

ISIS and Islamic Radicalization in Southeast Asia

An Interview with Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Combatting radicalization in the context of growing ISIL authority is a topic of growing importance to Southeast Asia. The *Journal* interviewed Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, in order to better understand the reemergence of terrorism in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman's assessment of radicalization in Southeast Asia provides an overview of the ISIL's recruitment efforts and linkages to preexisting Southeast Asian terrorist groups, as well as explains the religious narrative feeding fringe minorities' interpretations of Islam.

Journal: Perhaps you could begin by discussing some of the unique qualities or capabilities that set ISIS apart from other terrorist groups. For example, how does ISIS' objective of establishing an Islamic caliphate differ from the objectives of other terrorist groups?

Osman: What ISIS seeks to achieve is not very different from what other Islamist organizations, including non-violent groups, have sought to achieve for many years. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda have sought to establish a caliphate. What is different about ISIS is the fact that this is the first time that an organization has declared the establishment of a caliphate in an actual territory: Iraq and Syria. Unless the international community does something concrete, ISIS can expand their territorial control to other parts of the Middle East, such as Jordan or Lebanon. So, ISIS is different because it has a proper territory, money, and support among some of the more radical fringe groups within Muslim societies.

Journal: At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore this year, heads of state stressed that ISIS was a major threat for Southeast Asia. In Malaysia alone, the government estimates

there are 50,000 ISIS sympathizers. To what extent is Southeast Asia a key recruitment center for ISIS? What regional conditions, such as economic marginalization, ethnic conflicts, or corruption, make alternative actors such as terrorist groups particularly appealing in this region?

Osman: It is difficult to analyze this from a general Southeast Asian perspective, but there are some common issues for all countries. The issue of economic marginalization is something that these nations have in common. There are some segments of the Muslim societies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and even in Singapore—one of the richest countries in the world—where Muslim minorities, especially the Malay minorities, are facing economic challenges. But, the number of those who actually turn to violence within this group is low, so economics alone cannot explain the strong support for ISIS. While issues of ethnic conflict and corruption are certainly contributing factors, they cannot be identified as the main sources of discontent. There are larger issues affecting Muslims around the world that can better explain ISIS support in Southeast Asia.

There is a need for Muslims to reassess the position of Islam on certain issues in order to deal with the fringe minorities who have interpreted the religion in a certain way. In this regard, the Salafi jihadist-type is one that we need to understand.¹ We have even seen some strains of Salafism being coopted into the government. In the case of Malaysia, some Salafi Muslims have reportedly entered the government under disguise and then began religious classes at the grassroots level. I think that the “Salafization” of the way Muslims are thinking about religion in Southeast Asia is important to assess; when I say “Salafization” here, it’s not just actual adoption of Salafism, but also accepting norms that are defined by Salafi thinking. Groups may begin to view, for example, celebrating the birth of the prophet Mohammed as something deviant due to Salafi influence. This group may similarly find their perspective on non-Muslims changing. The peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims has been present for centuries in Southeast Asia, but Salafization of the mind is challenging that.

A third issue is the rising anti-Shiite sentiment in Southeast Asia. In fact, the Malaysian state has officially banned Shiite Islam—it is considered deviant. Even in minority-Muslim Singapore, we see significant anti-Shiite fervor. That attitude is problematic because once one starts dehumanizing Shiite Muslims by saying they are deviant, infidels, or hypocrites, it makes it easier for people to be influenced by the ideas of ISIS; ISIS is now arguing that Shiite Muslims are worse than non-Muslims and should be killed, and that people should go to kill Shiite Muslims in Iraq and Syria. That sentiment is very important when trying to understand why ISIS is finding support in Southeast Asia.

Journal: You mentioned that it is an important time for Muslims to rethink certain

¹The Salafi jihadi is a conservative movement that falls within the scope of Sunni Islam and adheres to a doctrine known as Salafism. Salafism encourages a fundamentalist approach to Islam, supports the implementation of Sharia law, and rejects bid’ah (i.e., religious innovation). The Salafi jihadi discourse includes several variants that differ on issues such as the war on unbelievers and Muslim minorities.

issues, particularly in regard to the Salafization of Islam in Southeast Asia. Are you familiar with any religious leaders, scholars, or groups that you feel are taking on this challenge?

Osman: In Indonesia, people are turning to Salafi organizations, in part, because mainstream organizations are not providing for Muslims' needs—these big organizations tend to be politicized, which affects their image. There are some smaller groups in Indonesia, but they are elite, limited in size, and lack the grassroots network to counter Salafization.

The case of Malaysia is more complex. Malaysia is a state that is, to a large extent, anti-Shiite and very conservative in terms of its religious views. Occasionally, some of the traditionalist scholars from the religious bureaucracy come out and criticize Salafism. For example, Malaysia just had the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) General Assembly, and one of the key leaders of the Salafis in Malaysia is now on the central committee of UMNO youth. He spoke critically of traditional Islam during his speech, and the chair of the assembly stopped him. We hear of some examples of discourse, but there is not enough conversation happening.

Singapore provides an interesting case of a very developed country with a first-world economy that is still moving out of, in some ways, a third-world-type of political system. In that process, we are seeing the government be very careful not to appear as if they are persecuting the Salafis. The Salafis are being given space—as long as they don't cross certain boundaries set out by the state, such as actions that might prove problematic for race relations. Besides, many Salafis are non-political; but, non-political Salafis could easily move towards a more political—or even more violent—position. One example of this is Al-Laskar Jihad in Indonesia, which became involved after the New Order regime collapsed in 1998 and ethnic and religious conflicts ensued.² Al-Laskar Jihad was tolerated by the state for years because they had a very quiet political position. But, within a very short period of time, they easily transformed themselves into a more violent manifestation of their ideology.

Journal: Could you briefly discuss ISIS' recruiting strategy in some of these countries? You have mentioned that it is important not to refer to Southeast Asia as a monolith, but perhaps you could provide some examples from Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia.

Osman: One example would be ISIS' formation of a new Malay-based combat unit called Katibah Nusantara. The group is comprised of several hundred fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. There were also some instances of actual recruitment of young Muslims. One recent example was the British Muslim expat living in Malaysia. Apparently, the former al-Qaeda-trained fighter influenced a number of people to go fight in Syria and Iraq. Fortunately, we have not seen many attacks yet, but the biggest worry is that some of these fighters are going to return to

² Laskar Jihad is an extremist paramilitary group led by Jafar Umar Thalib. The group is known for violent attacks against Christians in Indonesia's eastern Moluccan Islands.

Southeast Asia.

A lot of ISIS's social media propaganda has also been in Indonesian, Bahasa Indonesia in particular, which is similar to the Malay language. Anyone who speaks Malay would also understand Bahasa, while the Bahasa majority—more than 90 percent of Muslims in Southeast Asia—would also know Bahasa. For now, Internet or social media propaganda remains the most significant means of recruitment.

Journal: In your opinion, what should be done to thwart terrorist organizations' online influence?

Osman: I think there's a need for more grassroots-level activities that bring young Muslims together and acquire their ideas on counter-strategies. I did something together with some friends last year. We formed a network called the Young Southeast Asian Muslim Forum in which we brought together young Muslims from seven countries around the region and conducted workshops. We didn't call it a "counter-radicalization" workshop, but instead called it a workshop on "positive portrayal of Islam" because, obviously, much of the negative portrayal is related to terrorism. We need more of this type of small-scale work and to think about more operating at the grassroots level.

Journal: Do you think that the recruitment efforts you mentioned have focused on recruiting soldiers for the conflict in Syria and Iraq, or on propagating terrorist attacks in Southeast Asian territories?

Osman: When we look at people who have gone to join some of these groups, we hear reports of how they have never been trained to fight. They are actually more of a hassle for ISIS and other groups. So, firstly, I think that ISIS' strategy is to evoke fear in the hearts of governments around the world as their citizens leave to fight in Iraq and Syria. This appears to be a show of strength on their part. Secondly, I think they are building a vanguard of future fighters that could potentially be used around the world. We have recently seen this in the case of France and the couple involved in killings in the United States. We will likely see more of this because it's so easy for radicalized people to go out there with a weapon and shout, "I'm doing this in the name of ISIS."

Journal: To what extent do you think that ISIS is linking up with or recruiting from terrorist groups already established in Southeast Asia, such as Jemaah Islamiyah or Abu Sayyaf?³ Has ISIS reached out to these preexisting groups?

Osman: It seems that many of these preexisting groups have basically pledged allegiance. I am not sure about the extent to which ISIS is reaching out to them—I think

³ Jemaah Islamiyah is an Indonesia-based terrorist group formed in the 1990s to establish an Islamic state across Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the southern Philippines. Abu Sayyaf is a terrorist group formed in the early 1990s and based in the southwestern Philippines.

it is the other way around. ISIS has become a very strong brand among many of these groups. I recently read that there are nearly thirty groups in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, that have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Some of the notorious ones include the former spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Bakar Bashir, who currently is in charge of the splinter group Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid.⁴ And then a number of smaller groups have also pledged allegiance, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Fighters Front.⁵ It seems that these groups are looking to associate themselves with ISIS—not the other way around.

Journal: Malaysia and Singapore are the only two ASEAN nations who have joined the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. What do they hope to achieve as members of this coalition? In your assessment, how should such multilateral institutions work to effectively combat terrorism? What level and kind of cooperation can we realistically expect of regional actors?

Osman: Malaysia and Singapore decided to join the coalition because both countries have been responsible members of the international community and contributed in a number of other settings. Malaysia is a part of the UN Security Council and chairmanship of ASEAN, so joining the coalition indicates the type of responsibilities that Malaysia has sought to exercise. In the case of Singapore, the nation has done very well because of its excellent relationship with not just neighboring countries, but also the major powers of the world. Singapore's successful investments in South America, Central Asia, and elsewhere come with certain responsibilities—perhaps Singapore's reason for engagement is similar to why certain European countries and the United States contribute significantly to, for example, the United Nations.

I think the second reason has to do with intelligence sharing. When governments are part of a global coalition, there's more that their partners within that coalition are likely to share with them. So, they likely hope to access information that is important in thwarting or preventing attacks in their respective countries. In general, ASEAN has done quite well in terms of intelligence sharing, which we are likely see more of. One example I can cite occurred when one of the key leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah, Mas Selamat bin Kastari, escaped from detention in Singapore and, because of intelligence cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia, the Malaysian authorities detained him, and Singapore managed to bring him back. This kind of information sharing has been significant.

Journal: In terms of ASEAN's efforts, should any significance be attributed to Indonesia's absence from the coalition? Why might Indonesia opt not to participate in this multilateral effort, despite the fact that segments of its population appear susceptible to radicalization?

⁴ Abu Bakar Bashir formed the Indonesia-based Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid—a splinter group of Jemaah Islamiyah—in 2008.

⁵ The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) is a splinter group of the Philippines-based Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). BIFF broke ties with the mainstream MILF in 2008.

Osman: The political considerations are firstly that, during the hotly contested presidential elections in Indonesia, the current president Joko Widodo actually won by a very slim margin compared to what the polls initially anticipated. The key reason was that his opponents were able to galvanize conservative Muslim political parties and civil society groups to successfully portray him as a pro-Chinese, pro-Christian individual seeking to destroy Islam in Indonesia. Throughout the campaign, Widodo was fighting hard to prove to the Muslim populace his credentials as a Muslim. A significant number of Indonesians today believe in some sort of Western conspiracy against Islam, or that many of the Western powers are out to undermine Islam, so I suspect that Widodo was trying to protect his image. If he were to join the coalition, the rhetoric that he is anti-Islam might be again used against him by his political opponents.

Secondly, in terms of foreign policy, President Widodo has adopted a fairly nationalist policy; he does not want to be seen as taking instructions from the United States or Western powers. Thirdly, and also related to foreign policy, is that Indonesians view their country as an emerging superpower. So, there is a mindset in Indonesia of “we don’t need to be a part of a coalition, we can handle this problem ourselves. In fact, perhaps you need to join *our* efforts.” This mindset is quite clear within the Indonesian government. I would also add that I lived in Indonesia for about a year and was surprised at how many people believe, for example, that the Bali bombings were planned by Israel’s foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). So, we should not underestimate the backlash that any Indonesian president might encounter given the prevalence of this type of opposition in Indonesia.

Journal: A fairly widely-read article on ISIS published in the *The Atlantic* this year asserted that ISIS is “a religious group with carefully considered beliefs,” and that “pretending it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combatted” is a strategic mistake. In your assessment, is this an accurate statement? Why or why not?

Osman: I think the author made some interesting points, but ISIS is definitely not an Islamic group. ISIS represents a particular understanding or interpretation of Islam. So, for us to call it an Islamic group that represents Islamic theologies is, perhaps, incorrect. However, we also need to admit that this is not entirely the creation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi is quoting some Muslim scholars, many of whom come from Saudi Arabia and had harder views. Many of these ancient scholars, for example Ibnu Taimiyah, held much more puritan. Taimiyah’s ideas were due to his context, for he wrote during a period immediately after the Mongol invasion and he basically saw the destruction of Islam and the caliphate at that time. Naturally, there was a tendency for him to turn to a more radical position.

Muslim communities around the world need to seriously assess where these beliefs are coming from within Islam, because these views are not coming from outside of Islam—these views are within the fold of the Islamic religion. When I talk about Islam here, I don’t believe that many Muslims like to argue that there is only one Islam or that all Muslims are of one religious community. Islam practiced in Algeria or Morocco is very

different compared to the Islam practiced in South Africa or India or Pakistan. There are many forms of Islam that we are talking about, and they all come under the umbrella of the Islamic religion. Within this umbrella, there are some extremely problematic positions and interpretations of the Islamic religion. Recently in India, 70,000 clerics came out against ISIS with a statement and religious position. I think that clearly is an admission that these views come from within Islam and must be dealt with from that perspective. So, in a way, the author of this article is half correct.

Journal: Is using mainstream Islam critical to countering radical Islamist narratives? How might you suggest for this to occur? Are there any successful counter-radicalization initiatives in Southeast Asia that the international community might draw upon?

Osman: What we mean by “mainstream Islam” is unclear because it means different things to different people. There are numerous interpretations not just across Southeast Asia but within each of these countries, so we have all sorts of strains of Islam. If we refer to “mainstream Islam” being traditionalist Islam with a strong Sufi influence and historical precedence, then I believe it is important in countering some of these narratives. At the same time, we should not marginalize the more moderate Salafi positions—not all Salafis believe in violence. Yet, there is a longer-term problem that we must consider: we may successfully prevent people from becoming violent, but in doing so we may also mainstream a very puritan and exclusive type of Islam. So, it is problematic when we give too much ground to moderate or non-violent Salafis. I think it has long term consequences on Muslim societies in the region.

Journal: You mentioned that traditional Islam has a strong Sufi influence. Is Sufism important for cultivating a more tolerant, moderate, or traditional form of Islam?⁶

Osman: I think that is one of the ways. The only reason why I am saying this is because that is the kind of Islam that most Muslims in Southeast Asia are familiar with and grew up experiencing. The problem, though, is that this was never positioned as “Sufi Islam,” but was always positioned as simply “Islam.” So, Muslims might say they are not Sufi, but their practices are all similar to those that Sufi Muslims practice. I think the Salafis are trying to define what the “right” Islam is. We are seeing the mainstreaming of Salafi Islam. And, similar to Sufi Islam, Salafi Islam has not been defined necessarily as a religious sect, so people are becoming and thinking like Salafis without even realizing that it is happening—and I think that is more problematic. Although today we are talking about violent extremism, I also think the issue of non-violent extremism must also be dealt with. The problem with Salafism is that it is creating an exclusive mindset that is dehumanizing non-Muslims and Muslim minority sects—and the jump from non-violent to violent becomes easy.

Journal: Do you think that even non-violent extremism paves the way ultimately for

⁶ Sufism is a more mystical brand of Islam wherein Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.

the kind of mindset that is required for extremist, violent behavior?

Osman: Yes, I think so. When we talk about the 50,000 ISIS supporters in Malaysia, I think the numbers are much higher—we are actually looking at more like half a billion supporters. A large majority of Malaysian Muslims are thinking of Shiite Muslims as deviants. Looking at the younger population—those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five—the numbers are staggeringly high at 95 percent. Many individuals today even believe it is un-Islamic to wish someone a merry Christmas or happy Diwali, so there is a significant shift happening.

Journal: How would you assess the various approaches taken by Southeast Asian states in fostering interfaith tolerance, such as the Pancasila framework in Indonesia, Malaysia's privileging of Islam within a pluralist system, or Singapore's highly regulated system for religious freedom?⁷ Do such approaches effectively cultivate religious pluralism in the region?

Osman: Of course, it depends on the different contexts of each of these countries. Pancasila has been an important aspect of Indonesian society. Interestingly, some of the Islamic political parties seeking to implement Sharia law have argued that Sharia is in line with Pancasila. So, when we talk about frameworks like Pancasila, it is highly dependent on people's interpretations. It is important to remember that the first tenet of Pancasila is the belief in the oneness of God—it is not a completely secular framework. Pancasila also regulates religion, so an individual can only be an adherent to six religions; if one falls outside of the six religions, then he or she is breaking the law. Yet, the tradition of a pluralist society has long existed in Indonesia, particularly given the commonality of interreligious and interethnic marriages. For example, just look at one of the presidential candidates in the last election: Prabowo Subianto. Prabowo played to the conservative Muslim gallery, yet his brother is a well-known Christian evangelist. This sort of family setting is very common in Indonesia, which fosters a higher degree of tolerance.

I think that the weakest link in Southeast Asia is really Malaysia. Even though Malaysia has not experienced a long history of violent extremism, the state of Islam in Malaysia has become extremely problematic because of the mainstreaming of puritan ideas. In the past, it used to be that certain privileges were given to the Malay community, but now it's no longer about *ethnic* privileges. In the latest UMNO General Assembly meeting, we saw *religious* idioms employed in every single speech. Within UMNO itself, we previously saw people who would strongly say that they disagreed with the implementation of Islamic criminal law. Today, no one would dare question Islamic criminal law—or their political career would probably be over. In fact, UMNO is currently proposing working with the Islamist political party whose main agenda is the implementation of Islamic criminal law. On an intrinsic level, many UMNO

⁷ Pancasila or "Five Principles" is the Indonesian state philosophy as articulated by Sukarno. The Five Principles are: nationalism; internationalism (humanism); democracy; social prosperity; and monotheism.

leaders may continue to be secular, but the utilization of Islam in the political fora is damaging in that it creates an exclusive mindset, which privileges the Muslim identity over the non-Muslim. Nearly 40 percent of Malaysia's population is non-Muslim, so this mindset is very problematic.

In the case of Singapore, given the stronger state hand in dealing with issues, the state has generally been able to curtail violent or non-violent religious extremism. That said, we are beginning to see new trends as Singapore's political system has experienced a significant democratization process since 2011. As space for public discussion and expression of ideas expands, Muslims are also trying to secure their rights. For instance, regarding headscarves, women in Singapore are not allowed to wear the hijab in certain uniformed professions, such as the police force or even girls going to school in uniform. Today, Singaporean Muslims are arguing that their rights as Muslims—to practice their religion freely—are protected by the constitution. At the same time, the vast majority of Muslims in Singapore are perhaps not ready to give certain communities, such as the LGBT community, equal rights under the state. Beyond the narrative that Singapore is a highly regulated political system, interesting contradictions and contestations are happening in a democratizing Singapore.

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