

# Malaysian Women and Islamic Radicalisation in the Home

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## *Introduction*

As an increasingly conservative wave of Islam engulfs the globe, literalist Salafi interpretations of the faith have become prevalent in Malaysia. Over the past year, there has been increasing recognition of women's roles as recruiters, financiers and influencers for radical Islamic groups. More women have been arrested for their support for and involvement in the Islamic State (IS), but much of the focus has been on their desire to marry a jihadi soldier or channel funds to the cause. In Malaysia, these women (including returnees from IS) are seen to be followers, not decision-makers or active agents in extremist action. While it is assumed that Malaysian Malay women endure the restrictions of cultural and Islamic patriarchy, they do have agency in the home, and exercise this power and centrality within the private sphere by wielding religion as a tool to exert influence over their spouse and children.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that more attention needs to be paid to mothers as potential nurturers of extremist interpretations of Islam and that there is a possibility that they could be vectors of radicalisation (whether violent or otherwise) given their unrivalled influence in the home. This ethnographic study of women in both rural and urban Malaysia reveals that women may be susceptible to the process of radicalisation through religious social gatherings, and should extremist views be

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1 Serina Rahman is a Visiting Fellow at the Malaysia Programme, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. She is deeply grateful to Francis Hutchinson and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) for the opportunity and funding to complete this study, and would also like to thank Vilashini Solmiah for her collaboration and contribution to the research. Much appreciation also goes to La Toya Waha for the opportunity to present this paper at the KAS conference, "United by Violence, Divided by Cause?", and the invaluable feedback from Dr. Waha and other participants on its content. A version of this chapter, with extensive details on the ethnographic observations of Malaysian Muslim women, is published as an ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Trends in Southeast Asia (2020/2).

internalised, they can then be disseminated to or enforced upon offspring and spouse.

This study was borne of a decade's participant observation<sup>2</sup> of rural women in the southwest of Peninsular Malaysia. It seemed that women dealt with a particularly patriarchal society by establishing power within the private sphere of the home by using religion as the tool of choice to exert control over their offspring and spouse. Subsequent research into the possibility of rural mothers and mother-figures perpetuating more conservative or exclusivist interpretations of Islam in the home took a different turn, however, as I realised that this state of affairs already existed in Malaysia's capital, urban Kuala Lumpur and its outskirts.

In 2017, the first woman with links to the Islamic State (IS) was arrested in Singapore; subsequent media coverage of similar arrests in Malaysia and Indonesia enabled the acceptance of an article on women as possible advocates of terror that had previously been deemed 'rather difficult content'.<sup>3</sup> In May 2018, the Surabaya family suicide bombings shocked the region and the rejection of this theory as being 'offensive to mothers' dissipated.

Initially meant to focus on just rural women, informant interviews broadened the quest to Kuala Lumpur and its wealthy suburbs. The perpetuation of exclusivist and intolerant views amongst mothers and encouragement to engage in the defence of the greater Islamic cause, or at least to carry out 'financial jihad' (*jihad bil maal*)<sup>4</sup>, was already in motion.

This paper will begin by outlining the meaning of radicalisation and extremism as used in this chapter, then set the scene with an introduction to Malaysian society; its patriarchy and recent leanings towards a more intolerant and literal Islam. It will then examine the multiple roles of Malay-

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2 Participant observation is an ethnographic methodology in which study subjects are observed and documented while the researcher is immersed within the community, amongst the subjects. This method recognises the need for a researcher to become part of the group under study to enable the group to act as naturally as possible, then for the researcher to return to the written photograph of the data collected to understand and write about it while maintaining objectivity. See Bernard (1994), and Kawulich (2005).

3 Rahman and Lim (2017).

4 Jihad bil maal or jihad bi al-Mal is understood as 'financial jihad' which, in its authentic interpretation, is to use your economic resources and wealth to eliminate the poverty and suffering of the poor. This concept is discussed in Chapter 107 of the Quran (Surah al-Ma'un). However, in this context, the concept is misused as a tool to gather financial donations in support of jihad in the sense of war against the non-believers.

Also see: Rana (2011) and Institute of Policy Studies (2008).

Muslim women in this increasingly conservative society. A discussion of the private and public spheres and how women are seen as perfect pillars of Islam in the home follows. The similarities between the scenario in Malaysia and radicalisation processes under IS are highlighted. Findings from the field are discussed before concluding with possible ways forward.

While this publication attempts to answer the question of whether a woman can use religion to enhance her position and power in the home and among her peers, the overarching goal is to join the dots between seemingly disparate components and highlight the need to look beyond the myth of a mother's purity and perfection in efforts to counter increasingly exclusivist views that feather the nest of hateful extremism.

### *Data and Methodology*

Much of the data gathered for this work was collected from a string of rural fishing villages in southwest Johor, Malaysia between 2008 and 2019. In-depth research specific to this chapter began with an extensive literature review of publications on gender in Islam, Malaysia and Islamic extremism, as well as in the fields of counter-terrorism, political Islam and IS (formerly ISIS, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq).<sup>5</sup> Informant interviews were held with gender and women's rights experts as well as with researchers in counter-terrorism and Malaysian Islamic radicalisation. This led to other contacts in the field and religious study circle participants.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand some of the ways in which women learn about and discuss Islam with their peers and religious teachers, I attended neo-Salafi English-language seminars and more progressive religious study sessions. Popular preachers recommended by informants were followed online on YouTube or on Facebook. Participation in a conference on Women Rising against Extremism<sup>7</sup> also provided information and contacts. This is a qualitative, partially ethnographic analysis of women (specifically

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5 While IS is considered an outlier in Islam and for many, not even deemed Islamic in any way, the organisation bears some study for the attraction it is known to have amongst disenchanted Muslims – if not to physically migrate to its territories or enact terror, then to perpetuate its teachings and encourage others to act.

6 These women attended study circles in Bangi, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam in Selangor, Malaysia. These areas are considered the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city.

7 The conference 'Women Rising Against Extremism' was organised by Sisters in Islam in Kuala Lumpur from 14 to 18 October 2019.

mothers) and their approach to religious education, dissemination and self-empowerment. The specific methods used to collect and analyse data include participant observation, formal and informal interviews and literature reviews; after which the data was analysed using triangulation, as well as qualitative coding for common themes and threads.<sup>8</sup> The names of informants, interviewees and study circle participants have been changed or omitted.

### *Delineating the Terms*

Radicalisation is most often seen as a transformative process or movement in the direction of supporting or enacting radical behaviour, or towards extremism (Borum 2011; Neumann 2013; Kruglanski et al. 2014). The idea of what is ‘extreme’ thus hinges upon what society deems is ‘mainstream’; a society in which conservative interpretations of a faith is seen as the norm may not construe an act of violence in defence of their faith as extreme (Borum 2011:10).

Radicalisation is political in that the process tends to reject or undermine an accepted status quo or ideas.<sup>9</sup> Hateful radicalisation, as understood here, is the process of becoming increasingly hateful towards others who are different from oneself (CCE 2019:7). While this too does not guarantee the taking of violent action, its propaganda “turns a blind eye to hate speech, open expressions of racism and politically motivated intimidation” (Neumann 2013:890), as well as “erode psychological barriers to violence” (Borum 2011:29).

This does not bode well for a diverse society like Malaysia.

The radicalisation of Muslims is said to take place when a Muslim community feels threatened by those who are not of the same faith (Liw and Arosaié 2019). In the case of Malaysia, however, this has happened even

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8 While the transcripts of interviews and copious verbatim notes from seminars, conferences and YouTube videos have not been published, they are stored in hard copy. The content was analysed manually to determine common discursive threads, themes, content, words and phrases used etc., then specific points of interest relevant to the hypothesis was extracted for use in the publication. Triangulation of points between sources was made to ensure that content was repeatedly reported by multiple sources for validity.

9 Note that this concept can be applied beyond just religious radicalisation (for example in the case of radical liberals, radical environmentalists, the far right and left of a political spectrum etc.). See: Trip et al. (2019).

though there is a majority Muslim population, as a result of political parties using religion as a tool to retain or regain power (Rahman 2018).

Salafism is often misconstrued as the violent ‘jihadi’ interpretation of Islam, but this is not necessarily true (Kamarulnizam and Mohd Afandi 2015). Mohamed Nawab (2017:14) describes Malaysia’s ‘neo-Salafis’ who reject Sufis and Shiites as deviants and emphasise the importance of a distinct identity from non-Muslims, yet have refashioned themselves into an “appealing face of Salafism.” This is done through English-language seminars pitched at the better-educated, English-speaking populace focusing on topics such as parenting, spirituality and marriage. Neumann (2013) also describes ‘quietist Salafists’ who reject violence, but encourage separation from mainstream (non-Muslim) society.

The discussion in the following sections highlights the social bonds between women in Malaysia, an aspect of Salafi jihad, which has been said to be more important than its ideology (Kruglanski et al. 2014). This chapter examines the possibility of the cognitive radicalisation of women through religious study sessions and thereafter in the home. The normalisation of radical views could potentially jeopardise Malaysia’s harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-faith social fabric.

### *Patriarchy, Public/Private Spheres and Women’s Agency*

Patriarchy is a social construct based on biological differences between male and female, through which gendered assumptions and expectations define spaces and human behaviour (Rajan 2011:18). The public and private sphere dichotomy refers to domains within which an individual is able to exercise influence, dominance and authority (Ridzi 2009). Agency is an individual’s socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Rajan 2011:19), but this implies “unconventional, independent or emancipatory actions or practices of individuals who are oppressed or severely constrained” (Parker 2005:3). A person’s agency is dependent upon multiple social and cultural factors; at any one time there are both religious and social factors.

The Islamic resurgence in Malaysia that came with the rise of political Islam emphasised women’s reproductive roles and connection (if not confinement) to the home. This entrenched gendered identities based on Muslim ‘ideals’ and further ensconced mothers as homemakers and Islamic educators (Ong 1995). Financial maintenance was contingent upon a wife’s obedience to her husband; a form of economic guardianship (McLarney 2011). In a 2019 survey of 675 women across Malaysia, it was found that the women believed that they were duty-bound to obedience and confor-

mance in order to be a ‘good wife’. In a marriage relationship, 97 per cent agreed that they must obey their husbands and take care of their children (Sisters in Islam 2019).

The ISIS discourse also highlights the obligation of a woman to obey her husband, a duty as important as prayer, fasting and giving charity. Obedience to a husband is deemed “a form of worship by which [a woman] can get closer to her creator”; she “does not fulfil her rights to her God until she fulfils those of her husband” (Europol 2019:15).<sup>10</sup>

In her seminal work on the politics of piety, Saba Mahmood (2005:182) describes how according to Islamic jurisprudence, a woman’s foremost duty after marriage “is to her husband and offspring... second only to her responsibility toward God” and how “obedience to one’s husband is an obligation to which every Muslim woman is bound” (ibid:179). Similarly in Malaysia, and in many Islamic communities worldwide, many women believe that their subordination to men is divinely ordained (Europol 2019), and that their submission is ‘natural’ because a man is physically ‘stronger’ (McLarney 2011:436). Inequalities or ‘injustices’ are not seen as such, because they are accepted “as legitimate behaviour patterns,” merely the ‘fate’ of women, or justified, because women’s needs “are less than men’s” (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002:51).

In Malay society, a woman’s sense of self comes from being a “complementary family person... [and there are] complex and dynamic ways that women wield power over those under their control and influence”. Hence while hegemonic practices allocate men and women to different spheres, women are still primary actors in the negotiation of social meaning (Blackwood 2000:11).

Power refers to the relations that determine behaviour and is manifested when influence over another is intended, such as when an individual holds the acknowledged right to command, and this right is accepted by others (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002). In Malay-Muslim society, while men hold unquestionable power in the public sphere, Malay-Muslim women resist (or demonstrate agency) by accepting gender roles, entrenching women’s centrality in the home (Nuraniyah 2018). This paper will show that some

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10 Raja Rohana (1991) notes that contrary to subjugation, Islam improved the conditions of women during a time when “pre-Islam pagan Arab men regarded women as possessions to be bought, sold or inherited”. Sisters in Islam (SIS) also highlight other verses in the Quran that emphasise marital equality, love, compassion and justice. However, adat (tradition) and political Islam has led to laws that disadvantage Malay-Muslim women.

women use religion to achieve centrality; an illustration of what Parker (2005) describes as a woman being both a victim and an oppressor.

This section of the paper has described the theoretical basis of power relations in a Malay-Muslim home against the backdrop of societal and religious patriarchy. The rest of the paper will sketch the other components that enable a mother to perpetuate exclusivist teachings in the home.

### *The Multiple Roles of Malaysian Malay-Muslim Women*

According to Malaysia's Department of Statistics (2018), the Female Labour Participation Rate (FLPR) is 54.7 per cent. This means that more than half of Malaysian women<sup>11</sup> are gainfully employed. Roziah Omar notes that even as women's successes have increased, they maintained their own subordination through *adat* (tradition) and Islamic discourses in their acceptance of the man as the head of the household and their duties to "bear him children, look after the family, maintain her modesty as well as guard her sexuality and faithfulness" (2003:117).

These studies demonstrate that even as Malay-Muslim women can achieve professional success, they voluntarily accede to domestic expectations to "fulfil their family obligation to be perfect wives and mothers" (Zuraini Jamal@Osman 2015:8) based on the belief that this is what tradition and Islam have dictated for them. They assuage their struggles with the understanding that they will be rewarded in the afterlife and that "reward will be in accordance with the degree of hardship" (Europol 2019:11).

### *Increasing Islamic Conservatism in Malaysia*

Several studies have traced the advent of a more conservative brand of Islam in Malaysia. Chandra Muzaffar (1987:2) described the effort to "re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the Islamic human being, guided by the Quran and the Sunnah"; most visibly

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11 Malaysia has a multi-racial society of which the majority are Malays. By definition in the constitution, anyone who is Muslim can be determined to be 'Malay' as long as he/she speaks the Malay language and practices Malay customs (Malaysian Federal Constitution, Article 160). In reality, however, the Muslim population is made up of a diaspora of ethnicities (not just Malays). This paper focuses only on Malay-Muslim women.

obvious in the prevalence of religiously sanctioned attire and strict separation between the sexes. Marina Mahathir has also commented on increasing Arabisation in Malaysia, stemming from the belief that “the more like Arabs you are, the better Muslim you are”.<sup>12</sup>

Ahmad Fauzi (2016) traced the Salafisation of Malaysian Islam to increased engagement with Saudi Arabia and acceptance of Salafi principles into mainstream Sunni Islam, with an overarching (and now increasingly explicitly stated) goal of achieving Islamic statehood. He identifies the sources of political Islam to a generation of Islamic religious teachers, who subscribe to Salafi theological concepts, the acceptance of Salafi theology as standard texts in private and public religious schools and the entry of Salafi-leaning bureaucrats into JAKIM, the civil service and politics. Mohamed Nawab (2017) points out that even as there is increasing interest in and top-level support for Sufism in Malaysia, there is clear evidence of interest in ‘neo-Salafism’ given huge attendance numbers at neo-Salafists’ seminars and other events.

A 2013 Pew Survey found that 86 per cent of Malaysian Muslims surveyed were in support of Sharia Law, with 35 per cent believing that Sharia is the word of God. While 63 per cent of the respondents indicated concern about religious extremism, 31 per cent pinpointed Christian extremism as the problem. These results suggest that Sharia Law is not equated with extremism and that when extremism is mentioned, it is observed in the ‘other’ but not in a respondent’s own community or faith. A 2015 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that 48 per cent of Malaysians surveyed were concerned about Islamic extremism – but 11 per cent of all respondents reported that they were in support of IS. In a Merdeka Centre study of Muslim youth in Southeast Asia (2011), more than 70 per cent of Malaysian youth surveyed want the Quran to replace the Federal Constitution and more than 80 per cent identified themselves as Muslims first, before their race or nationality.

Even after having taken into account the potential bias of survey respondents only providing answers that depict them in more socially-acceptable (i.e. Islamic) light, the figures are jarring. The trend of increasing radicalisation is also reflected in the number of arrests of those exhibiting support for IS or attempting to join the cause. Between 1967 and 2015, Malaysia’s Special Branch identified 22 home-grown militant groups dominated by ex-Afghan *mujahideen* returnees (Tan 2019:178). With the rise of IS, a steady stream of Malaysians has been recruited. Over the last two years, 519

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12 Free Malaysia Today, 25 November 2017.



individuals have been arrested for terrorism-related charges in Malaysia, 100 have travelled to Syria and other IS-controlled territories and 40 have been killed in battle (Singh 2020). Other IS sympathisers travelled to Marawi in the Philippines to assist with the establishment of an Islamic State there. Analysts and the Minister of Defence himself have noted the increased threat of terrorism and extremism which is “on the rise”.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note the number of women in support of IS. The Special Branch was reported to have expressed concern about the “marked increase of local women”, who joined IS in the belief that they would be awarded with “strapping good-looking Middle Eastern husbands, fighting in the name of Islam” (Samuel 2016:64). In May 2018, a Malaysian housewife was among 15 people arrested. She had plans to launch attacks on non-Muslims by running them down in her car during the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections, as well as to crash into non-Muslim places of worship using a gas cylinder as a detonator.<sup>14</sup> Liow and Arosaie (2019:89) note that ten families were amongst those who travelled to Syria and Iraq.

This section has illustrated the backdrop of increasing extremism and support for the IS cause. The following section will highlight additional identities that women embody as mothers and mother-figures as well as juxtapose the Malay stereotype of men in contrast to those roles.

### *Gendered Expectations and a Mother's Empowerment*

#### *Understanding Men*

A gendered analysis requires the examination of both men and women. In her study of urban women and their practices of Islam, Sylvia Frisk (2009:170) took note of the accepted underlying assumptions of male behaviour. In her observation of this upper-middle class community, she saw that men were described as the weaker sex, and more prone to giving in to their *nafsu* (desires). Women, on the other hand, had no problems with self-control (Frisk 2009:171). IS propaganda also highlights the tendency of a man to wander, when they say that “women must know that men were not created to remain confined to the home with their wives and children” (Europol 2019:15).

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13 Kaur. Free Malaysia Today, 2 December 2019.

14 Rodzi. Straits Times, 1 June 2018.

Raja Rohana outlined the differences between the childhood training of a boy and a girl: whereas the “daughter’s days of childhood freedom before she takes on the duties of a ‘responsible daughter’ is brief”, the son “is allowed to enjoy a carefree freedom until such time when he takes over the family responsibility” (1991:18). My observations of men’s and women’s treatment in rural communities over a decade also had parallels to this – it seemed to be unsurprising that men would partake in illegal or immoral activities, but a woman was always deemed to be above and beyond this. Young boys were also given the freedom to play (often well into adulthood), while girls were assigned housework duties early on, and expected to quickly get married and bear children as this was their primary role in life. Further education or career success is seen as secondary, and at times, unnecessary or undesirable for females.

### *The Mother is Pure and Perfect*

In Malaysian popular culture, modern media depictions of the mother in daytime television drama, songs and folklore emphasise her self-sacrificing qualities, long-suffering burden of child-bearing and raising and the imperative that lies with the children to forever return that sacrifice with unwavering loyalty, devotion and care. Attaining motherhood is seen as a necessary rite of passage and the primary goal of every Malay-Muslim woman. Her untold happiness in being able to bear a child is used in an analogy for happiness in the proverb:

...*sebagai emak mandul baru beranak*. (... like a barren mother who is finally able to bear children).<sup>15</sup>

Popular Malay media (radio, television and social media) adds to the overarching belief (97 per cent of all women surveyed by SIS) that “a child is a blessing (*rezeki*), and having many children is a way of God blessing me (*bagi rezeki*)” (2019:27). This implies that if a woman is unable to bear children, she has not received God’s blessings. For some, being able to bear a child (and if possible, more than one) means being able to add to the Muslim population (*umma*), a commendable act (Saili and Saili 2018).

According to IS, contraception to prevent childbirth is “but a disease brought by our enemies, so that the number of Muslims decreases” (Eu-

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15 Common proverb used in Malay conversations, translation provided by the author.

ropol 2019:21). The true role of Muslim women, thus, is to get married, give birth and raise children. IS discourse also emphasises a women's purity and the nobility of her domestic role as mother, spouse or sister of the soldiers of jihad.

### *Mothers as the Pathway to Heaven*

For a single Malay-Muslim woman, marriage lifts her from the bottom rung of the social ladder where every sin is borne by her father and other male relatives who are deemed responsible for her. Yet in marriage, the common cultural trope is "*syurga di bawah tapak kaki suami*" (heaven is under the feet of your husband) – in line with the understanding that a woman's job is to obey her husband's every word. When she has borne children, however, even as she still remains under the 'control' of her husband, she is 'empowered' by the belief that for her children, "*syurga di bawah tapak kaki ibu*" (heaven is under the feet of their mother). This belief is supported by a number of hadiths such as:

"The Prophet Muhammad said (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him): your Heaven lies under the feet of your mother." (Ahmad, Nasai).

"God has forbidden for you to be undutiful to your mothers". (Sahih Al-Bukhari).

"A man once consulted the Prophet Muhammad about taking part in a military campaign. The Prophet asked the man if his mother was still living. When told that she was alive, the Prophet said" "[Then] stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet." (Al-Tirmidhi).<sup>16</sup>

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16 These hadiths were found online at (<https://www.soundvision.com/article/the-quran-and-hadith-on-mothers>), accessed 21 October 2019, and are taken at face value by the writer; they have not been verified through Islamic means as valid or correctly interpreted, however, these are the common tropes used and repeated to strengthen the belief that the pathway to heaven is through a mother.

*The Mother is the Bastion of Religion in the Home*

While it may seem contrary to the understanding of patriarchal Malay society and Islam, the above discussion of the weakness of men as well as the expectation of self-control and purity of women lends itself to the belief that mothers are the bastions of religion in the home. It is within domestic power dynamics that a woman is able to expand her space of influence and attempt to balance externally-imposed inequalities (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002). Frisk noted that the women she studied had an overwhelming desire to “submit to the will of a transcendental God”, and that this submission required a “transformation in the husband’s religious behaviour and attitude” (2009:187). A woman’s ability to evolve her husband into a better Muslim allows her to first follow in the ideology, and secondly demonstrates her agency in exerting influence over her husband and children (Von Knop 2007). This is one way in which women resist the patriarchy and become empowered.

In a workshop by Farhat Naik, wife of the Indian Islamist preacher and Malaysian permanent resident Zakir Naik, on how to raise ‘Noble Generations’<sup>17</sup>, she emphasised that women are the “fortress against the devil” and that women need to “protect our husbands from the whisper of the Satan”. She then tells the audience that if they are able to make their child love them, the child is their [Islamic] “missionary throughout – developing the love for God has to be done by the mother”.

The central role of women under IS is to partake in *hijrah* (to travel from ‘Abodes of War’ (*dar al-kufr*: infidel states) to ‘Abodes of Islam’ (*dar al-Islam*: the Islamic State), where they are free to practise the religion in its entirety (Li 2016; Europol 2019:9). *Hijrah* is deemed to be obligatory (CPRLV 2016); and women are drawn by the promise of an Islamic ‘utopia’, where they have a central and supportive role (Pearson 2015; CPRLV 2016). Once there, they are to raise “good Jihadis”<sup>18</sup> a task deemed to be within a woman’s “field of honour” (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015:73), and the best thing for her to do as a “righteous wife” (CPRLV 2016:48). She is showered with praises for this endeavour and told that she is “the

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17 The workshop by Farhat Naik, ‘Women’s Movement for Creating Noble Generations’ was held on 12 October 2019 in Kota Damansara, Selangor.

18 This is mostly perpetuated through the online al-Khansaa magazine, whose audience are women empathetic to the ISIS cause. Also see Von Knop (2007), Gentry and Sjoberg (2015), CPLRV (2016), Nuraniyah (2018), Lahoud (2014), Europol (2019) and Khalil (2019).

hope of the *umma*<sup>19</sup> and that her honour lies in “being a producer of jihadis” (Europol 2019:9; Tarras-Wahlberg 2018).

In IS discourse, women are approached as “mothers and scholars, wives and motivators of men” (Pearson 2015:19). She is tasked with educating her children “to that which Allah loves” (Von Knop 2007:410) or put simply, in jihadist ideology (Khalil 2019). But IS differentiates itself from other radical groups by emphasising the education of women as an avenue for their self-development; she is told that she has the responsibility to ensure a good grounding in Islam and is chastised for believing that she cannot understand the Quran without the help of a scholar (Europol 2019:28). This is touted as Female Jihadism; a feminine interpretation of religion for women’s empowerment,<sup>20</sup> through which a woman is able to spur their “husbands, sons, brothers” to jihad (Lahoud 2014:783). The belief is that if “a woman is convinced of something, no one will spur a man to fulfil it like she will ... behind every great *mujabedeen* stood a woman” (Von Knop 2007:406).

This section has highlighted the multiple identities that Malay-Muslim mothers have within the domestic sphere, and commonalities those roles have with that of women under the IS regime. There is universality in the importance of motherhood and as the above examination has shown, contrary to popular assumptions, it is the mother that is the key source of religious education in the home. The following section details the results of the on-ground research and its parallels to the discussion above.

### *Findings from the Field*

The stimulus for this study came from rural communities, where I observed the treatment of women under patriarchal norms. Misogyny restricting women’s movements, decisions and actions not only came from husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, but also from women themselves; either in the form of controls inflicted by a mother on her daughter, or by peers and relatives, who chastise other females for choices that do not abide by patriarchal norms.

In contrast to that, however, there were many signs that women worked within the constraints to establish personal power centres in the home. One approach was to entrench Malay *adat* in terms of ritual practices and

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19 Umma refers to the global Muslim community.

20 As opposed to Islamic Feminism, which is deemed sacrilegious.

reminders of the importance of a mother. A mother ensures that she is the centre of attention by constantly holding family feasts and celebrations tied to cultural or religious practices and requiring that her offspring and spouse are present; thus emphasising her centrality in the home. When there is nothing to celebrate, the mother reminds her family of her importance through daily contact through social media; forwarding images or short dramatic videos on the consequences of disobeying a mother (illness, accidents and other misfortune), story-telling or mealtime discussions of moral takeaways from daytime television dramas (often along the same lines as the social media videos) and the need to always remember her sacrifices for her children. All of these are underlined with religious undertones, obligations or consequences.

Not unlike the women in Frisk's study (2009), the rural women I observed tried to ensure that their spouses pray regularly and attend religious ceremonies. They also constantly remind their children to fulfil their religious requirements, be it prayer, giving to charity or fasting. Often heard tropes in the villages are as follows (translated verbatim):

“If you don't do as God wants us to do [fulfil religious requirements], you will prevent me from going to heaven as I will bear your sins.”

“Your path to heaven is through me, so if you don't do as I say [fulfil religious requirements] you will not get to heaven.”

“The best way for you to get to heaven is to work hard so that you can save money so that we [the parents] can go to *hajj* [pilgrimage], this is the duty of all children.”

Most of the children that I observed took these messages to heart and often attributed misfortune to their not following the orders of their mother, or were sharing social media posts about her importance and gratitude for all her child-raising suffering. These observations indicate that the mothers are successful in the exertion of control over offspring.

Amongst peers or female relatives, daily chatter often revolves around how well children or grandchildren are able to recite the Quran, pray or fast; who amongst them had taken the virtuous step of sending their children to Islamic schools or won scholarships to Islamic education abroad; or which of their daughters has married the next eligible religious person in the village. Pride was expressed in how they are able to control their spouses in making them fast or pray, or in preventing him from spending time with his friends every evening, and instead have him stay at home to teach the children prayer, or at least send them to religious classes. At

times it seemed to be a competition to see who held the next religious feast (*kenduri*) and which groups from the Islamic missionary schools (*tabfiz*) were invited to recite prayers at those events. Empowerment for these women came from peer or relative recognition of their religious successes in this way; being able to bring the family closer to God is an indication of personal achievement and status.

In speaking to gender and radicalisation experts on the possibility of these rural scenarios resulting in the spread of intolerant, exclusivist attitudes (should the mothers inadvertently listen to the wrong preachers), I was redirected to urban areas, where this was already happening.

### *In the Urban Centres*

In wealthy upper-middle class neighbourhoods around Kuala Lumpur, many women attend *usrabs* (study circles) to improve their understanding of religion. Frisk observed these meetings in her research, and noted that they often comprised women who had retired or abandoned their careers to focus on religion. Not unlike the ritual feasts and other events arranged by rural mothers, these were important social events and “arenas for competing claims by groups of pious women as to how to be good Muslims” (2009:158). These study circles served the same affirmative purpose: an individual’s presence at the events indicated their piety and commitment to God. The urban women studied by Frisk also hosted collective community rituals as a public demonstration of their religious agency.

These sessions were often hosted by wealthy individuals, with popular non-Malaysian preachers, who would at times remind their hosts that a contribution to the Islamic cause (by hosting the event, which also serves as a channel for the collection of donations for various Islamic charities) would earn them merit and offset any sins or extravagance they may have had in their lives.<sup>21</sup> With many of the hosts nearing or in retirement, concerns about the afterlife loom large. Not unlike those I observed in rural areas, these events seemed to be a competition; the contest centred on how

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21 For this section in particular, information on the community prayer events came from an individual whose family members hosted popular preachers for the community. Interview conducted on 23 July 2019 in Petaling Jaya. Information on the women’s-only study circles came from research collaborator Vilashini Solmiah in Kuala Lumpur over a series of meetings in July, September and October 2019.

lavish the events were, what food was provided, and how much in donations were collected.

The highlight of urban *usrabs* was the fund-raising activity. While some of this is instigated by Islamic social media influencers,<sup>22</sup> others are encouraged by the guest preacher. The women were often told that as they are too old to perform *hijrah*, the best way to support the Islamic cause was to donate to it. In these *usrabs*, women were urged to contribute online (through their phones) during the session, and donations were projected onto a screen in real time. The informants mentioned that tens of thousands of Malaysian Ringgit could be collected in this way. While these contributions were requested to ‘defend Islam’, the women did not ask where the money was going; their only interest was to demonstrate how generous they were in the name of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from raising jihadi offspring, IS discourse also highlights the importance of women as fundraisers; “she is a female Jihad warrior who wages jihad by means of funding jihad” (Von Knoop 2007:410; Lahoud 2014:790; Nuraniyah 2018:905).<sup>24</sup>

Other means of demonstrating superiority among urban women was their ability to access popular preachers online; a woman’s internet/technological savvy enabled her to broaden her knowledge beyond Malaysia’s borders. Nuraniyah (2018) noted that the internet enabled women’s activism in extremist groups; it served as a new space for women’s voices and an area where women could circumvent the patriarchy and state restrictions on information. There are no controls over the information that is spread through these channels.

While the study circles provide a sense of belonging to women in search of answers, there are also virtual sisterhoods that provide support for the jihadist cause. Von Knop (2007) writes of the Radical Sisterhood which has

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- 22 These were said to be Malaysian women who had moved overseas, and were of the government-approved Sunni school of thought, but by virtue of being overseas and having access to a wider breadth of religious knowledge (given JAKIM’s restrictions within Malaysia), held great influence over local women.
  - 23 Another informant who conducts anti-terrorism research for a government agency mentioned that collections after religious seminars hosted by large Malaysian corporations for their staff are also known to be channelled towards terrorism funding – these collections also leverage on an individual’s need to demonstrate their commitment to the Islamic cause. Interview conducted on 16 October 2019. Nuraniyah (2018) reports on Indonesian female migrant workers’ support of terrorism by purchasing flight tickets for jihadis and financing terror attacks.
  - 24 This is in contrast to the actual meaning of the concept of financial jihad as discussed in footnote 4.



representatives all over Europe and a strong online presence. Groups like these discuss ideological issues and provide advice on how to best educate children and persuade husbands to follow the ‘right’ practices. They provide guidance for women in difficulty and an Islamic solution to ease problems and tension – a welcoming community that gives a voice to women and are often openly supportive of the IS cause. They promote “the dream of living a pure, true Islam” and create an online echo chamber that has infrequent dissent due to a self-reinforcing group logic, which then encourages participants to isolate themselves from those who are not part of the ‘sisterhood’ (Pearson 2015; CPRLV 2016).

Observations of Farhat Naik’s seminar to a group of upper-middle income women in Kota Damansara, Selangor were indicative of group behaviour as examined through social movement theory (Borum 2011). Similar to those who join online sisterhood forums (CPRLV 2016), the women in attendance at the seminar were seeking answers, and possibly going through periods of vulnerability (as indicated by the comments and questions they asked after the session).<sup>25</sup> They had issues that they needed help dealing with (the context from which the process of radicalisation cannot be separated from), and were open to views that would help them solve their problems. They decided that religion would be the source of those answers, and in joining these groups were able to identify with the messages given – the group’s narrative and ethos made sense to them. As the women accepted the group’s frames of reference, they began to identify with those they engaged with and with group socialisation were indoctrinated into the movement (i.e. the more exclusivist, neo-Salafi approach to Islam).

Feminist researchers often argue that women are unjustly denied their agency to act for political purposes by associating their actions with emotions, a need to be part of an in-group or as mere followers of a cause (Mil-

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25 It is interesting to note that the women attending this workshop seemed needier and uncertain of the teachings of Islam. They were looking for solutions to their problems and were willing to accept and believe everything that the speaker put forward – especially as she peppered her presentation with quotations from the Quran in Arabic (with no translation). In contrast, the women at the Sisters In Islam conference (October 2019), who appeared to be from the same socio-economic class as those who attended the Kota Damansara workshop were not in search of answers; they knew where the verses that they could refer to in the Quran were, and discussed them at length (in English). These women were fully aware of the rights that Islam accorded them and had a deep understanding of the faith but used the session to share experiences and learn from each other in their efforts to improve human rights through Islam.

let 1971; Lloyd 1993; Grosz 1994; Prokhovnik 1999). However, a woman exhibits agency in deciding to join a group to learn more or act in the name of religion (Morgan 1989). Nuraniyah reported that the women she observed are active seekers of religious knowledge and try various venues before opting to follow Salafi preachers, because their sessions are frequently peppered with Quranic verses and deemed “more intellectual... [and] a better source of knowledge” (2018:900).

Of the sessions around Kuala Lumpur, my informants mentioned that some of the participants they were in touch with eventually refused further contact, as they had been advised by their teachers to stay away from those outside the *usrabs*. Other informants noted the increasing religiosity of friends, who were involved in these sessions, and who then either disappeared from social media or only post extremely religious content, alienating former friends and contacts.<sup>26</sup> This behaviour is emblematic of Salafi approaches as they encourage isolation from those who are non-Muslim or inadequately Muslim (Kruglanski et al. 2014).

Other informants talked about the content of the urban *usrabs*.<sup>27</sup> The idea of the wider Muslim *umma* is often invoked. One participant mentioned that in her session, the preacher said “we are one *umma*, and when one part of the *umma* is hurt [such as in Syria], it is like a part of our body – when one arm hurts, the other will feel the pain. So we must stop that pain – and you must encourage your husbands and sons to go fight for the cause”.<sup>28</sup>

Farhat Naik encouraged the raising of children “overflowing in their love of Allah,” she recommended that the women tell their children stories of “the warriors of Islam” and their successes (not unlike IS recommendations to tell bedtime stories of martyrs (Khalil 2019)). While she did not focus on pooling contributions from the audience, Farhat Naik implored them to donate even the smallest amount “in the way of Allah” as “cleans-

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26 These informants provided links to preachers that their friends followed and described behavioural changes in those who got involved with more exclusivist versions of Islam (their deduction based on what they saw being posted online). Interviews were conducted on 24 and 25 July in Shah Alam and Kota Damansara.

27 These informants had attended these sessions and related what they observed. Some also commented on friends who had become more religious (and usually were their entry to the sessions they attended). Most lost touch with the women, who initially brought them into the *usrabs*, as they themselves dropped out of the study sessions.

28 Interview conducted on 26 July 2019 in Bangi, Selangor.

ing ourselves and our wealth guarantees success” and “purifying our wealth brings us closer to Allah”.

In her study of extremist preachers such as Zakir Naik,<sup>29</sup> Vilashini Solmiah observed that they are successful in luring their audiences, because they begin their sessions with more benign, moderate matters. Hence if a session is three hours long, the first two hours will endear the audience with well-balanced content, widely citing religious texts and convincing them that the preacher is moderate and knowledgeable. The subsequent hour then slides into pointing out how the preacher has often been victimised, invoking sympathy and anger (as the audience is already convinced of his positive qualities). The preacher then points out the common qualities of those who have an agenda against him. He notes that they are all non-Muslims, then the more exclusivist, intolerant trope begins – neatly persuading those listening to him to be more wary and less trusting of those who do not believe as they do (or have been taught to believe by the preacher). I saw the same traits in other online preachers’ sessions and at Farhat Naik’s talk. Towards the end of her session, she added stories of how detractors were abusing their family and how Muslims had to rise to help those who are oppressed worldwide.

Intolerance of other faiths was also evident on at least two occasions. One informant mentioned that the centre responded to a question on whether class continued on a public holiday with “we do not acknowledge Deepavali”.<sup>30</sup> During the session by Farhat Naik, a girl, not older than 15 years, asked how to explain to her friends that music is not allowed in Islam (a highly conservative interpretation of the faith). Farhat Naik responded that if she was speaking to non-Muslims about Islam, she needs to begin with other topics that are easier to convey. The girl’s bewildered response was “but I am Muslim, I don’t have non-Muslim friends”. These are examples of the exclusivist, intolerant interpretation of Islam that is being practiced and disseminated.

The presence of all-women *usrabs*, online sisterhood forums and sessions such as those by Farhat Naik demonstrate that it is women inviting

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29 Spouse of Farhat Naik mentioned in earlier section.

30 In Malaysia, conservative preachers remind the public that they are not to wish others on their major festive holidays (such as Christmas or Deepavali) as it reduces their own faith and makes them apostate; Muslims are only to wish other Muslims on their own religious occasions. New Year celebrations are also deemed a Christian celebration. Hence to ‘not acknowledge’ Deepavali could be a continuation of this line of thought or a complete disavowal of any other faith but Islam as is taught in Salafi beliefs. Interview conducted on 12 October 2019.

other women to the Islamic cause. Other informants disclosed intelligence on a number of high-profile female recruits and recruiters; it was clear that the young teenagers at Farhat Naik's session were there with their elders.

Kinship relations and multi-generational jihadi families are not uncommon. Hwang and Schulze (2018) trace how Indonesian jihadis are drawn into the cause by female relatives, parents and teachers, growing into a jihadi community from birth. It is clear then that mothers who (intentionally or otherwise) follow a more exclusivist interpretation of Islam can and will teach that version to their offspring. Darul Islam<sup>31</sup> had a women's *dakwah* (education) wing that focused on women's recruitment and education (Nuraniyah 2018). Famous female IS militants played central roles in recruiting women online by blogging idyllic stories of the Islamic State and *hijrah* to encourage other Muslims to join the cause (Jamestown Foundation 2019).

### *Returning to the Rural Fringes*

While the rural communities I observed in Johor did not have lavish women-only home-based study, women gathered at mosques for religious classes. Social events, too, served to share gossip, demonstrate piety and negotiate social standing through religious achievements. In the southwest of Johor, local informants told me that the preachers at these sessions are all Malaysian, as any outsider would be too obvious in a closed and somewhat xenophobic community such as this.<sup>32</sup> Online preachers that are followed are mainly those that the Johor Queen, who is known to be more inclusive and progressive in her views on Islam, posts on her Facebook and Instagram pages.

However, a top-down directive on the 'acceptable' form of Islam does not guarantee that a state's citizens will necessarily follow suit. The Johor Survey (Chong et al. 2017) showed a deviance between the Sultan's and respondents' views on Islam, and it is possible that a more conservative

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31 An earlier incarnation of Jemaah Islam, whose followers then evolved into ISIS supporters in Indonesia.

32 These observations were taken in Johor, a state where the country's main Islamic political party (PAS) is not seen in positive light as a result of the Johor Sultan's disapproval of their approach to Islam. There is great respect for the Johor royal family in this community, and as a result, Johor Muslims are often duty-bound to follow in royal footsteps, when it comes to religion. Interviews conducted on 6 and 25 September in Johor.

brand of Islam has permeated the ground. Online preachers are easily accessible and a drive through local villages and suburbs reveals myriad advertisements for seminars by preachers in full religious garb, but promoting content that does not seem as inclusive as the messages from the royal palace.

Given the prevalence of patriarchy in rural societies, it is not unlikely that local women might begin to take up a more ‘feminine’ approach to Islam that empowers them to study the Quran on their own, in addition to buttressing their knowledge so that they can better guide their families on the rightful religious path. Vilashini pointed out that urban *usrabs* have become a benchmark that rural women aspire to. As there are no boundaries to accessing online Islamic influencers or preachers (notwithstanding their respect for their royalty), conditions on the ground could change. As it is, over the last 12 years of my immersion in this community, more Islamic missionary schools have sprung up. Some parents have pulled their children out of government schools to put them in a *tahfiz* full-time. While they are not the majority, there are also increasing numbers of youth dressed in the ‘religious’ attire of turbans, robes and full-faced veils.

### Connecting the Dots

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that Malaysian Malay-Muslim women who are faced with the pressures of patriarchy in the public sphere, and, who, by tradition and religious beliefs, are pressured into leaving professional successes at the door to tend to domestic duties, may find an outlet for personal empowerment and peer recognition through religion. A gendered analysis of the roles and identities of women (and men) in the home has shown that a woman can gain power by wielding religion as a tool to control or influence her family. This paper does **not** claim that given the increasing accessibility and emerging acceptability of exclusivist Salafi teachings, everyone (especially mothers) are on the road to becoming suicide bombers or jihadi soldiers.

It is also important to note the difference between Salafi and Salafi-jihadi ideology; Salafi interpretations are strict declarations that the “smallest deviation [is] tantamount to *shirik* or polytheism and there is an obsession with Islamic purification”. Salafi jihadism, on the other hand, aims to “replace the secular political system with an Islamic one through armed revolution... [while] purification only concerns religious matters – i.e. ridding Islam of superstitions” (Nuraniyah 2018:901). Many Salafis, in not wanting

to be associated with terrorism, decry the antics of Salafi-jihadis – as they do in Malaysia.<sup>33</sup>

Ahmad Fauzi (2016) has outlined how, in spite of the political rhetoric and denials, much of mainstream Islam in Malaysia has already adopted Salafi views that “purportedly paves the way to violence” (Ahmad Fauzi 2016:21). Samuel also highlights how certain radicalised narratives provides the “mood music” for acts of terrorism, and that some non-violent radical groups can be “conveyor belts” to violent extremism as “religious extremism is inherently violent” (2016:75).

However, Liow and Arosaie (2019) posit that because Malaysia already functions as a de facto Islamic nation (although the constitution states otherwise) given the constitutionally-defined preferential treatment to Malay-Muslims, the Islamic bureaucracy helmed by JAKIM, the supremacy of political Islam and political parties’ attempts at proving their ‘Islamic credentials’, there is little real need for Malaysians to support IS. The lure of IS lies in its counter-narrative to non-Islamic nations, especially where Muslims are a minority. In Malaysia where there is already an Islamic hegemony, outright support for IS, *hijrah* and radicalised violence is reduced.

The idea that mothers would perpetuate exclusivist and extremist theology to their family has been hard to swallow largely because mothers are believed to be a “peace-making ally against violence” (Winterbotham and Pearson 2016); that they would not have the political mettle or agenda to support extremism (Gentry and Sjöberg 2015); and that “killing is an unnatural female behaviour” (Åhäll 2012). It was for these reasons that the United Kingdom’s counter-terrorism strategy, which was to rope in Muslim mothers to report on their children or other family members, if they were to join the IS cause, failed (Gentry and Sjöberg 2015; Winterbotham and Pearson 2016). The women would rather preserve the family unit and stability than report on a possible, but yet unproven, security threat.

It goes against the grain to believe that a mother is capable of evil. Rather, they are usually seen as victims of violence than perpetrators (Cunningham 2003). But the Surabaya bombings of 2018 have proven that it is possible.<sup>34</sup> Media reports have highlighted that, of those known to travel

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33 Malay and Islamic political parties such as the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and Malaysia’s Islamic Party (PAS) often disassociate themselves from terrorism and accuse each other of being Salafi, even as each attempts to demonstrate their Islamic credentials.

34 Since then there have been several more arrests of women in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia of plotting terror or charged as supporters of ISIS; comprising mothers or housewives, students and migrant workers.

from Southeast Asia to the Islamic State, it was “the daughters and wives in the group who were more determined than the men” (Jones 2018). Winterbotham and Pearson (2016) emphasise that it “would be wrong to assume that [supporters of Daesh] were always men”.

The above discussion has shown that all the factors that can contribute to a nest of extremist nurturing in the home are present. Rajan (2011) has written about Palestinian women who want to be “mothers of martyrs” as it gives them honour, glory and recognition. Gentry and Sjoberg point out that “mothering violent men is mothering no less” (2015:74). At the very least, as shown in the UK counter-terrorism failure, these mothers will not inform the authorities about family members’ intentions to participate in jihad. At the very worst, they will encourage it and give their blessings.

### *The Time is Now*

Given the physical collapse of the Islamic State, there are now many returnees waiting to be repatriated to their homelands, including Malaysia. A 2017 report by The Soufan Centre noted that at the time there were 91 Malaysians in ISIS ranks, of which 12 were women and 17 were children. Khalil (2019) points out that counterterrorism officials have been preparing for the return of male foreign fighters, but are hugely unprepared for returning women and children. Abdul Nasir points out that Malaysia’s de-radicalisation programme for male returnees is only one month long; women and children are deemed to “have had no decision-making powers over their migration to Syria” and are thus assessed on a case-by-case basis and monitored when allowed to return to their villages.<sup>35</sup>

Even as female returnees may claim to have been only housewives and mothers, Khalil (2019) points out that IS considers their female supporters “a key to their future survival,” and that some female returnees have declared that “even if we haven’t been able to keep [the Islamic State], our children will one day get it back”. Abdul Nasir warns that “racial and religious issues, especially those which can be exploited to suggest Islam is under threat in Malaysia, can be scavenged by IS to keep its radical ideology alive among potential extremists in the country”.<sup>36</sup> Today’s intensification of political Islam worsens the situation.

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35 Nasir. Today Online, 24 September 2019. Also refer to Chan. Straits Times, 25 October 2017.

36 Nasir. Today Online, 24 September 2019.

It will take generations to reverse or remove patriarchal traditions, attitudes and behaviours (if this is at all possible), and it is impossible to monitor mothers within the home to determine what and how they are teaching their families about religion. But it could be possible to better monitor those who teach them, or those that they reach out to for religious knowledge.

D’Estaing (2017) notes that while women might be central to the spread (or prevention) of extremist teachings, the onus should not be placed solely on their shoulders, “good governance and the role of the state in preventing violent extremism... [and] social, economic, security initiatives [are required] to incite notable change”. The Malaysian government needs to move beyond Islamic politics and begin work on improving conditions on the ground to ensure that exclusivist views of Islam that could be detrimental to Malaysian society at large, are not perpetuated in the home.

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