minister and current UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi claimed in October 2015 that this deradicalization program had a 95% success rate; however, this statistic is

370 "Malaysia's anti-terror chief targeted by ISIS," *Straits Times*, June 24, 2017. For an explanation of how POTA has been used to facilitate the deradicalization program, see Mohd Mizan Bin Mohammad Aslam, "Deradicalization Programs for SOSMA, POTA, and POCA Detainees in Malaysia," Middle East Institute, June 23, 2020. For a defense of SOSMA and POTA, see Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass and Jasminder Singh, "Terrorism Laws in Malaysia: The Continuing Case for SOSMA and POTA," Middle East Institute, April 20, 2021. Additionally, Malaysian authorities frequently rely on the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code for terrorism-related detentions.

371 See "Malaysia: Cases Involving Charges Related to Supporting Islamic State," Library of Congress, July 5, 2016.

372 Chan, "The Malaysian State Responds to IS."

373 Ibid.

374 Ibid.

375 "Malaysia's Anti-Financial Crime Centre Act is ready for action," ACCA, February 12, 2020.

376 Shalini Kumar, "Financial Intelligence Network launched to combat financial crimes," *Sun Daily*, November 5, 2019.

377 *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Malaysia*.

378 Ibid.

379 Ray Sherman, "Malaysia: Police Arrest 9 Linked to African-Based Terror Group," BenarNews, March 10, 2019.

unverified and even outright rejected by some experts.[380] Abuza argues that "disengagement" is a more accurate term for the program than "deradicalization," as repatriated militants have no option but to agree to the program and most retain their extremist perspectives after the program.[381] In recent years, Malaysia has revamped the program to address religious extremism specifically.[382] However, the question of whether these programs effectively deradicalize returned militants with entrenched extremist ideas and combat experience remains. Further, fighters in the Middle East can avoid the deradicalization program entirely and slip back into Malaysia undetected, as the country does not require visas for entries from Syria, Iraq, or Turkey.[383]

Thus far, these efforts seem to be effective. For example, in early May 2021, shared intelligence between the Philippines and Malaysia resulted in the arrest of eight ASG militants in Sabah, and two weeks later, Malaysian police conducted a raid in Sabah in the northeast portion of Malaysian Borneo, which resulted in the death of five ASG members in Sabah.[384] In this way, Malaysian authorities have made a concerted effort to tackle both domestic and external terrorist elements. However, an important component within the suite of measures to tackle domestic terrorism at home are CVE initiatives, which include preventing the radicalization of Malaysians and building community resilience to violent extremism. Assessing the trajectory of the Islamic State in Malaysia is complicated by the movement's diversity of detainees, supporters, and sympathizers as well as the role of online radicalization. Radicalization to violence is a process that is personal to the individual, but also one that necessarily involves the intersection and convergence of multilevel socioeconomic and political factors. In a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society like Malaysia's, understanding the impact of the Islamic State, or violent extremism more generally, and preventing or nurturing resistance to its appeal requires a reflection on the country's current sociopolitical landscape, in addition to the historical environment that was covered in Chapter 1 of this report. To that end, the remainder of this chapter explores prospects for building social capital within Malaysia to build community resilience to violent extremism and presents some recommendations that take into account local dynamics relevant to the Islamic State threat such as the presence and movement of regional fighters, and the role of gender.

Focusing on Building Resilience

As the preceding chapters show, individuals affiliated with the Islamic State in Malaysia come from different backgrounds and socioeconomic strata with equally varied motivations. They are men and women, even families with children. According to the data presented in this report with respect to the arrests of Islamic State-affiliated individuals, they include (now former) military personnel, government officials, students, artists, and wiremen.[385] Some were previously with KMM or received weapons training in locations such as Afghanistan and Sulawesi. Others returned from Syria.[386] Many had never been in trouble with the law.[387] The drivers of their participation encompassed a wide range of personal motivations, including search for adventure outside the drudgery of routine and

380 Daniel Besant, "Is Malaysia a world leader in the deradicalisation of Islamist militants?" *Southeast Asia Globe*, January 14, 2016.

381 Ibid.

382 Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, "Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia: Past Experience and Future Prospects," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9:6 (2017): p. 7.

383 Broches.

384 Henkin.

385 See, for example, Farik Zolkepli, "14-year-old IS recruit nabbed," *Star*, February 19, 2015; Chris Lau, "Face-to-face with a M'sian jihadi in Syria," Malaysiakini, August 2, 2014.

386 See, for example, "Response by Dato' Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Minister of Home Affairs, to the Thirteenth Sitting of Parliament," Parliamentary Hansard, D.R.06.04.2015, April 6, 2015, pp. 145-146.

387 Responding to a question in Parliament on May 25, 2015, Minister of Home Affairs, Dato' Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, pointed out that 75% of the 107 detained by authorities had been recruited through social media with a majority of them having been "clean skins" or first-time offenders.

redemption for past sins; political, in pursuit of redress for grievances of oppression and injustice; and religious, in reliance on a theological basis from a particular (mis)understanding of Islam.[388] Because these drivers overlap, it is difficult to determine their relative influence. Almost always, these individuals seemed to have a blinkered sense of purpose and blinding sincerity. Not all fully appreciated the implications or ultimate consequences of their intended actions.[389] Additionally, allegiances can be fluid, rendering a segmented approach to determining whether an individual is linked to the Islamic State or another movement too rigid, a phenomenon not unique to Malaysia, but also found in other places like the Philippines, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The al-Qa`ida-aligned "Tandzim Al-Qaeda Malaysia," for example, which was convened by former JI operative Yazid Sufaat, was at one point linked to the Islamic State.[390] Such fluidity in membership has generally served as a significant challenge for counterterrorism and countering violent extremism policy communities.

Unraveling these factors to inform more nuanced policy responses is tricky enough. However, predicting, preventing, and preempting individual tipping points is rife with added difficulty. Not all radicals, after all, commit violence, even if they may think or preach it; distinguishing radicalization from recruitment is important. Many of those arrested by the Malaysian authorities certainly did not act upon their beliefs, although others did variously support, plan, or facilitate plots or attacks. Radicalization to violence is a process that is personal to the individual, but also one that necessarily involves understanding "how complex multilevel factors (e.g. individual, family, community, national, and international) intersect and converge with multiple co-occurring systems (e.g. psychological, educational, social, cultural, local, economic, legal, political, institutional, media, environmental, and global)."[391] The brief historical overview of militancy in Malaysia, as covered in Chapter 1, and the findings regarding the various Islamic State-affiliated plots and arrests (Chapters 2 and 3) suggest that broad preventive measures to prevent and counter violent extremism need to be prioritized to stem the influence of the Islamic State in the country.

Resilience and Violent Extremism

The research in this report shows that Islamic State activity in Malaysia involves proactive recruitment and complex networks, necessitating a communal response to reach those who might be vulnerable to recruitment. This section delves into the concept of resilience-building as part of this P/CVE approach in undermining the appeal of the Islamic State, in particular, and the polarization of extremism in Malaysia's multicultural landscape, more generally.

Although resilience is often thought of as a desirable trait, different policies and practices of resilience can redefine the relations of security and insecurity in different ways. In certain circumstances, government-led resilience strategies involving community monitoring and social control in the name of security have actually undermined trust and created or entrenched fissures within the target community as well as between the community and the state.[392] In Malaysia, the politicization of Islam

388 Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, pp. 70-73.

389 Author (Noor) conversations with Ahmad El-Muhammady, assistant professor, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia and Associate Fellow, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, 2015-2017.

390 Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, p. 61; Ahmad El-Muhammady, "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia" in *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs – From the Desert to World Cities: The New Terrorism* (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2015), p. 109.

391 Michele Grossman, "Resilience to Violent Extremism and Terrorism: A Multisystemic Analysis," in Michael Ungar ed., *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2021), pp. 293-317.

392 See, for example, Jon Coaffee, "Rings of Steel, Rings of Concrete and Rings of Confidence: Designing out Terrorism in Central London Pre and post 9/11," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28:1 (2004): pp. 201-211; Jon Coaffee, "From Counterterrorism to Resilience," *European Legacy* 11:4 (2006); Jon Coaffee and Peter Rogers, "Rebordering the City for New Security Challenges: From Counter-terrorism to Community Resilience," *Space and Polity* 12:1 (2008), pp. 101-118.

over the decades, elaborated in Chapter 1, that served to buttress the identity and self-awareness of the nation's Malay-Muslims has instead resulted in a sense of alienation and resentment among many other Malaysians.[393] This has, in turn, impacted trust and social cohesion in the country.

The idea of cultivating resilience to the recruitment propaganda of the Islamic State, on the one hand, or to "bounce back" after a traumatic experience with violent extremism (for example, involvement with the Islamic State or surviving a terrorist attack), on the other, is very much tied to the availability of this cohesion and social capital; that is, what social networks are willing and able to do for each other, especially in times of crisis, based on trust. This social capital is, itself, influenced by prevailing social structures: culture, religion, and language, among others.[394] The bonds between and among Malaysia's diverse communities are indicative of the nation's social capital. Put another way, how integrated or polarized the different ethnic groups are in Malaysia could determine the impact of extremist activity on the nation—in particular, the susceptibility of Malaysians to appeals by the Islamic State or similar groups in the future or the propensity for Malaysians to regroup as a nation in the event of a more significant attack than the one inflicted upon the Movida bar in Puchong.

Resilience in Practice? The Malaysian Context

This sentiment of nationhood is, of course, impacted by both internal realities and external developments.[395] A 2019 study uncovered three main explanations for the appeal of religious extremist groups among Malaysian youth: misinterpretation of ideology, cross-border notion of the Islamic *ummah*, and charismatic leaders of influence. The lack of knowledge about Islam, and consequently its misinterpretation, is underscored by other studies, as well as in interviews with individuals involved with the Islamic State.[396] A 2015 study by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan that surveyed Muslim students in Malaysian public universities (aged between 18 and 22) showed that 45.9% were unsure of whether the concept of jihad in Islam allowed for killing without reason or if it was an order of self-defense based on clearly defined parameters. Additionally, 46.4% of the respondents were unsure whether satisfying the lust of Islamic State members could be considered jihad.[397] Through interviews, those who relied on religious justification to join the Islamic State revealed that they did so for different, personal reasons. Some pursued absolution, and others saw suicide bombing as their quickest way to martyrdom.[398]

Whereas the construct of the Muslim *ummah*—an imagined community transcending national boundaries—is not new and has existed within Malaysia at different points historically (as discussed in Chapter 1), the vision of a physical Islamic state with defined borders was reignited by the rise of the Islamic State. In the case of Malaysia, it was a "very substantial and persuasive proposition among youth to participate in religious extremism" alongside the other two drivers of ideological misguidance

393 See, for example, Bridget Welsh, "Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 18, 2020, and Lee Hwok Aun, "Fault Lines - and Common Ground - in Malaysia's Ethnic Relations and Policies," ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, August 15, 2017.

394 Grossman; Lauren van Metre, "Community Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kenya," *Peaceworks* 122, United States Institute of Peace, 2016.

395 Nationhood refers to the sense of belonging to, or integration within, a larger group of people united by citizenship, a shared sense of history, culture, and language, among others. The road to nationhood can be particularly fraught in post-colonial countries seeking to rebuild fractured communal ties in the aftermath of colonial divide-and-rule policies.

396 See, for example, Mohd. Khairul Che Nordin and Muhamad Syafriz Mhd. Nazer, "Faktor Penglibatan Belia Muslim Malaysia dengan Terorisme: Analisis Perspektif PDRM dan Panel Pemulihan Deradikalisasi [Factors of Malaysian Muslim Youth Involvement in Terrorism: An Analysis on the Perspectives of PDRM and Deradicalization [sic] Panel]," *Journal of Usuluddin* 48:1 (2020).

397 Nursalihah Ahmad Raston et al., *Persepi Belia di Malaysia Terhadap Jihad dan Gerakan Islam Radikal [Youth Perceptions in Malaysia Towards Jihad and Radical Islamic Movements]* (Kuala Lumpur: IYRES Publication Unit, 2016).

398 Farik Zolkepli, "Malaysian Militants are Dying to Become Martyrs," *Star*, January 12, 2016; Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, p. 70.

and charismatic leaders.[399]

Indeed, beyond the youth, many other Malaysians were swayed by these factors. According to the Royal Malaysia Police, between the end of 2014 and mid-2015, 10 families, many of them led by young parents, left Malaysia for Syria, deeming their home country *taghut*, idolatrous and having strayed beyond the boundaries of Islam. In their eyes, relocating to the Islamic State-controlled areas in Syria was a "dream come true," a return to the glory days of the caliphate past.[400] Others looked to the future, convinced that the battle for the end of times would take place in Shyam, or modern-day Syria, as part of the prophesy in the *hadith* (or reported sayings and traditions of the Prophet Mohammad) of the Army of Mahdi carrying black banners.[401]

Groups like Kumpulan Fisabilillah,[402] on the other hand, were intent on bringing the fight back home and planning attacks on areas previously targeted by the KMM in the early 2000s. These included commercial and entertainment areas in Kuala Lumpur, the federal administrative capital of Putrajaya, and a Carlsberg brewing factory in the state of Selangor.[403] A 16-year-old schoolboy who had intended to kidnap and harm a shop assistant but then had a change of heart halfway through his attack had been persuaded into viewing non-Muslims as *kafir harbi*, to be justifiably killed.[404]

The ethnic, religious, and linguistic faultlines baked into Malaysia's political landscape since its colonial past are ripe for the types of destabilization that extremists hope to catalyze. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the ethnic and religious identity of Malays, for example, is fused in the country's constitution and the nation's subconscious.[405] In effect, what this has led to is the perceived threat to one half of that identity also being treated as an affront to the other. A defense in the name of Islam would therefore also preserve the essence of being Malay, and vice versa.[406]

In Malaysia's diverse milieu, this, in turn, sets off an action-reaction chain with Malaysians of other ethnicities and faiths, presenting significant challenges for inter-communal relations. Unfortunately, it also doubles as an opportunity for political exploitation. In 2005, then-UMNO Youth Chief and now Defense Minister Hishamuddin Hussein infamously waved an unsheathed Malay *keris* (a traditional dagger symbolic of Malay culture) in an ethnically charged party general assembly where pledges of an uprising were threatened if Malay rights were challenged.[407] The former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahiaddin Yassin, controversially proclaimed a decade before he took office that he was "Malay first … but being Malay does not mean I am not Malaysian."[408] Since the theatrics of politics can, in fact, have very real, violent consequences, the risk of rhetoric stoking ethnic/religious sentiments or "political

399 Norhafezah Yusof, Amrita Kaur, Mohd Azizzudin Mohd Sani, and Rosna Awang Hashim, "A Qualitative Expert Interview Approach towards Understanding Religious Extremism among Malaysian Youth," *Qualitative Report* 24:7 (2019): pp. 1,577-1,592. The role of charismatic leaders is not determinative, however. Others posit that peer influence and social media have played a key role in youth radicalization in Malaysia. See, for example, Nordin and Nazer.

400 Muzliza Mustaffa, "Families leaving for Isis as Malaysia not Islamic enough, says top anti-terrorism cop," *Malaysian Insider*, May 23, 2015.

401 Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, p. 71.

402 Aliza Shah, "New extremist groups uncovered," *New Straits Times*, December 16, 2016.

403 El-Muhammady, "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia," p. 111.

404 G.C. Tan, Farik Zolkepli, Nadirah Rodzi, and Danial Albakri, "Teen stages IS 'lone cub' attack," *Star*, January 13, 2016.

405 Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines a Malay as a Muslim who habitually speaks the Malay language and adheres to Malay customs. In the past, therefore, the Bahasa Malaysia colloquial phrase for convert to Islam was to "masuk Melayu," or to enter into being Malay.

406 For a more detailed exposition, see Elina Noor, "Deconstructing Identity: Ethnicity, Religion, and Inter-Communal Relations in Malaysia" in Luca Anceschi ed. *Conflict, religion, and culture: domestic and international implications for Southeast Asia and Australia* (Quezon City: Philippines-Australia Studies Network, 2009), pp. 57-74.

407 Hishamuddin later apologized for causing unease, although he defended his action. Teh Eng Hock, "Hisham regrets wielding keris, he apologises to all Malaysians," *Star*, April 26, 2008.

408 "Muhyiddin: I'm Malay first," KiniTV via YouTube, March 31, 2010.

radicalization" is especially acute in multicultural Malaysia.[409]

Ironically, it was the democratization of the political space in Malaysia beginning in 2008 that saw a public hardening of communal positions and tested the government's stewardship of the nation.[410] Pluralism, or the previously uncontentious notion of different communities living alongside and actively engaging or integrating with each other, came to be heavily debated in multicultural Malaysia. As younger Malaysians in particular claim their space and ask hard questions about ethnicity, religion, and nationalism, the government will increasingly be tested by the balance of affording constructive public debate without inadvertently, or indeed deliberately, fraying the social fabric of the nation.

This rhetoric will be especially important in the online environment with a growing number of Malaysians—most of them under 40 years of age—interacting digitally more frequently and for longer periods of time. A weighted national survey in 2020 by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission tracked a 155% increase of internet users aged between five and 17 from 2016 to 2020. The survey also found that 98% of Malaysian internet users went online for social purposes: 98% relied on the internet for text communication versus 96.5% in 2018, 93% for social media (85.6% in 2018), and 87% to view or download videos (77.6% in 2018).[411] Overall, communication-based online activities grew from 60-96% in 2018 to 81-98% in 2020. Part of this rise was because of COVID-19-induced movement restrictions imposed in Malaysia, but the reduction in broadband and data tariffs over the years has also contributed to increased use of the internet for longer periods of time.

Greater online interaction does not necessarily translate into a corresponding development of meaningful intercultural bridges or social capital offline. A study of six online communities in Malaysia concluded that while online networking facilitates interactions, basic elements of social capital such as trust and norms of reciprocity have remained stymied by sociocultural factors. The flipside of these online communities connecting their constituencies based on ethnicity, religion, dialect, or language means that those shared characteristics may also end up obstructing greater social capital among different groups of people. Real-life integration through online means in the Malaysian context, therefore, remains only half of the story.[412]

The good news is that despite these prevailing social schisms that continue to be a vulnerability ripe for exploitation, several surveys and studies have shown that Malaysians generally reject what the Islamic State represents. In 2015, the Pew Research Center found that 64% of Malaysians polled expressed a negative view of the Islamic State.[413] A local survey published in 2016 of 1,200 students from public and private institutions of higher learning in peninsular Malaysia indicated that a majority rejected the Islamic State, with many not even having a fully developed understanding of whether the group was a political, religious, or terrorist organization. Slightly over half (54%) of the respondents did not accept the Islamic State's cause or the promise of heavenly rewards associated with it (66.7%), 72.1% would not donate to the group's cause, 80.9% would not invite friends to join the Islamic State, and 83.4% would not invite their social media contacts to join the Islamic State. Those who responded

409 Ahmad El-Muhammady quoting Yazid Sufaat when speaking at a panel on "US and Malaysia Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism" at the International Symposium on Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, co-hosted by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland and the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) on January 12, 2021.

410 Several high-profile conversion cases became sensitive flashpoints for ethnic relations around that time. These included the case of Lina Joy, who sought to have her conversion out of Islam formally recognized in her identity card; and R Subashini and S Shamala, whose respective husbands had abandoned their marriage, converted to Islam, and converted their children without their wife's knowledge or consent.

411 Internet Users Survey 2020, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020.

412 Wan Munira Wan Jaafar, "Perkembangan Modal Social dalam Kalangan Komuniti atas Talian (Social Capital Development in Online Communities), *Malaysian Journal of Youth Studies* 15 (2016): pp. 107-120. The article addresses the link between social capital and national integration through (i) an online survey of six selected online communities covering a total of 162 members, and (ii) interviews with eight online community administrators, two government representatives, and 27 random members of the public.

413 Jacob Poushter, "In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS," Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015.

affirmatively to these categories comprised 15.1%, 9.3%, 7.9%, 4.8%, and 4.8%, respectively.[414]

A broader study in 2019 beyond just youths revealed similar findings. The quantitative survey of 5,232 Malaysians who represented the three selected sectors of defense and security, education, and the general public found that 90.8% of those polled rejected the Islamic State. Of the more than 5,000 respondents, 60 were chosen for a focus group discussion testing their understanding of the Islamic State with nine questions. The results showed that 79.2% correctly answered four out of the nine questions. However, in both the Pew and mixed-methods surveys, the proportion of respondents who were either unsure (25%) or who held a favorable (11% for Pew, 9.2% for the other) view of the Islamic State warrants sufficient concern given the potential harm that can be associated with the group's rising influence in the country.[415]

Although the threat of violent extremism has peppered the landscape over the decades, Malaysia has not yet suffered a large-scale terrorist attack. As such, the risk remains distant for the general Malaysian public, but among ordinary Malaysians, there is a minimal sense of awareness or ownership of the country's safety. The upside to this is that the populace is able to live and carry out their daily activities free of the chronic stressors that accompany a highly securitized environment. People do not have to walk through metal detectors to shop at malls or surrender their belongings for security checks in order to get through hotel doors. There are few warning signs or announcements in public spaces to report suspicious behavior, even though there was an arrest of a man at a Light Rail Transit station who had planned a suicide attack in 2016.[416] It is not until there are visible signs of security measures, such as when military and law enforcement personnel carry out joint patrols in tourist and other public areas, that Malaysians are reminded of the need to stay vigilant.[417] Given the number of attacks foiled (as detailed in the preceding chapters) and the relatively minor impact of the Movida bombing, Malaysia's security forces have in fact become a victim of their own success in thwarting the terrorist threat.

Looking Ahead: Social Capital as Resilience against Violent Extremism in Malaysia

The strength of Malaysia's social capital has not been truly stress-tested since the communist Malayan Emergency officially ended in 1989.[418] Although preserving inter-communal harmony in Malaysia is a priority broader than just preventing or countering violent extremism, it is nonetheless a key aspect of exactly that objective. Building a reservoir of trust and a vision of a shared future among the younger generation is crucial in advancing that goal.

For this reason, various government as well as civil society-led efforts have been initiated to boost resilience in preventing or tempering the lure of violent extremism, particularly among the youth. MyAman is a collaborative social media repository involving both government and nongovernmental actors to engage community members "interested in making a stand against violent extremism."[419] Its online presence is on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where content includes photos carrying

414 This was a cross-sectional study incorporating questionnaires and focus group discussions. Che Mohd Aziz Yaacob, Bakri Mat, Fakhrorazi Ahmad, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, Rusdi Omar, and Kamarul Zaman Haji Yusoff, "Kefahaman dan Penerimaan Mahasiswa Universiti Awam Terhadap Gerakan ISIS [Understanding and Acceptance of the ISIS Movement among Public University Students]," *Malaysian Journal of Youth Studies* 15 (2016): pp. 89-106.

415 Che Mohd Aziz Yaacob, Kamarulnizam Abdullah, and Mohd Sofian Omar Fauzee, "Pengaruh kefahaman dan penerimaan rakyat Malaysia terhadap perjuangan ideologi Daesh [Malaysian attitude [sic] and perception on [sic] Daesh's ideological struggle]," *Kajian Malaysia* 37:2 (2019): pp. 121-145.

416 "'Lone wolf attacks more dangerous,'" *Star*, September 11, 2016.

417 "Police and military to step up joint security patrols," Bernama, January 19, 2016.

418 For more on the communist insurgency, see Ong Weichong, *Malaysia's Defeat of Armed Communism: The Second Emergency, 1968-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

419 MyAman maintains accounts on Twitter and Instagram.

messages of diversity, kindness, and harmony; cartoons dispelling the appeal of violent extremism; videos of interviews with former extremists; and casual chats about critical thinking. The platform features social media content creators; uses hashtags like #SenjataSaya (#MyWeapon) to spread messages of positivity, agency, and empowerment; and crowdsources multicultural content through video competitions such as #Hype2019. MyAman's social media reach, however, has been modest, if "likes" and "followers" are any metrics. Its Facebook account has over 7,700 followers with video views ranging from single digits to a few thousand. Its Instagram account has just over 1,000 followers, while its Twitter account has approximately 100 followers.

Another government resource is a peer-to-peer guide for youths written by Thomas Koruth Samuel and published by the Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) in Kuala Lumpur.[420] The guide, "Don't lah wei!,"[421] is meant to "equip young leaders with the skills and tools to understand the deception of the extremists; the manner in which past and current heroes overcame adversities and addressed grievances without using indiscriminate violence; critically examine the claims and 'promises' of the terrorists; understand the potential for women in both terrorism and countering terrorism; and study the radicalization process to better understand the vulnerable, paving the way for an intervention to reverse the process."[422] In short and as the title states, it aims to ensure that "your *kawan2* (friends) never becomes a terrorist."

To counteract the sterile nature of bureaucratic approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE), the guide recounts a youth leaders' workshop designed to facilitate CVE outreach to peers. Two Student Leaders Against Youth Extremism and Radicalization (SLAYER) workshops, both in April 2017, brought together a total of 100 undergraduates of various ethnicities and religions over a period of two and a half days to reaffirm youth leadership, create awareness on extremism, and build "mental firewalls" to violent extremism. The students dressed casually; sat around on bean bags; and among other things, played games, watched a documentary, interacted with a former youth extremist, learned to draw cartoons, and competed in a hackathon on counter-narratives.[423]

This cohort of students then returned to their campuses and became advocates of their own volition. They led CVE workshops and programs at their own institutions with SEARCCT's support, volunteered for legitimate humanitarian and social causes abroad, and helped SEARCCT understand the pulse of students on campuses. Further, SEARCCT reported impressive quantitative results from the workshops. With the students' assistance, SEARCCT was able to triple its digital content production. During the five days over which the two SLAYER workshops were held, SEARCCT's social media reach increased by 20,000%.[424]

A similar collaboration involving not just different Malaysian stakeholders such as SEARCCT, universities, and the media but supported as well by the United States and The Asia Foundation is a newly launched CVE portal of written and media resources.[425] The portal's intent is to raise awareness, sustain networking and collaboration, and empower vulnerable communities, including youth, in the areas of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), counterterrorism, and peace studies.[426] All of its resources are currently in English, though with time there may be additions in

420 The Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) is an organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia established to build regional capacity and cooperation in countering terrorism and violent extremism.

421 "*Lah*" is a Malaysian colloquial suffix to emphasize a word (usually, though not always, a verb). "*Wei*" is also a colloquialism when calling out to friends.

422 Thomas Koruth Samuel, *Don't-lah Wei! A Peer-to-Peer Resource Guide in Ensuring Your Kawan2 Never Becomes a Terrorist* (Kuala Lumpur: Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017).

423 Ibid., pp. 113-123.

424 Ibid., p. 124.

425 The CVE portal is known as MyCVEguide and can be found at https://mycveguide.com

426 "About us," CVE Malaysia.

Bahasa Malaysia that may more suitably address its stated target audience.[427]

As stated above, resilience is not only anticipatory or proactive but also reactive.[428] If one measure of resilience is how long it takes for society to resume functionality or how well it copes and heals collectively in the midst or aftermath of trauma, then the *#kitajagakita* (we take care of each other) campaign that sprung up organically among the Malaysian grassroots to look out for each other's well-being at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic is an encouraging indication of social belonging and collective communion in a time of crisis, despite the country's latent communal faultlines.[429] The movement coalesced in response to the economic crunch of the pandemic, which left many lower-income and even middle-income households unemployed, hungry, and desperate. Malaysia's number of suicides rose to 468 in just the first five months of 2021, a staggering increase from an annual total of 631 in 2020 and 609 in 2019, and a tragic indictment of the pandemic's toll on the country.[430] Although Nik Faizah Nik Othman, a social and political activist, is credited with the initial idea of encouraging households in need of urgent food, money, or other assistance to wave a white flag from their home, civil society groups, businesses, and individuals quickly organized among themselves to deliver aid to those in need. The grassroots campaign spread to include, among many others, a website that not only lists the specific needs of those asking for help (e.g., food/groceries, employment, baby items, money), but also connects donors and volunteers through a purple flag system; a "one-stop shop" online resource collating various civil society COVID-19 efforts; as well as a digital application designed by students allowing users to upload photos of homes flying a white flag, a digital accompaniment to the physical "white flag" campaign.[431]

Community resilience, therefore, extends beyond the government. It is a combination of social capital, a sense of attachment to a place, transparency of information, the availability of economic resources, and assumption of leadership, whether by an elected government or through community organization.[432] Over the last two years, Malaysia has been roiled by a global pandemic and multiple changes in government that have damaged public trust in many of the country's institutions and systems.[433] And yet, grassroots efforts have shown that civic engagement, intercultural and interfaith support, and a sense of belonging are yardsticks for establishing and preserving resilience, particularly in a heterogenous and democratic society like Malaysia.[434]

But the pandemic also surfaced disturbing and previously unseen levels of xenophobia toward Rohingya refugees and other blue-collar migrants, sections of society usually marginalized and exploited even under normal circumstances.[435] Contrary to its previous articulations of concern for the Rohingya, the government seemed instead focused on "placating, rather than correcting the concerns

427 Ibid.

428 Others argue that CVE in Malaysia should be considered more broadly than the "conventional and US-centric understanding of CVE" since the focus on community programs and surveillance ignores the wide range of state policies reflected in legislation, education, and rehabilitation in Malaysia. Bin Jani, "Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia: Past Experience and Future Prospects," pp. 6-10.

429 For more on social resilience and collective trauma, see, for example, David Garcia and Bernard Rimé, "Collective Emotions and Social Resilience in the Digital Traces After a Terrorist Attack," *Psychological Science* 30:4 (2019): pp. 617-628.

430 "Malaysia records three daily suicide cases this year up to May," Code Blue, July 1, 2021.

431 Kitajaga.co; KitaJagaKita.com; Yap Wan Xiang, "Student-built 'Bendera Putih App' Allows Users to Upload White Flags and Food Banks on Map," says.com/my, July 5, 2021.

432 Van Metre.

433 See, for example, Syed Jaymal Zahiid, "Budget 2022 must prioritize public trust to regain economic recovery, think tank says," *Malay Mail*, October 7, 2021; Alifah Zainuddin, "Malaysia's Youth Step Up Protest as Political Crisis Deepens," *Diplomat*, August 2, 2021.

434 Grossman.

435 Sukhani; Thomas Daniel and Putri Nor Ariane Yasmin, "Malaysia Shouldn't Use Coronavirus as an Excuse to Reject Rohingya Refugees," *South China Morning Post*, April 23, 2020.

of the electorate, whether legitimate or not."[436] Tolerance of diversity is a key feature of multisystemic resilience to the risks and threats of violent extremism. It is also a fundamental underpinning of all P/CVE strategies that aim to bring together different stakeholders (government and community), cultures, and socioeconomic strata.[437] As Malaysian debates over the state of national cohesion, including the place of refugees and asylum seekers, figures more prominently in an increasingly open environment facilitated by technology, there will undoubtedly be more raucous, radical voices that will push the boundaries of what is acceptable in a plural and diverse community. Societal attitudes both determine and are determined by politics and policies. Where political will is unable or unwilling to push back against these radical, even extreme voices, the majority will have to step in to ensure their own voice is not drowned out by the threatening din. The strength or fragility of Malaysia's cohesion—and therefore the resilience of its P/CVE approach to groups such as the Islamic State—will continue to be a long, persistent, and comprehensive slog. It will require a candid canvass of the power, policies, and practices that impact trust as a variable of resilience to violent extremism.

436 Thomas Daniel and Putri Nor Ariane Yasmin, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Malaysia," Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre Blog, London School of Economics and Political Science, October 8, 2020.

437 Grossman.

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AT WEST POINT