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GLOBAL LINKS, LOCAL THREATS: THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM NETWORKS ON DOMESTIC TERRORISM IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This research examines the impact of international terrorist networks on domestic terrorism in Malaysia, with a focus on groups such as *Al-Qaeda*, ISIS @ *Daesh*, *Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah* (JI), *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD) and *Abu Sayyaf*. Using a qualitative, case-based method, this paper explores how recruitment, radicalisation and financing processes connect global jihadist movements to Malaysian extremist actors. Recruitment is often facilitated through encrypted platforms and social media, supported by transnational links with Indonesian and Filipino militants. Marginalised and uneducated populations, including Rohingya refugees and Southern Thai communities, are particularly vulnerable due to socio-political and economic hardships. Radicalisation is driven by extremist content in Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesian languages, spread through online media and jihadist publications. Returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq further deepen the threat, bringing combat experience and hardened ideologies that can strengthen local networks. Terrorism financing in Malaysia relies on informal mechanisms such as *hawala*, misuse of charitable organisations and the increasing use of cryptocurrencies. Authorities have exposed several cases involving NGOs and individuals accused of funding foreign terrorist groups under humanitarian cover. The study underscores the need for stronger regional and international cooperation, highlighting Malaysia's role in trilateral patrols, ASEAN intelligence exchanges and global counterterrorism partnerships. This paper concludes that an integrated strategy combining intelligence sharing, legal enhancements and community resilience is critical to disrupt the evolving nexus between terror networks and domestic security threats in Malaysia.

Introduction

The growing interconnectedness of global terrorism has had direct repercussions on domestic security landscapes, particularly in Southeast Asia. Malaysia, though traditionally considered a moderate Muslim-majority nation, has experienced increasing exposure to transnational terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda, Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah* (JI) and the Islamic State (ISIS) @ Daesh. These networks exploit digital platforms, regional instability, porous maritime borders and ideological narratives to influence individuals and cells within Malaysia, leading to tangible security threats.

One of the most pressing issues is the online radicalisation of youth and vulnerable communities, where encrypted messaging apps and social media channels like Telegram and WhatsApp serve as key recruitment tools. A recent UNODC report (2024) warned that Southeast Asia remains a "fertile ground" for the digital proliferation of extremist ideology, especially in local languages like Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesian.

Another key issue is the return of Malaysian foreign fighters. According to Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), 121 Malaysians were confirmed to have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq since 2013, with around 53 killed, while others have either returned or remain unaccounted for. The 2023 arrest of a returning fighter in Selangor, who was allegedly planning a lone-wolf attack on a religious site, underscores the persistence of this threat (RMP, 2025).

Terrorism financing also presents a growing challenge. The 2019 arrest of Malaysian NGO members for funnelling humanitarian aid to ISIS-linked groups in southern Philippines illustrates the misuse of charitable fronts (RMP,2025). Furthermore, Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and the Financial Intelligence Unit have identified increasing cryptocurrency usage in terror financing, which further complicating the enforcement.

This study explores how international terrorist networks impact domestic terrorism in Malaysia through three primary mechanisms: recruitment, radicalisation and terrorism financing. It examines the tactics used by foreign terrorist organisations to penetrate Malaysian society, local vulnerabilities particularly among marginalised groups and evaluates state responses through counterterrorism legislation, deradicalisation and international cooperation. Understanding how global threats evolve into local realities is crucial for crafting adaptive, preventive and community-based policy frameworks. This study ultimately aims to contribute to broader discourse on regional security, counterterrorism cooperation and national resilience.
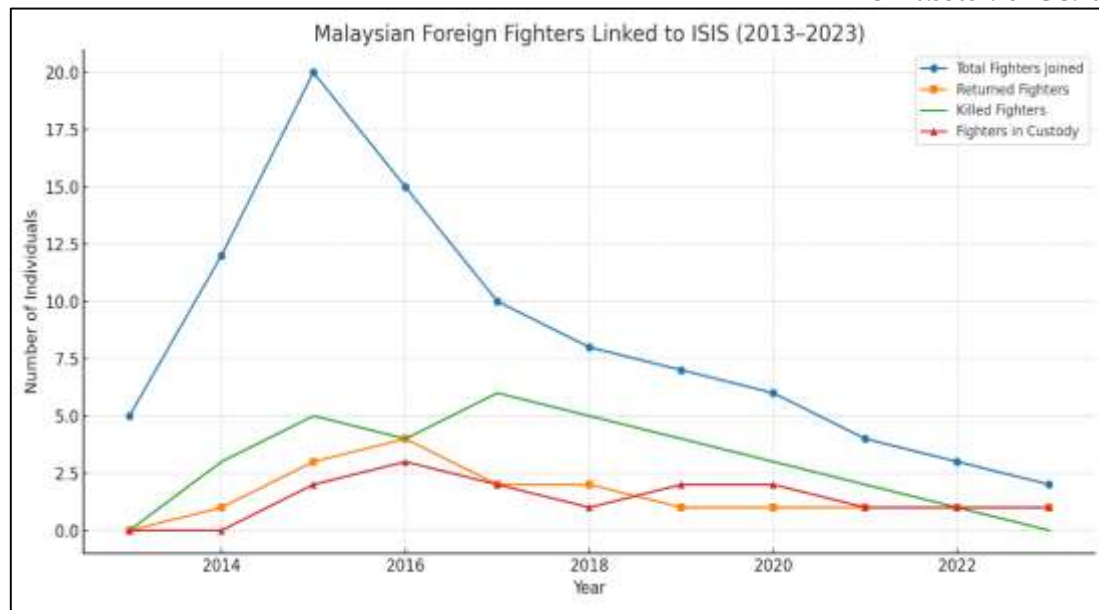
Figure 1: Malaysian Foreign Fighters Linked to ISIS (Daesh) 2013-2023
Source: (MDIO, 2025)

Literature Review

The rise of terrorism in the digital age has significantly altered the dynamics of recruitment, particularly in Southeast Asia where Malaysia has emerged as both a target and source of extremist mobilisation. Recent scholarly efforts have shed light on how terrorist groups like the *Al Qaeda* and Islamic State (ISIS) exploit technological platforms, charismatic networks and socio-political vulnerabilities to radicalise and recruit Malaysians. This literature review focuses on three critical studies that collectively explore the mechanisms and pathways of terrorist recruitment involving Malaysians both domestically and abroad. The first examines the strategic use of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in radicalizing individuals through emotionally charged and culturally tailored propaganda. The second investigates the evolution of Malaysian foreign fighter networks, emphasizing the role of local ideologues in shaping transnational jihadist narratives. The third highlights how returning foreign fighters and perceived grievances contribute to domestic radicalisation. Together, these studies offer valuable insights into the multifaceted recruitment strategies by international extremist groups and provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how identity, communication and charismatic authority influence radical behaviour.

Nor Hanim Ibrahim, Syaripah Ruzaini Syed Aris and Fariza Hanis Abdul Razak (2017) in their study on the *Use of social media in ISIS Recruitment,* investigated the role of Facebook in the recruitment strategies of ISIS targeting Malaysians. The study highlights how ISIS exploits emotional messaging, promises of spiritual rewards and the sense of global belonging to lure individuals particularly youth through public social media platforms before shifting them to encrypted communication tools like Telegram. The paper reveals the strategic use of Bahasa Malaysia-language content in cultivating a sense of religious obligation and adventure. The findings are crucial in understanding how online radicalisation flourishes in digital spaces among vulnerable segments of society. This study related with *Communication Theory of Radicalisation* which emphasises on how persuasive extremist narratives, especially on digital platforms, influence belief systems and behaviour over time.

Under the theme of *Malaysian Foreign Fighter Pathways*, Reuben Dass and Jasminder Singh (2022) explored the evolution of Malaysian foreign fighter involvement in conflicts in Iraq and Syria from 2012 to 2019. The study identifies three main phases of recruitment, each influenced by charismatic ideologues such as Yazid Sufaat, Lotfi Ariffin and Muhammad Wanndy. These figures successfully mobilised Malaysians via physical networks and later transitioned to digital platforms, where romantiised narratives of martyrdom and religious obligation were widely disseminated. The research provides insight into how personal influence and ideological legitimacy contribute to recruitment, particularly among disenfranchised or identity-seeking individuals. This study suit with *Charismatic Authority* theory (Max Weber) which explains how recruitment is driven by the personal appeal and ideological command of influential leaders who mobilise support for radical causes.

While Amira Jadoon, Milo Comerford and Hussein Mohd (2022) in their study on the *Influence of ISIS and Returnee Threats*, examined the Islamic State's influence in Malaysia by analysing arrest data, foiled plots and the profiles of Malaysian recruits from 2014 to 2019. Their study found that 319 individuals were arrested in connection to IS-related activities, with a significant number radicalised via online channels and influenced by returning foreign fighters. These returnees brought ideological credibility and tactical skills, becoming catalysts for local recruitment. The research shows how global jihadist networks leverage shared identity, perceived victimhood and communal grievances to radicalize Malaysians. This study fitting with *Social Identity Theory* which proposes that individuals adopt extremist ideologies when they derive a sense of belonging, superiority and purpose from group membership, especially in times of socio-political uncertainty.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, integrating case study analysis with network analysis to examine how international terrorist networks influence domestic terrorism in Malaysia. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring the intricate socio-political and ideological dimensions of terrorism that often elude statistical measurement. This methodology enables an in-depth examination of motivations, operational patterns and structural relationships within terrorist networks.

The case study method serves as the primary approach, focusing on several critical incidents and developments within Malaysia. These include the 2016 ISIS-inspired Movida nightclub bombing, the dismantling of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) sleeper cells in Selangor and Johor during 2020–2021 and the arrests of returning Malaysian foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq. These cases were chosen for their relevance in illustrating different phases of radicalisation, planning and local execution. Through these examples, the study identifies common trends, tactics and strategic influences used by foreign terrorist organisations.

Complementing the case studies, network analysis is used to map out the connections between transnational and domestic terrorist actors. This involves identifying key individuals, support cells and ideological or financial linkages that enable international groups to exert influence within Malaysia. Examples include how Malaysian militants communicated digitally with ISIS operatives in Syria, or how *Katibah Nusantara* facilitated cross-border movement and coordination between jihadist groups in Malaysia, Indonesia and the southern Philippines. This method helps visualise the structure and flow of influence across borders.

The data sources for this study include open-source reports from intelligence agencies, counterterrorism publications, academic research, news archives and governmental press releases as well as interview with counter terrorism practitioners.   These sources are triangulated to ensure the reliability and validity of findings. Thematic analysis is applied to extract recurring patterns and core themes related to recruitment, radicalisation, financing and operational coordination. By combining both analytical tools, case study and network analysis, this study provides a holistic understanding of how global terrorist organisations penetrate and shape the domestic threat landscape in Malaysia. The methodology facilitates policy-relevant insights, helping stakeholders formulate more informed counterterrorism strategies that encompass security enforcement and ideological countermeasures.
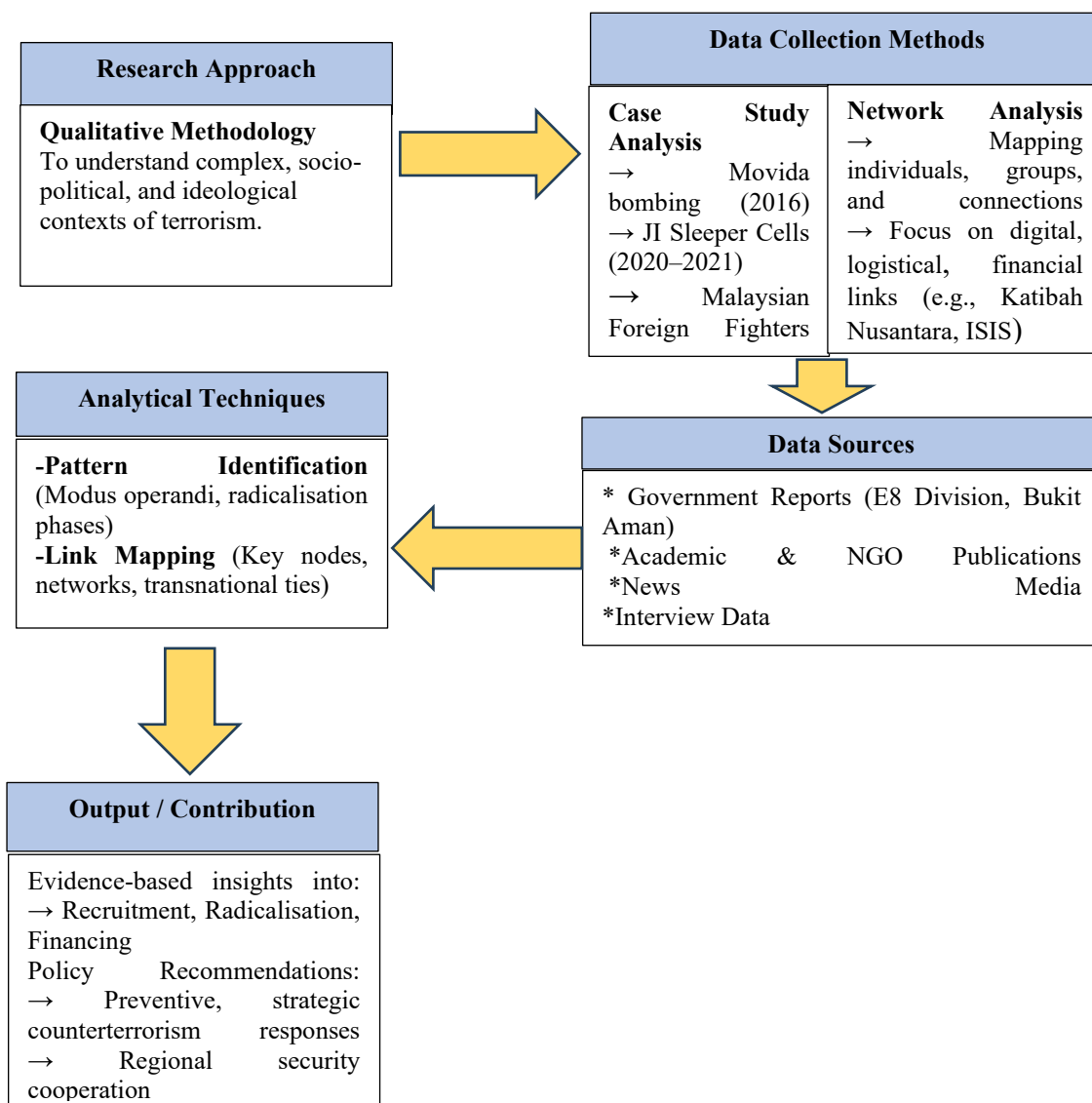
Research Methodology Framework

Figure 2: Research Methodology Framework

Terrorism in Malaysia – Revisited
Since 2011, Malaysia has increasingly found itself vulnerable to the global proliferation of extremist ideologies and operational strategies propagated by international terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda*[i], *Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah* (JI)[ii] and the Islamic State (ISIS) @ *Daesh*[iii]. These organizations, despite operating primarily beyond Malaysian borders, have successfully penetrated local communities through digital propaganda, transnational networks and covert financing mechanisms. This has led to a rise in domestic radicalisation, the recruitment of Malaysian citizens for foreign conflicts and several attempted or successful terror plots within the country. The relationship between international terrorism and domestic threats raises urgent concerns about national security, social cohesion and the effectiveness of Malaysia's current counterterrorism framework.

The existing body of research often treats international and domestic terrorism as separate domains, failing to fully address how global jihadist networks adapt their strategies to local contexts. In Malaysia, this disconnect creates a blind spot in understanding how foreign extremist narratives are localised, how regional networks operate across porous borders and how radicalized individuals or returnees reintegrate into society or prison systems. With the evolving nature of terrorism especially the shift from centralised command structures to decentralised, digitally enabled cells there is a pressing need to study the transnational to domestic linkages that inform recruitment, radicalisation and financing in the Malaysian setting.

Based on statistic obtained from Counter Terrorism Branch, Malaysian Defence Intelligence Organization (MDIO), a total of 663 local militants and foreigners were arrested in Malaysia between 2001 and 2020. The figures also indicated that between 2013 and 2020, a total of 188 foreigners which came from various countries were arrested due to involvement in terrorism in Malaysia (MDIO, 2025). These figures highlight the significant existence and influence of such groups within the country and have expanded their ideological, logistical and financial reach into Malaysia.

Table 1: Statistic of the Arrested Local Militants and Members of Various Foreign Terrorist Groups in Malaysia Between 2001 and 2020

Militant Groups	Nationality	Total
ISIS @ Daesh	Local	343
Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah (JI)	Local and Foreign	132
Darul Islam (DI)	Foreign	30
Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)	Foreign	27
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	Foreign	25
Al-Qaeda	Foreign	23
Abu Sayyaf Group	Foreign	38
Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)	Foreign	4
Fetullah Organisation	Foreign	3
Maute	Foreign	4
Ansar Al Shariah (Tunisia)	Foreign	6
Babbar Khalsa International (BKI)	Foreign	7
Hezbollah	Foreign	5
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Foreign	3
Jemaah Santri Melayu	Foreign	3

Taliban	Foreign	2
Al-Shabab	Foreign	2
Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)	Foreign	1
Jamaatul Mujahideen (Bangladesh)	Foreign	1
Sikh for Justice	Foreign	1
Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF)	Foreign	3
	663	

(Source: MDIO, 2025)

Furthermore, the involvement of Malaysian citizens in ISIS @ Daesh activities in Syria and Iraq, particularly as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), represents a critical security challenge that demands serious attention. Between 2013 and 2024, a total of 121 Malaysian nationals were reported to have migrated to Syria, lured by extremist propaganda and promises of contributing to the so-called *Islamic Caliphate*. Many of these individuals were radicalised through a sophisticated combination of online narratives, jihadist messaging platforms and recruitment networks that framed participation in overseas conflicts as a religious obligation and a noble cause.

The success of ISIS @ Daesh narratives in the Malay language, coupled with the global spread of extremist ideology, allowed foreign terrorist groups to penetrate Malaysian society and appeal to vulnerable individuals, including youths, professionals and even entire families. Their involvement not only contributed to the operational strength of ISIS @ Daesh abroad but also created a long-term domestic threat, as returning fighters could import battlefield experience, operational knowledge and hardened ideologies back into Malaysia. This phenomenon underscores the transnational nature of modern terrorism and highlights the urgent need for comprehensive deradicalisation, reintegration and intelligence-sharing programs to address the potential threat posed by returning FTFs (MDIO, 2025).

Table 2: Statistic of Malaysian Citizens "Hijra"[iv] to Syria Between 2013 – 2024

(Believed to be still in Syria) - 48	
Male	20
Female	10
Children (Male)	12
Children (Female)	6
Killed - 48	
Male	42
Female	1
Children (Male)	2
Children (Female)	3
Return/Repatriate to Malaysia - 25	
Male	8 – return, 2 - repatriate
Female	5 repatriates
Children (Male)	6 repatriates
Children (Female)	4 repatriates
Total	121

(Source: MDIO, 2025)

Based on this statistic, there are possibilities that the returning of them have a history of bringing back their knowledge, philosophy and networking to create a local group to start off recruitment initiative, fundraising and planning attack. Besides that, their return also raises the concern over terrorist spillover and potential sleeper cells forming domestically.

Given Malaysia's strategic location in Southeast Asia, its multi-religious society and its dual commitments to regional cooperation and domestic stability, understanding the influence of international terrorist networks is both timely and essential. This paper addresses a significant gap by investigating how global extremist actors shape the domestic threat landscape in Malaysia. In doing so, it aims to inform counterterrorism strategies that are not only reactive but preventive and adaptive, blending law enforcement, intelligence cooperation and community-based interventions to better safeguard the nation from evolving terrorist threats.

Linking The Global and The Local: International Terrorism Networks
The evolving landscape of international terrorism has increasingly blurred the lines between global networks and local threats. Under this theme, this study examines how transnational terrorist organizations, such as *Al-Qaeda,* ISIS and JI and other militant groups have successfully extended their influence into Malaysia. These networks exploit global communication channels, financial systems and ideological narratives to recruit, radicalise and operationalise local actors. In Malaysia, the presence of foreign terrorist fighters, homegrown extremist cells and cross-border linkages with groups in Indonesia and the Southern Philippines reflect how international terrorism networks adapt to regional contexts. Understanding these connections is critical for assessing Malaysia's domestic security challenges and for formulating effective counter-terrorism strategies that bridge both global and local dimensions of the threat.

Transnational Linkages and Malaysia's Geostrategic Exposure
Malaysia's geographic centrality in Southeast Asia, with shared maritime borders and proximity to multiple conflict zones, has made it a significant node in transnational terrorism networks. Over the past two decades, Malaysia has been used as a logistics hub, financial conduit and recruitment ground for various terrorist organizations including *Al-Qaeda*, ISIS, JI, LTTE, *Abu Sayyaf*, ARSA, Maute Group and JAD. According to the Royal Malaysia Police, over 500 individuals have been arrested for terrorism-related activities between 2013 and 2023, with many cases linked to international networks (RMP, 2023).

Al-Qaeda and *Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah*: Foundational Threats
Al-Qaeda's operational history in Malaysia includes the infamous 2000 Kuala Lumpur Summit, where key 9/11 conspirators met (Gunaratna, 2002). JI, *Al-Qaeda's* Southeast Asian proxy, capitalised on religious schools (pesantren) and mosques to radicalise and recruit Malaysian members. Several Malaysians trained in Mindanao under JI before becoming operatives (Abas, N, 2012). Notably, Yazid Sufaat, a Malaysian biochemist, provided safe houses and materials for Al-Qaeda operatives, underscoring the nexus between foreign networks and domestic actors (ICG, 2003).

ISIS @ Daesh: Digital Radicalisation and Malaysian Recruitment
The rise of ISIS between 2013 and 2019 marked a new era of online radicalisation in Malaysia. With sophisticated propaganda and digital outreach, ISIS recruited over 100 Malaysians to Syria and Iraq, some of whom returned or were arrested in transit (MDIO, 2025). The 2016

Movida nightclub grenade attack in Puchong was the first confirmed ISIS directed attack on Malaysian soil, orchestrated via encrypted Telegram channels (MDIO, 2025). This shift toward virtual radicalisation made it harder for authorities to detect lone actors inspired by global jihadist narratives.

Recruitment Pathways and Ideological Mobilisation

Recruitment in Malaysia often begins through religious study circles, online forums and prison radicalisation. JI and ISIS have both used charismatic preachers and social media influencers to disseminate extremist ideologies. One prominent case is the recruitment of Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, a Malaysian who joined ISIS in Syria and coordinated attacks from abroad until his death in 2017. His digital presence enabled him to radicalise and instruct Malaysian sympathisers remotely, exemplifying how global networks can localise ideological influence (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025).

Financing Mechanisms: From Charity to *Hawala*

Terror financing in Malaysia has evolved from physical cash transfers to cryptocurrency and false charitable fronts. According to Bank Negara Malaysia and the Financial Intelligence and Enforcement Department (FIED), several NGOs operating under humanitarian pretexts were found to have diverted funds to support Syrian militants between 2015 and 2020. The LTTE, ARSA and Babbar Khalsa also used diaspora fundraising via community events or online donation drives to funnel money back to support militant operations abroad (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025). Informal value transfer systems such as *hawala* and remittance services were exploited to avoid scrutiny.

Cross-Border Training and Operational Support

Malaysian fighters have received military training in Southern Philippines, Syria and Afghanistan. Mahmud Ahmad, a former University of Malaya lecturer turned ISIS financier, organised training camps in Basilan and coordinated foreign fighter logistics for the 2017 Marawi siege (MDIO, 2025). His death in a clash with Philippine troops revealed the extent of Malaysian involvement in regional jihadist operations. JI, MILF and *Abu Sayyaf* also maintained training camps in Mindanao, where Malaysian and Indonesian recruits trained in explosives, small arms and guerrilla tactics (Abas, N, 2012).

The Influence of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Nexus

Malaysia hosts a large Rohingya refugee population, raising security concerns related to ARSA. While ARSA has not conducted operations in Malaysia, there is growing concern about diaspora-based recruitment or support cells. Malaysian police have investigated small groups suspected of fundraising and propaganda dissemination for ARSA since 2020 (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025). This adds a new layer of complexity as Malaysia must balance humanitarian obligations with national security imperatives.

LTTE and Babbar Khalsa: Ethnic-Based Radical Movements

Although often categorised separately from Islamist terrorism, the activities of LTTE and Babbar Khalsa in Malaysia represent the intersection of ethnic grievance and foreign conflict radicalisation. In 2019, twelve Malaysians, including political figures, were arrested for alleged LTTE support, having shared materials glorifying LTTE fighters and making financial contributions. While charges were later dropped due to insufficient evidence of active plotting,

the case highlighted how transnational nationalist ideologies can radicalise local populations (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025).

Peripheral Yet Persistent Threats: Taliban, *Al Shabaab* and JAD
While the Taliban, Al-Shabaab and JAD are less visible in Malaysia, they have contributed to the ideological landscape. Returnees from Afghanistan occasionally seek to rekindle ties with militant groups or act as recruiters. JAD, closely linked to ISIS, has coordinated with Southeast Asian cells, with one Malaysian arrested in Indonesia for attempted collaboration in 2019 (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025). These groups may not be operationally active in Malaysia but remain relevant in shaping extremist discourse in online spaces.

Foreign Fighters and the Need for Coordinated Response
The movement of Malaysians to Syria, Iraq, Mindanao and Afghanistan underscores how Malaysia is part of a broader jihadist circuit. As of 2024, over 40 Malaysians who joined ISIS @ Daesh remain unaccounted for, with some detained abroad and others feared to have returned unnoticed (MDIO, 2025). These fighters pose a reintegration and surveillance challenge. Moreover, cross-border facilitators provide logistical aid and training, creating resilient networks. In order to counter this, Malaysia must continue enhancing intelligence-sharing, strengthen rehabilitation programs and adopt a whole-of-society approach to disrupt the recruitment pipeline and transnational links (MOHA, 2024). On 30th Sep 2024, MyPCVE[v] was launched by the Prime Minister and it served as Malaysia's comprehensive framework to address the root causes of violent extremism, strengthen resilience against radicalization and promote rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. It aligns with Malaysia's broader security and societal goals, emphasising a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach involving government agencies, civil society, the private sector, and communities.

Discussion and Findings

The Influence of International Terrorist Networks on Domestic Terrorism in Malaysia: Recruitment, Radicalisation and Financing
International terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda*, JI and more recently ISIS @ Daesh, have played a significant role in shaping the landscape of domestic terrorism in Malaysia. These networks operate beyond national boundaries, using ideology, digital platforms and transnational financial channels to recruit, radicalize and support operatives within Malaysian borders. In the following section, this study examines on how international terrorist groups influenced local context in various forms.

Recruitment: Tapping into Transnational Narratives and Identities
International terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda*, ISIS, and JI have refined recruitment strategies that merge global ideologies with local socio-political contexts. In Malaysia, these groups exploit shared religious narratives, political grievances and personal vulnerabilities, combining online radicalisation with transnational linkages that transcend borders and leverage regional ethnic and religious solidarities. Online platforms are central to this process, with social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Telegram serving as key dissemination tools. ISIS, for instance, mastered digital propaganda through high-quality videos, online magazines like *Dabiq, Rumiyah* and *Al Fatihin*, and targeted Malay-language content. Malaysian recruit Wanndy Mohamed Jedi operated from Syria using Telegram to coordinate with supporters and

spread propaganda (MDIO, 2025), facilitating incidents like the 2016 Puchong grenade attack which is the first ISIS-claimed event in Malaysia (The Star, 2016).

Encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram enable foreign recruiters to bypass surveillance, offering secure channels for ideological grooming, tactical training, and logistical coordination (MDIO, 2025). In 2019, a Malaysian university student in Klang Valley was radicalised via online forums and recruited by an ISIS facilitator in Indonesia, ultimately planning a lone-wolf attack against non-Muslim places of worship (NST, 2019). Transnational ties between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines amplify recruitment risks. JI and its affiliates maintain networks across maritime Southeast Asia, exploiting ethnic and linguistic affinities. The 2017 arrest of a militant cell in Tawau revealed Indonesians being smuggled into Sabah for onward transit to Mindanao for training (RMP, 2018), highlighting how the Sabah coast remains a conduit for such operations.

Marginalised refugee communities, such as the Rohingya and southern Thai populations in Malaysia, are also vulnerable to radical narratives promising justice and empowerment. ARSA sympathisers have reportedly leveraged diaspora communities in Peninsular Malaysia and Penang for recruitment or fundraising (MDIO, 2025). The Royal Malaysia Police have arrested Rohingya men suspected of ARSA links (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025). Broader recruitment narratives are tied to identity politics and perceptions of victimhood, with groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS framing global jihad as a moral duty to defend oppressed Muslims in Syria, Palestine, and Myanmar. Studies by Hoffman and Hassan (2017) note that Malaysian youth with limited religious literacy but high emotional engagement with global Muslim suffering are especially susceptible to radical interpretations and foreign recruitment.

Religious institutions and educational networks are sometimes exploited as recruitment channels. While most Islamic institutions in Malaysia promote moderation, rogue preachers and informal *dakwah* groups have occasionally propagated Wahhabi-Salafi ideologies or accepted foreign funding tied to extremist agendas (Zulkarnain Haron & Nordin Hussin, 2013; Muhammad Haziq, 2021). Local *madrasahs* and religious study circles (usrah groups) have, in isolated cases, been used to identify and indoctrinate followers (RMP – CT Div E8, 2025). Returnees and deportees from Syria or Mindanao also contribute to recruitment dynamics; despite deradicalisation programs, some continue to promote extremist beliefs. The legacy of figures like Muhammad Wanndy, whose followers attempted attacks in his name even after his death, illustrates the enduring influence of such individuals (ISIS-Malaysia, 2018).

Despite heightened security, cross-border facilitators exploit smuggling routes in Sabah and northern Peninsular Malaysia, which are also used for human trafficking and militant movement. Weak maritime enforcement and corruption in areas such as the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) zone make these borders attractive for terrorist operatives (ESSCOM, 2025). Persistent cooperation between Malaysian and Filipino ISIS affiliates in hotspots like Zamboanga, Jolo and Mindanao underscores the regional nature of the threat. In conclusion, the recruitment of Malaysians into terrorist networks is shaped by ideological, technological and geopolitical factors. Countering this requires integrated strategies that combine enforcement with digital literacy, community resilience and enhanced regional intelligence cooperation.

Radicalisation: Ideological Indoctrination and Returning Fighters

Radicalisation in Malaysia is primarily fuelled by global *Salafi-jihadist* narratives propagated by international terrorist organisations such as ISIS, *Al-Qaeda* and JI. These movements localise their ideological messaging, promoting a violent interpretation of Islam that conflates religious duty with political militancy, often framed through anti-Western sentiment and global Muslim victimhood. Such narratives resonate with specific segments of Malaysian society, particularly marginalised individuals and youth (Yusof, 2020). Online platforms like Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube have amplified these messages by distributing Malay-language jihadist content, including ISIS's *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* and *Al Fatihin*. These materials frequently misuse Qur'anic verses and hadiths to legitimise violence and martyrdom, with poor religious literacy making audiences more susceptible to misinterpretation (MDIO, 2025).

Radicalisation is not driven solely by ideology but also by emotional and psychological vulnerabilities arising from personal crises, perceived injustices and socio-political grievances. In Malaysia, many recruits are drawn to narratives emphasising Muslim suffering in Syria, Palestine and Myanmar before formal group affiliation. Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki, Malaysia's first recorded suicide bomber, was inspired by such messaging, culminating in a 2014 vehicle-borne suicide attack in Iraq (Zolkepli, 2015). A significant concern is the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). As of 2024, more than 120 Malaysians had travelled to Syria and Iraq, with at least 40 killed and others returning either officially or clandestinely (RMP-CT Division E8, 2025; MDIO, 2025). These returnees often bring hardened ideologies, combat experience and operational links that can revitalise domestic recruitment efforts.

Managing returnees is particularly challenging within Malaysia's prison system. Despite the presence of rehabilitation and deradicalisation programs, some incarcerated militants continue to influence others. Hoffman and Hassan (2017) note that detention environments can become breeding grounds for extremist ideologies if surveillance, segregation and reform measures are insufficient. This risk extends to religious institutions, where most teachings are moderate but can be undermined by rogue clerics, often trained in regions with radical interpretations of Islam; who spread extremist ideas in unregulated *usrah* or private study circles (MDIO, 2025; Muhammad Haziq, 2021). These individuals, leveraging religious authority, can influence vulnerable followers under the guise of authentic Islamic teaching (Zulkarnain Haron & Nordin Hussin, 2013).

Radicalisation pressures are especially acute within marginalised communities, including rural Malaysians, Rohingya refugees, southern Thai Muslims and Filipino Muslim diaspora. Socio-economic grievances, political exclusion and social alienation make these populations prime targets for extremist recruiters. Arrests in Penang and Sabah have uncovered links to ARSA and Abu Sayyaf operatives engaged in recruitment and propaganda (Bernama, 2022). These cases highlight how local frustrations are exploited into violent agendas, underscoring the need for community resilience measures that prioritise vulnerable demographics.

Cross-border radicalisation in the Sabah-Sulu corridor remains a persistent challenge due to historical ethnic, religious and linguistic ties among Muslim communities in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. This interconnected network facilitates the flow of ideology, personnel and resources across borders. Groups like the Maute Group and MILF splinters have served as training and indoctrination hubs, as seen in the case of Amin Baco, a Malaysian militant who held a leadership role in the 2017 Marawi Siege and maintained active links with

JI and ISIS-affiliated cells (ICG, 2020). The convergence of ideological indoctrination, returning fighters and porous maritime borders necessitates an integrated approach combining enforcement, regional intelligence cooperation, religious re-education and strategic counter-narratives to curb radicalisation in Malaysia.

Financing: Local and Transnational Funding Channels

Terrorist financing serves as a vital enabler of both domestic and transnational extremist activities in Malaysia, with operations often blending traditional and modern methods such as *hawala*, abuse of charities, criminal enterprises and digital currencies (Zarifi, 2021). Covert financial flows enable extremists to procure weapons, fund travel, recruit operatives and coordinate logistics. A major area of concern is the exploitation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charitable foundations for channelling funds to foreign terrorist groups, including ISIS and *Hayat Tahrir Al Sham* (HTS), under the guise of humanitarian aid such as *infaq, zakat*, and disaster relief, making detection and tracing of these transactions particularly difficult (BNM, 2020).

The rise of cryptocurrency has added another layer of complexity to counterterrorism financing. Malaysian authorities recorded a 2019 case in which a national used Bitcoin to fund ISIS-linked networks, bypassing traditional banking scrutiny (The Star, 2019). Digital currencies' anonymity and decentralisation, especially when accessed via encrypted networks, complicate enforcement. Similarly, informal *hawala* systems remain widely used for cross-border transfers, often funded by Middle Eastern sponsors and directed toward domestic JI and Daesh-linked operatives, without triggering regulatory alerts (Basarudin & Abdullah, 2021). These channels are preferred for their speed, trust-based networks and cultural familiarity.

Domestic extremist cells have also turned to self-financing through ideologically motivated crimes, such as the 2016 goldsmith robbery in Kedah by ISIS supporters intending to finance travel to Syria and acquire firearms (Hoffman & Hassan, 2017). Legitimate businesses have been exploited for money laundering and operational support, as in the 2018 Selangor case where a printing company was used to funnel funds to overseas cells via over-invoicing and underreporting (Rahim, 2019). Malaysia's geographical proximity to Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand further exposes it to spillover financing from regional insurgencies, with Abu Sayyaf, MILF and Maute Group networks using Malaysian intermediaries for payments through cash couriers, mobile platforms and smuggling methods (ICG, 2020).

Diaspora networks have also been co-opted for extremist financing, with elements within the Rohingya and Tamil communities implicated in funding groups like ARSA and LTTE under the guise of ethnic solidarity (Bernama, 2022). Malaysia's legislative and institutional responses, such as the Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing and Proceeds of Unlawful Activities Act (AMLATFA) and the Financial Intelligence Unit's collaborations with INTERPOL, ASEANAPOL and the Egmont Group, have strengthened monitoring and prosecution efforts (BNM, 2021). However, enforcement continues to be challenged by evolving financial technologies, the sophistication of terror financiers and the transnational scope of operations, making adaptive regulatory modernization and intelligence cooperation essential to sever the financial arteries sustaining extremist networks.

The Role of Regional and Global Cooperation in Countering the Impact of International Terrorism Networks on Domestic Terrorism in Malaysia

Malaysia's strategic location and multi-religious composition make it particularly vulnerable to the transnational nature of terrorism, necessitating strong regional and global cooperation. Terrorist networks such as *Al Qaeda*, ISIS, JI and *Abu Sayyaf* exploit porous maritime and land borders, highlighting the need for joint countermeasures in recruitment, radicalisation and financing. In response, Malaysia has bolstered its counterterrorism framework through multilateral initiatives like joint maritime patrols, intelligence-sharing platforms, and capacity-building programmes. Notable efforts include the Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) with Indonesia and the Philippines to secure the Sulu-Sulawesi seas and intelligence mechanisms such as the Counter Terrorism Information Facility (CTIF), ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE), ASEANAPOL and INTERPOL cooperation, which have disrupted militant movements and funding flows (author personal's experience as CT Practitioner).

Malaysia has also benefited from capacity-building with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), especially in countering cryptocurrency-based terror financing, while exercises under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) have enhanced preparedness for cyber and chemical threats (Friedrichs, 2020). Legally, Malaysia's engagement in the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT) and Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) has strengthened its ability to prosecute individuals linked to transnational terrorism. Joint investigations, enabled by these legal instruments, have exposed the misuse of humanitarian NGOs for terror financing, underlining the value of international legal cooperation (Liew & Hamid, 2022). By integrating maritime security, intelligence collaboration, military readiness and judicial cooperation, Malaysia demonstrates a comprehensive understanding that terrorism is a global problem requiring a coordinated, sustained and multilateral response. This approach reflects the recognition that only through synergy between regional and international frameworks can the domestic impact of international terrorism networks be effectively mitigated.

Table 3: Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Examples / Cases	Enablers / Factors
Recruitment	Terrorist groups (ISIS, *Al-Qaeda*, JI) blend global jihadist ideology with Malaysia's socio-political context, exploiting religious narratives, grievances, and identity politics.	- Wanndy Mohamed Jedi recruiting via Telegram from Syria (2016 Puchong grenade attack) - Malaysian student recruited by ISIS facilitator in Indonesia (2019) - Tawau cell smuggling Indonesians to Mindanao (2017)	- Social media (Facebook, YouTube, Telegram) - Encrypted comms - Transnational ethnic/religious ties - Marginalised communities (Rohingya, southern Thai) - Rogue preachers and informal religious circles
Radicalisation	Driven by *Salafi-jihadist* narratives	- Ahmad Tarmimi Maliki (first Malaysian suicide	- Poor religious literacy

	localised for Malaysian audiences, combining religious duty with militancy; appeals to emotional triggers & perceived injustices.	bomber, Iraq 2014) - Amin Baco (Marawi Siege leader, 2017)	- Online jihadist media (*Dabiq, Rumiyah, Al Fatihin*) - Marginalised groups (Rohingya, Filipino diaspora, rural Malays) - Influence in prisons and unregulated *usrah* groups
Financing	Extremist financing mixes traditional methods (hawala, charities) with modern tools (crypto, mobile payments). Funds channelled domestically and abroad under humanitarian or business covers.	- Bitcoin funding to ISIS (2019) - 2016 Kedah goldsmith robbery for Syria travel - 2018 Selangor printing company laundering funds - Diaspora funding to ARSA, LTTE	- Abuse of zakat/infaq donations - Informal money transfers - Self-financing crimes - Proximity to regional insurgencies

Conclusion

This study finds that international terrorist networks such as *Al-Qaeda*, ISIS/*Daesh* and *Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah* (JI) have significantly shaped Malaysia's domestic security landscape through targeted recruitment, ideological dissemination and transnational financing. Malaysian cases, including ISIS affiliates and JI-linked arrests in Johor and Sabah, reveal how digital platforms, refugee communities and regional extremist ties drive radicalisation, with online propaganda in Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesian expanding extremist reach via outlets like *Dabiq*, *Al Fatihin*, and *Rumiyah*. Returning foreign fighters from Syria, Iraq and Mindanao pose ongoing risks due to combat experience and entrenched ideologies. Terror financing has evolved through charities, *hawala* systems, criminal syndicates, cryptocurrencies and covert NGO channels, as uncovered by MACC and Bank Negara, embedding threats within Malaysia's economic and social systems. While Malaysia counters these threats through regional cooperation, maritime security, intelligence sharing and legal reforms, the study stresses the need for sustained investment in counter-radicalisation, deradicalisation, multi-agency coordination and resilience against emerging dangers such as cyber-radicalisation and AI-driven extremist propaganda.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes:

[i] Al-Qaeda's presence in Malaysia has been significant, serving as a strategic hub for its Southeast Asian operations. A pivotal event was the 2000 Kuala Lumpur al-Qaeda summit, hosted by Malaysian national Yazid Sufaat, a former army captain and biochemist. This meeting, attended by key al-Qaeda operatives including two future 9/11 hijackers, was instrumental in planning major terrorist attacks such as the USS Cole bombing and the September 11 attacks. Sufaat also attempted to develop anthrax-based biological weapons for al-Qaeda at his laboratory in Malaysia (The Diplomat, 2021).

[ii] *Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah* (JI), the Southeast Asian militant network affiliated with *al-Qaeda*, had a significant footprint in Malaysia, using the country as a crucial logistical and operational base. JI leaders, such as Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin), operated extensively from Malaysia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, orchestrating recruitment, financing, and training activities. Malaysia's strategic location, relatively lax security environment at

the time, and existing migrant communities allowed JI to set up safe houses, forge documents, and facilitate travel for militants to training camps in Afghanistan and the Southern Philippines (Gunaratna, 2002; Abuza, 2003).

[iii] The Islamic State (ISIS), also known as Daesh, established a concerning footprint in Malaysia, particularly between 2014 and 2019, by exploiting online platforms for recruitment, radicalisation and propaganda dissemination. Malaysian ISIS sympathisers were involved in both foreign conflicts and domestic plots; some travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called Caliphate, while others remained to plan attacks within Malaysia and neighbouring countries (Noor, 2016; Ramakrishna, 2016).

[iv] *"Hijra"* (Arabic: الهجرة) literally means "migration" or "emigration". In modern extremist contexts, however, *hijra* has been reinterpreted by jihadist groups like ISIS to mean leaving one's home country to join a so-called Islamic land or battlefield. They encourage followers to make *hijra* to areas under their control (such as Syria or Iraq during ISIS's peak) as a religious duty, portraying it as a form of loyalty and sacrifice for the Islamic cause.

[v] The Malaysia National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (MyPCVE**)**, launched in September 2024, is structured around five key pillars: (1) Strengthening Resilience by promoting social cohesion and countering extremist narratives through education and community engagement; (2) Preventing Radicalization by addressing the root causes of extremism such as marginalisation, discrimination, and grievances; (3) Countering Recruitment and Facilitation by enhancing intelligence sharing, border control and monitoring online platforms; (4) Rehabilitation and Reintegration of individuals who have been radicalized, through tailored deradicalisation programs and community reintegration efforts; and (5) International Cooperation by aligning with global norms and collaborating with ASEAN, the United Nations and other international partners (MOHA, 2024).