

Malaysia: Extremism and Terrorism

On May 17, 2024, a man armed with a machete stormed a police station in Malaysia's southern Johor state and hacked a police constable to death. The assailant then used the deceased's weapon to kill a second officer and wound a third before he was shot dead. Police reported that the man's father was a known member of Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and they found materials linked to the jihadist group in the family home. After initially suspecting the attacker of belonging to JI, authorities claimed that the suspect acted on his own and had no known connections to JI or any other terrorist groups. Nevertheless, the attack raised concerns about a resurgent Islamist extremist threat, including from JI splinter groups. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#), [The Diplomat](#), [Straits Times](#))

The United States currently has two Malaysian nationals held as high-value detainees at U.S. Naval Base Guantánamo Bay in Cuba: Mohd Farik Bin Amin, also known as Zubair, and Mohammed Nazir Bin Lep, also known as Lillie. Bin Amin and Bin Lep have been held at Guantánamo since 2006 on charges related to their time as lieutenants of Indonesian national Hambali, an al-Qaeda operative and JI leader who is believed to have orchestrated terrorist attacks in Indonesia in the early 2000s. In January 2024, Bin Amin and Bin Lep pleaded guilty to conspiring in the 2002 nightclub bombings in Bali, Indonesia, which killed 202 people. A military court sentenced the two Malaysian nationals to 23 years in confinement, but the detainees could be freed by 2029 under a pretrial agreement that allowed for reduced sentences. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

Overview

Malaysia faced a domestic communist insurgency beginning in the 1930s when the country was part of the British colonies and protectorates. Communist insurgents formed the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), which sought to overthrow British colonial rule. Even after Malaya independence in 1957 and the establishment of the independent state of Malaysia in 1963, the CPM continued to call for militant struggle, and violent activities intensified during the 1970s and 1980s. The CPM and Malaysian government negotiated a peace agreement on December 2, 1989, and the last holdouts of the communist insurgency laid down their arms in 1990. By the late 1990s, Malaysia came under threat from domestic Islamic extremist group Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)—comprised of Malaysian fighters from the Soviet-Afghan war—and regional terror groups such as Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Philippines' Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). (Sources: [New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies](#), [Central Intelligence Agency](#), [Global Security](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [Patterns of Global Terrorism](#))

In January 2000, several al-Qaeda operatives—including perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks—gathered in Kuala Lumpur for training. Osama bin Laden sent four operatives to the capital city to train for a suicide operation in either the United States or Asia. Kuala Lumpur-trained operative, Walid Muhammad Salih bin Roshayed bin Attash (a.k.a. Tawfiq bin Attash) helped bomb the USS *Cole* warship in Yemen in October 2000. Two others, Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, were the first of the 9/11 hijackers to settle in the United States in early 2000. The fourth trainee, Abu Bara al-Yemeni, was encouraged by 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to launch an attack using commercial passenger planes. (Source: [9/11 Commission Report](#))

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Malaysian government cracked down on KMM and JI activities in the country. Some KMM and Malaysian JI members fled to Indonesia to avoid arrest. Since the start of conflict in Syria in 2011, former members of both KMM and JI are believed to have joined Syrian jihadists in their fight. Malaysian networks of these extremist groups are believed to support ISIS, according to Southeast Asian terrorism analysts and a regional study completed for the U.S. Agency for International Development. (Sources: [Global Security](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [USAID](#), [SEARCCT](#))

Analysts believe that Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, is at high risk for terror threats, citing reports of thwarted attacks as early as August 2014. Regional terrorist groups such as the ASG continue to pose a threat to Malaysia's northern state of Sabah and Malaysian maritime security. Mass arrests of suspects allegedly involved in terrorism have also raised concerns of an imminent threat in the country, as Malaysian authorities have arrested more than 100 individuals for ISIS-related activities. Following a deadly ISIS attack in neighboring Indonesia on January 14, 2016, and a subsequent arrest of a suspected suicide bomber in Kuala Lumpur, then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak ordered police to heighten security. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [CNBC](#))

In October 2015, the United States selected Malaysia to host a regional center to counter ISIS online propaganda, underscoring closer counterterrorism cooperation between the two governments. In September 2015, Malaysia joined the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. Malaysia has also implemented U.N. resolutions, such as the resolution to address the threat of foreign fighters. Malaysia has met with Indonesia and the Philippines to address regional security concerns. Beginning in 2016, the three governments met several times to discuss maritime cooperation, culminating in a March 2017 agreement to launch joint patrols of the Sulu Sea to safeguard ships' crew from piracy and kidnapping.

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(Sources: [The Star](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [The Diplomat](#), [Benar News](#), [U.N. Press Center](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Daily-Sun](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization and Recruitment

Currently reported to be inactive, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) aspired to create an Islamic state comprising of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines. KMM's violent activities included trying to overthrow the Malaysian government, assassinating politicians, and trying to kill U.S. Navy personnel stationed in Kelang and Lumut Port. To radicalize and recruit members, KMM adopted techniques similar to those of Indonesia-based [Jemaah Islamiyah](#) (JI)—namely, using personal networks and in-person meetings. KMM primarily recruited at Malaysian religious schools. Such schools are no longer a major recruitment hub since law enforcement authorities have increased oversight and mosques are increasingly state-controlled. (Sources: [SEARCCT](#), [TRAC](#), [SEARCCT](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [Mohd Mizan Aslam](#), [TodayOnline](#))

ISIS primarily uses the Internet to reach Malaysians. According to the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), ISIS's radicalization and recruitment in Malaysia has been facilitated via social media platforms, particularly Facebook. Malaysia has high rates of Internet access, and according to Malaysian Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, social media comprises 75 percent of ISIS recruitment efforts. Malaysians radicalized and recruited by ISIS appear to come from diverse backgrounds. Some are religious, some are secular who sought to redeem themselves for a religious cause, and others joined for thrill-seeking reasons. (Sources: [SEARCCT](#), [Middle East Institute](#), [Straits Times](#))

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Malaysian police Special Branch's Counter-Terrorism Division warned in August 2016 that ISIS was getting more aggressive in distributing its propaganda. ISIS has translated articles from its online magazine *Dabiq* into Malay and posted them to a website called Isdarat Daulah Islamiyah. The terrorist group has also created Malay-language videos, brochures, and tutorials. ISIS has also targeted Malaysians through propaganda videos that call for "lone wolf" attacks and encourage Malaysian sympathizers to join with ISIS supporters in the Philippines. (Sources: [The Star](#), [India Express](#), [The Malaysian Insider](#))

Malaysian youth have attempted to join ISIS abroad or carry out domestic extremist activities. In February 2015, a 14-year-old girl was arrested by Malaysian police before boarding a Cairo-bound flight. She reportedly planned to marry a 22-year-old Malaysian student in Cairo with whom she would travel through Turkey to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. In January 2016, a 16-year-old boy attempted to launch an ISIS-inspired so-called "lone cub" attack when he tried to kidnap a sales associate at a shopping mall. Authorities believe he had been influenced by Islamic extremism since 2013 and was exposed through email and social media. (Sources: [Straits Times](#), [The Star](#))

ISIS has even found appeal among the ranks of Malaysia's security services. In April 2015, Malaysian Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Bakri told parliament that as many as 70 Malaysian military personnel were found to have "joined" ISIS. While Abdul Rahim did not provide specifics on the extent of the alleged involvement, 10 Malaysian military personnel reportedly have died in ISIS suicide attacks. Others, including current Malaysian military enlistees, were being monitored by the military's intelligence and human resource personnel units. In July 2016, Malaysian Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar said that two low-ranking policemen were among 15 ISIS-linked people arrested. One was suspected of planning a terrorist attack and seeking funds for local ISIS cells. Authorities believed the other helped an ISIS member to avoid arrest. (Sources: [International Business Times](#), [The Diplomat](#), [International Business Times](#), [New Straits Times](#))

As of March 2017, the Malaysian government reportedly was cracking down on persons suspected of promoting ISIS ideology and recruiting new members for ISIS. The Ministry of Home Affairs announced that 234 Malaysians suspected of having links to ISIS had been detained by police as of February 22. Another 95 Malaysians were identified as having joined ISIS in Syria, 30 of whom had died while another eight were arrested upon returning to Malaysia. (Source: [Southeast Asia Globe](#))

Indonesia-based terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operates regional units, including in Malaysia. The Malaysian unit provides sources of financing for overall JI operations, including terror attacks and training. Specific sources of financing are reported to include money skimmed from charities operating in the region, cash transported from sympathizers, proceeds from weapons smuggling, profits from front companies, and extortion. In addition, JI cells are believed to train in parts of Malaysia, in particular in the state of Sabah on the island of Borneo. Senior JI leaders—such as notable recruiter Mohamed Iqbal Abdurrahman—have been arrested in Malaysia. (Sources: [Counter Extremism Project](#), Fletcher School Online Journal for issues related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization)

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Foreign Fighters

Malaysian militants joined the fight against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, eventually returning home to Malaysia. Several returning fighters are believed to have become members of KMM and Darul Islam, a precursor to JI. According to the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), Malaysian extremists began traveling to Syria to fight with al-Qaeda as early as 2012, but many eventually joined ISIS. (Sources: [SEARCCT](#), [Global Security](#), [Malay Mail Online](#), [USAID](#))

As of June 2024, there are two Malaysian nationals being held as high-value detainees at U.S. Naval Base Guantánamo Bay in Cuba: [Mohd Farik Bin Amin](#), also known as Zubair, and [Mohammed Nazir Bin Lep](#), also known as Lillie. By their own account, the two Malaysians traveled to Afghanistan in 2000, where they received militant training and went on to pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, JI operations chief and al-Qaeda operative [Riduan Isamuddin](#), also known as Hambali, recruited Bin Amin and Bin Lep to take part in a martyrdom operation. The so-called “West Coast Airliner Plot” was devised by al-Qaeda operative [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#) (KSM) as a “second wave” to follow the 9/11 attacks, but ultimately failed. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, both Bin Lep and Bin Amin served as lieutenants to Hambali, allegedly facilitating the financing of the 2002 nightclub bombings in Bali that killed 202 people, as well as the 2003 JW Marriott Hotel bombing that killed 12 people. The three were arrested in Thailand in August 2003 in a joint U.S.-Thai operation and have been held at Guantánamo since 2006. In January 2024, Bin Amin and Bin Lep pleaded guilty to conspiring in the October 2022 Bali bombings. A military court sentenced the two to 23 years in confinement, but the detainees could be freed by 2029 under a pretrial agreement that allowed for reduced sentences. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [The World](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

In January 2016, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino ISIS fighters in Syria were featured in an ISIS video that called for “lone wolf” attacks in their respective countries. Malaysian police identified one of the men as Mohd Rafi Udin. Rafi called on ISIS’s supporters in Southeast Asia to back ASG leader [Isnilon Hapilon](#), who was reportedly appointed as an ISIS leader in the Philippines. The one-minute-long video, “Public Message to Malaysia,” also called on [al-Shabaab](#) members to pledge allegiance to ISIS’s caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Analysts believe this call in the Malay language hints at the possibility that Malaysian or Malay-speaking fighters are members of the Somalia-based group. (Sources: [Straits Times](#), [Manila Times](#), [SEARCCT](#), [FBI](#))

Two Malaysians—identified as Mohd Faris Anuar and Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi—were involved in an ISIS beheading video posted in February 2015. Mohd Faris is seen executing a Syrian accused of spying for the Assad regime, while Muhammad Wanndy is believed to have recorded the video. Muhammad Wanndy, a Malaysian ISIS operative based in ISIS-controlled territory and reportedly killed in a drone strike on April 29, 2017, was suspected of directing operatives in Malaysia to launch the June 28, 2016, grenade attack on a nightclub near Kuala Lumpur. The U.S. Treasury Department had designated Muhammad Wanndy a Specially Designated Global Terrorist on March 30, 2017, under Executive Order 13224 for “provid[ing] financial and operational support for ISIS’ recruitment and attack-plotting in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.” According to Malaysian police, about one-third of 250 people arrested in Malaysia for suspected ISIS ties between 2013 and 2016 were believed to have been recruited by or otherwise linked to Muhammad Wanndy. (Sources: [International Business Times](#), [Straits Times](#), [CNN](#), [U.S. Treasury Department](#), [Benar News](#))

On January 13, 2017, three Malaysian ISIS militants were reportedly killed in an airstrike in Raqqa, Syria. One of those killed, Zainuri Kamaruddin, appeared in a May 2016 video burning his Malaysian passport and pledging allegiance to ISIS. On November 15, 2016, Malaysian national Hasan Zakaria, 25, reportedly drove a car bomb into a group of Kurdish soldiers in Syria, killing 15, including himself, and injuring many others. Three other Malaysians—one with a degree in finance and who had recently become a father—died fighting for ISIS against the Syrian army. As of August 27, 2014, three Malaysian women were believed to have traveled to Syria to offer themselves as sexual “comfort women” to ISIS fighters to boost their morale, according to Malaysian intelligence official. (Sources: [The Star/Asia News Network](#), [Straits Times](#), [Straits Times](#))

A number of Malaysian children are believed to live in ISIS-held territory. A May 2016 ISIS video entitled, “The Generation of the Epic Battles,” featured young boys at a training camp in Syria. The 15-minute propaganda video shows 23 boys who appear to be from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines learning to shoot guns and quoting the Quran. The Malaysian police’s Special Branch believe that children as young as two-years-old were brought to Syria by their parents or were born to Malaysian parents in Syria. (Sources: [Vocativ](#), [SEARCCT](#))

In July 2018, Malaysia issued a conditional return offer to around 102 Malaysians who had left the country to join ISIS. This offer involved compliance with security checks, investigations, psychological examinations, and counseling sessions with religious clerics to evaluate their level of radicalization. Under the offer, all returnees will be interrogated but not all will be detained, subject to the outcome of investigations. After preliminary investigations, those who did not participate in militant activities or criminal offences will undergo a one-month government-run rehabilitation program before they are re-integrated into society. Those found involved in criminal offences or militant activities will face court trials. The process differs for women and children, hence, their situation will be assessed on a case-to-case basis before the government decides on a

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suitable de-radicalization process. (Source: [Today Online](#))

Between 2019 and 2022, the Malaysian government repatriated 18 foreign terrorist fighters and their family members from Syria and Iraq. The repatriated included 14 adults, eight of whom are serving criminal sentences, and four minors. As of the end of 2022, there were approximately 50 Malaysian nationals remaining in Syria, according to the Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian government has continued efforts to repatriate its citizens. However, challenges remain, including the unwillingness of some individuals to return to their home country and diplomatic obstacles. Meanwhile, some Malaysian foreign fighters have reportedly moved to other conflict zones. In September 2021, the Taliban government in Afghanistan claimed to have detained two Malaysian militants who were fighting with ISIS's Khorasan province (ISIS-Khorasan or ISIS-K). (Sources: [U.S Department of State](#), [The Diplomat](#), [Straits Times](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Most terrorist incidents in Malaysia have been attacks on Malaysian seafarers or kidnappings of Malaysian nationals by regional terrorist groups. Since the beginning of 2016, Malaysian security forces have disrupted plots to launch attacks on Malaysian soil—including some allegedly directed by ISIS—and arrested individuals tied to foreign extremist groups. (Source: [USAID](#))

- **May 17, 2024:** A machete-armed attacker storms a police station in southern Johor state, killing two officers and injuring one. The assailant hacks a police constable to death, then uses the deceased's weapon to kill a second officer and wound a third, before he is shot dead. According to police, the perpetrator's father was a known member of JI. Police initially suspect the attacker belongs to JI, but investigators later say the suspect acted alone and has no connection to JI or any other terrorist groups. The attack raises concerns among authorities about a resurgent Islamist extremist threat, including from JI splinter groups. Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#)
- **May 17, 2021:** Malaysian police carry out a raid on suspected ASG members in Sabah, on the Malaysian portion of Borneo. A shootout ensues that leaves five militants dead, including Mabar Binda, an ASG sub-commander on the Philippine government's wanted list. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Bernama](#)
- **May 8, 2021:** Malaysian authorities arrest eight suspected ASG members in Sabah, on the Malaysian portion of Borneo. The militants are suspected of planning to use Sabah as a base to launch kidnappings and facilitate the travel of foreign fighters to the southern Philippines, according to a Philippine military official. A Malaysian police commissioner, however, claims the detained were not engaged in kidnap-for-ransom, but were in hiding after they escaped a military operation in the southern Philippines. Among the arrested was a sub-leader of the Sulu-based faction of ASG, Sansibar Bensio, who was allegedly previously involved in deadly clashes with the Philippine military and the kidnap of foreign citizens. Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Rappler](#), [Bernama](#)
- **November 20, 2019:** Yazid Sufaat, a Malaysian scientist who recruited terrorists for ISIS and al-Qaeda and tried to help Osama bin Laden develop anthrax for use as a biological weapon is released from Renggam prison in Johor and sent back to his home in Kuala Lumpur. Sufaat's release followed a decision by the Prevention of Terrorism Board and he would be required to wear an electronic monitoring device. Source: [South China Morning Post](#)
- **November 1, 2019:** The Malaysian High Court in Melaka charges two Malaysian state assemblymen and ten others for supporting the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorist group. LTTE has been designated as a terrorist organization in Malaysia since 2014. The charges include supporting the Tamil Tigers through Facebook accounts under different names, possessing items related to the LTTE, and supporting the Tamil Tigers through YouTube. Sources: [South China Morning Post](#), [Malay Mail](#), [Arab News](#), [New Straits Times](#)
- **September 24, 2019:** ASG militants ambush three fishermen in Lahad Datu and hold them hostage, demanding RM2.45 million for their release. On November 6, 2019, Philippine troops launched an operation to rescue the three hostages. Source: [Daily Express](#)
- **July 10, 2019 - September 25, 2019:** The Royal Malaysia Police claims that within two months, they have arrested 16 ISIS-linked terrorists. The alleged terrorists comprised three Malaysians, 12 Indonesians, and one Indian who were captured in seven states: Sabah, Selangor, Johore, Kuala Lumpur, Sarawak, Penang, and Pahang. One of the counterterrorism operations targeted one Malaysian and 10 Indonesians who were suspected of establishing a "new Daesh branch" by engaging members on social media with their ideology. "They were planning to launch attacks in Malaysia and Indonesia once they had recruited enough members," a statement released by the Royal Malaysia Police read. Other detainees were suspected of raising funds for Maute, a terror group based in southern Philippines, as well as planning to fight in Syria. One suspect was a 25-year-old Indonesian who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, an ISIS leader, and was picked up in Keningau, Sabah. The detainee had acted as a facilitator for an Indonesian family of five who were suspected of carrying out a suicide bombing attack on a church in the southern Philippine island of Jolo. The final suspect was a 38-year old female Indian citizen who had facilitated the transfer of funds to an India-based terror group. Sources: [Arab News](#), [Strait Times](#), [Xinhua](#)
- **June 18, 2019:** Suspected ASG-linked gunmen hijack two boats in waters off Lahad Datu's Tambisan area. The gunmen abduct 10 fishermen and flee towards the southern Philippines island of Sitangkai. The captors released the hostages on June 22, 2019. Sources: [Straits Times](#), [New Straits Times](#)
- **May 24, 2019:** Malaysian authorities arrest two local ISIS-affiliated militants, Muhammad Syazani Mahzan and Muhammad Nuurul Aiman Azizan, in Kedah.

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Both men are suspected of producing and testing explosives near their homes in Kuala Muda in an effort to carry out terrorist attacks throughout Malaysia. Both militants were reported to have undergone bomb-making training by Indonesian ISIS-linked militant group, Jemaat Ansharul Daulah, in Yogyakarta in 2018. Source: [Today Online](#)

- **May 13, 2019:** Malaysian authorities conduct an operation in Klang Valley, Selangor state and manage to shut down a pro-ISIS cell. The cell is comprised of a Malaysian, two Rohingya Muslims and an Indonesian. It had planned a wave of large-scale terror attacks and assassinations to “avenge” the death of fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim. The cell had also planned to kill high-profile personalities who they believed had insulted Islam or not shown sufficient support for the faith. Source: [Today Online](#)
- **January 22, 2019:** Malaysian authorities arrest two men with suspected links to ISIS in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The first suspect planned to launch attacks on entertainment centers in the Klang Valley and promoted ISIS’s Salafi Jihadi ideology on Facebook to attract new members. The other suspect allegedly tried to launch attacks on the Bukit Aman (national) police headquarters to seize firearms to be used against Buddhist monks throughout Indonesia and Malaysia is retaliation for atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Source: [Benar News](#)
- **September 11, 2018:** Unidentified militants kidnap two Indonesian fishermen off the coast of Semborna. The fishermen are then held by ASG militants in Sulu, Philippines, with a US \$1 million ransom demand. One fisherman escapes on December 6, 2018, and the other is rescued by Philippines forces on January 17, 2019. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#)
- **April 21, 2018:** Two unidentified gunmen shoot and kill Fadi al-Batash as he leaves a mosque in Kuala Lumpur. A Palestinian electrical engineer from the Gaza Strip, Batash was believed to be affiliated with Hamas and was in Malaysia training to become an imam. Senior Islamic Jihad leader, Khaled al-Batash, accused Israel’s Mossad—Israel’s national intelligence agency—of being responsible for the assassination. The Mossad is believed to have assassinated Palestinian militants and scientists in the past, but has never confirmed such operations. Source: [i24 News](#)
- **March 24, 2018:** Malaysian police arrest seven suspected terrorist in Johor and Sabah. Six of them, Malaysians from an Islamic State cell, were arrested in Johor for allegedly planning attacks on non-Muslim places of worship and plotting to kill police personnel, while an Abu Sayyaf member was detained in Sabah, said the police in a statement. The suspects planned to escape to a neighboring country to seek refuge with another terror group after carrying out their attacks, said the police chief. Source: [Straits Times](#)
- **January 24, 2018 - February 6, 2018:** Malaysia’s counterterrorism police arrest 10 people—seven Filipinos and three Malaysians—for smuggling militants via Sabah to join ISIS cells and undergo military training in the southern Philippines. Sources: [Today Online](#), [Agence France-Presse](#)
- **September 27, 2017 - October 6, 2017:** Malaysian police arrest eight men suspected of involvement in terror activities in a series of operations between September 27 and October 6. The eight men—four Malaysians, two Filipinos, a Filipino with permanent resident status and an Albanian—were arrested in operations in Sabah, Selangor and Perak. The first operation in Sandakan under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA) arrested five men suspected of involvement in bringing ASG terror elements into Malaysia through Sabah. The second operation, also under SOSMA, on October 1st, saw the 35-year-old Albanian—a guest speaker at a public university—being picked up in Selangor for having links to ISIS. Another two arrested are former convicts, previously found guilty in 2016 of participating in terrorist activities. One was arrested under suspicion of recruiting convicts in prison and planning an attack on Muslim, Christian, and Hindu places of worship in Malaysia. The suspect is also said to harbor information about a member of the Tanzim al-Qaeda Malaysia, a group linked to Jemaah Islamiyah, who remains at large. The other was an accomplice suspected of recruiting two Malaysians. Sources: [New Straits Times](#), [Reuters](#)
- **March 8, 2017 - March 12, 2017:** Malaysian authorities arrest seven ISIS suspects in the Malaysian state of Sabah and the Kuala Lumpur Airport. One individual, a female immigration officer, allegedly arranged for false documents allowing militants to travel to southern Philippines. The other suspects included Filipinos with permanent residency status and a Malaysian man. Source: [Straits Times](#)
- **February 21, 2017 - February 26, 2017:** Malaysian police arrest seven ISIS members who planned to attack Saudi King Salman on an upcoming visit to Malaysia. The group—including one Malaysian, one Indonesian, four Yemenis, and one other person identified as East Asian—are believed to have links to ISIS and planned to use a car bomb in the attack. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
- **January 27, 2017 - January 29, 2017:** Malaysian authorities arrest three men with suspected links to ISIS. One, a 37-year-old Indonesia man, worked as a security guard for Malaysian Airlines and allegedly had connections to Malaysian ISIS militants in Syria. The other suspect reportedly planned to attack a Muslim religious institution he claimed did not follow the teachings of Islam. Source: [AsiaOne](#)
- **January 23, 2017:** Malaysian police arrest four people, including three foreigners, with links to an ISIS cell based out of Mindanao in southern Philippines. The cell was led by a former university lecturer, Mahmud Ahmad, known to be a Malaysian ISIS member, according to Malaysian police. The cell had allegedly planned to facilitate the transit of South Asian and Southeast Asian militant recruits to join ISIS in the Philippines. Source: [Straits Times](#)
- **January 4, 2017:** Malaysian authorities detain at an undisclosed location in Malaysia a suspected Indonesian ISIS member planning to travel to Myanmar to carry out attacks. The suspect reportedly had connections to Syria-based Malaysian ISIS operative Muhammad Wanndy Muhammad Jedi. Source: [Reuters](#)
- At the Woodlands Checkpoint, Singapore border police refuse entry to and remand to Malaysian custody eight Indonesians found to possess ISIS propaganda, including photos of the ISIS flag and bombing-making instructions obtained from a WhatsApp group.

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Source: [Straits Times](#)

- **November 3, 2016 - December 16, 2016:** Malaysian authorities arrest seven persons suspected of links to ISIS, including four foreigners, two of them students.
The seven were detained in raids in the Malaysian states of Malacca, Selangor, Sabah, and Johor. One of the students was under investigation by a foreign government and was suspected of attempting to obtain security information about a private school in Selangor. Another of the detained persons was believed to have received bomb-making training from an ISIS militant in Syria. Source: [The Jakarta Post](#)
- **November 4, 2016:** Malaysian police arrest two suspected ISIS members at Kuala Lumpur Airport.
The two men, ages 29 and 24, had been deported by Turkey after attempting to cross into Syria and were believed to have been recruited by Muhammad Wannady. Source: [International Business Times](#)
- **September 21, 2016 - October 6, 2016:** Malaysian authorities arrest 16 suspected extremists, including a North African believed linked to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and 14 others said to be involved in an ISIS-linked cell headed by Muhammad Wannady.
The arrests—made in the Malaysian states of Selangor, Kelantan, Perak, Kedah, Penang and Sabah—included a student, a businessman, a school counselor, and a bank employee. Source: [International Business Times](#)
- **August 27, 2016 - August 29, 2016:** Malaysian police in the states of Selangor and Pahang arrest three persons, ages 20 to 27, believed linked to the ISIS and planning attacks in the capital Kuala Lumpur on Malaysia’s 59th Independence Day.
Targets are believed to have included a famous Hindu temple in Batu Caves, entertainment outlets, and a police station. The three suspects reportedly were directed by Muhammad Wannady. Sources: [TIME](#), [Times of India](#), [Indian Express](#)
- **July 20, 2016 - August 9, 2016:** Malaysian police arrest nine suspected ISIS members, including two persons said to have been involved in a nightclub bombing in Puchong on June 28, 2016.
Those arrested range in age from 17 to 56 and include three foreigners. Some were purportedly awaiting orders from Muhammad Wannady to attack entertainment venues in Johor Baru. The arrests occurred in locations throughout Malaysia, including Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Sabah and Kelantan. Source: [Straits Times](#)
- **July 18, 2016:** ASG militants reportedly kidnap five Malaysian tugboat crewmen off the coast of Sabah in northeastern Malaysia.
Source: [GMA News](#)
- **July 13, 2016:** Malaysia’s top counterterrorism officer receives a death threat from Muhammad Wannady.
Source: [The Star](#)
- **June 28, 2016:** Two assailants throw a grenade into a nightclub in Puchong, near Kuala Lumpur, injuring eight people.
Malaysian police claim that the attack was ordered by Muhammad Wannady, making it ISIS’s first successful attack in the country. Sources: [Reuters](#), [CNN](#)
- **June 23, 2016:** ISIS releases a 20-minute video with Malaysian ISIS members calling for lone wolf attacks on Malaysian soil, using “whatever means at their disposal.”
Source: [India Express](#)
- **April 1, 2016:** Eight armed assailants storm a Malaysian vessel underway from Manila, Philippines to Sabah, Malaysia, kidnapping four Malaysian crewmembers.
Malaysian officials suspect the gunmen are Filipino Muslims militants. Sources: [The Diplomat](#), [Inquirer](#)
- **January 15, 2016:** Authorities detain a 28-year-old Malaysian insurance salesman believed to be plotting a suicide bombing at a karaoke bar in Kuala Lumpur.
He later confesses to having been tasked with the attack by ISIS operatives in Syria. Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#)
- **January 11, 2016 - January 15, 2016:** Malaysian authorities arrest three Malaysians, including one woman, at Kuala Lumpur Airport after they attempted to travel to Syria via Turkey to join ISIS.
The three were recruited through Facebook and the messaging app Telegram by a Syria-based Malaysian ISIS operative. Source: [Reuters](#)
- **November 18, 2015:** ASG beheads Malaysian hostage Bernard Then.
Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak condemns the killing and calls on Philippine authorities to find the perpetrators. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [PhilStar](#)
- **November 9, 2015:** ASG releases Malaysian Thien Nyk Fun after reportedly receiving a ransom payment of 30 million pesos (\$900,000).
The Vice Governor of the Philippines’ Sulu Province, where the terror group is based, helped negotiate Thien’s release. Two Malaysian security officials facilitated the exchange. Source: [Straits Times](#)
- **May 14, 2015:** Four armed gunmen attack a popular seafood restaurant in Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia, kidnap two hostages.
ASG demand a ransom for the captives, 50-year-old restaurant manager Thien Nyuk Fun and 39-year-old diner Bernard Then. Sources: [Malay Mail Online](#), [Straits Times](#)
- **April 27, 2015:** Malaysian police arrest 12 alleged ISIS-inspired militants while they are mixing chemicals for explosives.
It is reportedly the first time ISIS terrorists are apprehended in the process of terrorist acts, as the improvised explosive devices were intended for attacks on government buildings, clubs and other public targets. The arrests were made at the foothills of Hutan Lipur Gunung Nuang in Hulu Langat and in Cheras. Source: [The Star](#)
- A group calling itself “Cyber Caliphate” with alleged links to ISIS hacks the website of Malaysian Airlines, posting messages like “ISIS Will Prevail” and “404-Plane Not Found,” a reference to the Malaysian Airlines flight that went missing in March 2014.
Source: [Bloomberg](#)
- Malaysian authorities arrest former Malaysian Army captain Yazzid Sufaat and a female accomplice for having recruited Malaysians to fight for ISIS in Syria.

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While Sufaat allegedly was recruiting fighters out of his home in Kuala Lumpur, the location of his arrest was undisclosed. Source: [The Star/Asia News Network](#)

- At least 19 KMM and 68 JI leaders are detained under Malaysia's Internal Security Act, according to the head of police in Kuala Lumpur, as Malaysian authorities dismantle the groups' networking, financial, and logistical capabilities.
Source: [Mohd Mizan Aslam](#)
- **October 13, 2001:** KMM sets fire to the Christ of King Church in the town of Sungai Petani, 190 miles northwest of Kuala Lumpur.
Source: [Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam](#)
- **July 19, 2001:** KMM sets fire to a Christian community center in Sungai Petani.
Source: [Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam](#)
- **October 25, 2000:** A homemade bomb explodes at the Sri Ganesha Hindu Temple at Jalan Pudu Lama, near Pudu Raya Kuala Lumpur Bus Station, on Deepavali Festival day.
Parts of the Temple are damaged by smoke and burn marks. A passer-by suffers light injuries from debris. Terrorism researcher Elaine Noor attributes the attack to KMM, saying the group aims to "spark strife between Muslims and non-Muslims as a prelude to an all-out religious war in Malaysia and beyond." Source: [Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam](#)
- - : Communist Party Malaysia members attempt to blow up the National Monument in Kuala Lumpur and carry out ambushes against police, killing the police chief in Perak state and the Inspector-General of Police.
Source: [New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies](#)
- **February 7, 1952:** Communist insurgents assassinate British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney.
Source: [New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

According to the U.S. Department of State, there were no ISIS-affiliated attacks in Malaysia in 2019. However, the country remained a source, transit point, and destination country for terrorist groups including ISIS, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), al-Qaeda, and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Suspected ISIS supporters deported from Turkey and individuals planning to travel to the southern Philippines to support ISIS-affiliated groups used Malaysia as a transit point. Malaysia also cooperated with the United States and others to increase border security capacity at airports and in the Sulu Sea, to counter terrorist messaging on social media, and to improve terrorist prosecutions. The national elections in May of 2018 resulted in the first transition of power since independence, and the new government pledged to review and potentially amend or repeal several pieces of legislation that govern how terrorist suspects are arrested, investigated, and detained. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Legislation

Since 2015, Malaysia has enacted two important legislative acts, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and the National Security Council Act (NSCA). Both POTA and NSCA supplement existing legislation, namely the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA), Penal Code, and Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA). POCA was initially passed in 1959 to address serious and organized crime and was applied only in Peninsular Malaysia. However, POCA was amended in April 2014 to apply to all states in Malaysia and include terrorism offenses. SOSMA—which was enacted to replace the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA)—provides guidelines for the arrest, temporary detention, investigation, and trial of individuals in cases related to offenses against the state, charges related to terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking. SOSMA was seen as inadequate in managing the threat of terrorism, as evidenced by a surge in Malaysian foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria, according to a March 2015 analysis published by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. (Sources: [S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies](#), [Middle East Institute](#), [Journal of Public Security and Safety](#))

POTA was introduced in April 2015 and enacted on September 1, 2015. The legislation emerged as a direct response to the rise of ISIS. It allows authorities to detain suspected terrorists for two years—with an option to extend by an additional two years—without being formally charged. POTA allows also for "restrictions and conditions" on terrorist suspects, including limiting their Internet access. (Sources: [Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015](#), [Pertanika Journal](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Middle East Institute](#), [Journal of Public Security and Safety](#))

The NSCA, which came into force on August 1, 2016, gives sweeping powers to a new National Security Council. The Council is chaired by the Prime Minister, who can designate an area as a "national security area" for up to six months with options for six-month renewals. Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi announced the appointment of Chief of Defense Forces General Zulkifeli Mohd Zin to serve as the Council's first director-general effective August 15, 2016. Under the NSCA, a "national security area" can be subject to martial law, allowing security forces to stop and search persons, enter and search premises without a warrant, and arrest suspects without a warrant. Human rights groups have argued for repeal of the legislation, describing it as a "tool for repression." (Sources: [Library of Congress](#), [Malay Mail Online](#),

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[Human Rights Watch](#), [Malaysia Today](#), [Astro Awani](#))

In March 2017, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that the government would seek to strictly enforce existing criminal laws “with the aim of enabling the government to prosecute those suspected of terrorism,” according to media reports citing a statement by the ministry. Cooperation also had increased between the police and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission in order to monitor the Internet for sites and users promoting ISIS’s ideology, propaganda, and recruitment efforts. (Sources: [Southeast Asia Globe](#), [Prevention of Crime Act 1959](#))

Government Agencies

In October 2016, Malaysia launched its first multi-agency counterterrorism force, the National Special Operations Force. The NSOF “acts as a quick-reaction force to curb terrorism in its early stages... to confront, fight, and eliminate threats,” read a Ministry of Defense statement. The NSOF is comprised of 17 officers and 170 personnel from the Malaysian Armed Forces, Royal Malaysian Police, and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Sources: [Straits Times](#), [Daily Express](#))

Rehabilitation and Deradicalization Programs

Speaking at a U.N. Security Council meeting on May 29, 2015, Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi emphasized that Malaysia sees rehabilitation and deradicalization as integral pillars in combating terrorism. According to Kumar Ramakrishna of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, “there is a continual exchange of ideas on deradicalisation and rehabilitation both within and outside [the Malaysian] government with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries as well as with partners further afield.” Malaysia has asserted that its deradicalization efforts are extremely successful—claiming a 95 percent success rate—and has offered to export its programs to other countries, including Australia. However, National War College Southeast Asia expert Zachary Abuza “completely reject[s] Malaysia’s assertion of a 95% success rate.” Abuza prefers to characterize the program as one of “disengagement” rather than “deradicalization.” (Sources: [U.N. Press Center](#), [Southeast Asia Globe](#))

Malaysia is also making substantial efforts to monitor and deradicalize educational institutions. The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) identifies Muslim student leaders at local universities to assist in disseminating the “true meaning” of jihad and in conducting various anti-violence, anti-militancy awareness campaigns on campuses. Security officials also hold briefings for school children, including at Islamic schools, to raise awareness of the dangers of ISIS. (Source: [The Star](#))

International Counter-Extremism

ISIS

Malaysia has implemented U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178. The Security Council adopted resolution 2170 on August 15, 2014, “[c]alling on all United Nations Member States to act to suppress the flow of foreign fighters, financing and other support to Islamist extremist groups in Iraq and Syria...” It asks Member States to “take national measures to prevent fighters travelling from their soil to join groups...” Resolution 2178 was adopted by the Security Council on September 24, 2015. It details more specific provisions that Member States should pursue in order to accomplish the goals of resolution 2170, pertaining to travel bans, risk assessments, screening, and information exchange, to identify foreign terrorist fighters and to prevent radicalization and recruitment. (Sources: [U.N. Security Council](#), [U.N. Security Council](#), [U.N. Press Center](#))

Malaysia is one of three Southeast Asian countries to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, along with Singapore and the Philippines. Established in September 2014 and the Global Coalition is “committed to degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh,” referring to ISIS. Malaysia joined one year later and has since “taken the lead among ASEAN members in addressing the threat posed to the Asia-Pacific region.” The Global Coalition focuses on disrupting ISIS’s infrastructure, stopping the flow of foreign fighters, helping to rebuild infrastructure in liberated areas, and offering a counter-narrative against ISIS propaganda. (Sources: [Global Coalition](#), [Benar News](#), [Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect](#))

Southeast Asia and Oceania

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In July 2003, the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs founded the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT). SEARCCT is designed “to train and enhance the capacity of enforcement, security and government officials on counter-terrorism issues in collaboration with established think-tank institutions and international organisations.” In addition, SEARCCT cooperates with a wide range of governments outside of Southeast Asia, including Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as two U.N. bodies, the U.N. Office on Crime and Drugs (UNODC) and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive-Directorate (CTED). (Sources: [SEARCCT](#) , [SEARCCT](#))

In August 2016, the Singaporean and Malaysian Ministers of Home Affairs agreed to share between their two countries’ law enforcement personnel biometric data of suspected and convicted terrorists and best practices in deradicalization and countering violent extremism (CVE). The bilateral agreement occurred on the sidelines of the International Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and the Counter-Terrorism Financing Summit, attended by more than 20 countries, in Bali. (Sources: [International Business Times](#), [Today Online](#))

In November 2016, Prime Minister Najib Razak met with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte to discuss military and police operations against Philippines-based terrorist group, ASG. ASG has kidnapped Malaysian and Filipino sailors, harming trade and commerce. The group has carried out kidnapping and piracy operations in and around the Sulu Archipelago, a chain of islands between Malaysia and the Philippines, and in the Malacca Strait, the channel of water separating the Malaysian mainland and Indonesia’s largest island, Sumatra. The leaders discussed border control and border crossings. (Sources: [United Press International](#), [Associated Press](#), [Sydney Morning Herald](#))

In March 2017, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi met in Putrajaya with New Zealand Attorney General Christopher Finlayson, who is responsible for New Zealand’s intelligence services. According to Ahmad Zahid, Finlayson was impressed with Malaysia’s counterterrorism efforts and deradicalization program and requested training from Malaysian security forces. (Source: [Cook Island News](#))

On June 22, 2017, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia agreed to enhance cooperation to address the threat of terrorism and extremism. In a joint statement, the three countries agreed to prevent extremists from making Southeast Asia or any country a base for their operations, and to help counter the “narrative” that the terrorists were waging a “legal jihad.” The three countries also agreed to cooperate on coming up with socio-economic programs to fight the underlying causes of terrorism and not stop at finding a “military solution.” (Source: [ABS-CBN News](#))

From February 24, 2020 to March 24, 2020, INTERPOL led an operation called “Maharlika III” in cooperation with the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. INTERPOL worked with the four countries to deploy law enforcement to strategic locations along known terrorist travel routes in Southeast Asia. According to media reports, national authorities worked with INTERPOL to launch simultaneous and coordinated enforcement actions—including sea patrols, passenger and vehicle checks, and secondary identity inspections—at ports and transit locations around the Celebes and Sulu Seas. Operation Maharlika III led to the arrest of more than 180 individuals on various charges, including one suspected ASG member. (Source: [Eurasia Review](#))

Europe

In April 2017, Malaysia’s Deputy Home Minister Nur Jazlan Mohamed and visiting U.K. Minister for Asia and the Pacific Alok Sharma discussed closer cooperation on counterterrorism and counter-extremism. Sharma said Malaysia was a key counter-extremism partner because it is a “modern, moderate Islamic nation.” Nur Jazlan said Malaysia would share its counterterrorism experience with the British government and “emulate the U.K. in its implementation of deradicalization and rehabilitation of extremists. (Source: [Astro Awani](#))

In April 2016, the European Union and Malaysia entered into a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which aims, in part, to “enhance political dialogue and intensify cooperation on regional and global issues,” including counterterrorism. Similar PCAs exist between the EU and five other Southeast Asian nations—Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, respectively. (Source: [European Union](#))

Terrorism Financing

In 2016, Malaysia became a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a policy-making body established in 1989 by the G7 Summit in Paris. The FATF “aims to promote the effective implementation of legal and regulatory measures for combating money laundering, terrorism financing, and other related threats.” Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said Malaysia’s membership demonstrated the country’s serious commitment to fighting terrorism financing. (Source: [The Star](#))

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Public Opinion

According to a Pew Research Center poll conducted between April 5 and May 21, 2015, only 26 percent of Malaysians polled were “very concerned” about Islamic extremism in their country. In 2015, the percentage of Malaysians who were “very concerned” about extremism increased seven percent year-over-year. The poll also found that opinions varied depending upon religion—30 percent of Malaysian Muslims were “very concerned” about a terrorist threat, whereas only 18 percent of Buddhist Malays were “very concerned” about a terrorist threat. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

In November 2015, the Pew Research Center release data on countries with significant Muslim populations, showing that most expressed negative views of ISIS. In Malaysia, 64 percent of those polled had an “unfavorable” opinion of ISIS, while 11 percent had a favorable view. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

By February 2017, more Malaysians—according to media interviews—sensed increased levels of Islamic observance in Malaysia and expressed greater concern for potential radicalization. “I can see the Islamic values getting stronger. A lot more people are wearing the hijab. A lot more people are going to the mosque,” said a Malaysian cab driver. There also was growing debate in Malaysian society about what it means to be a “good” Muslim, leading to confusion among young people about their own levels of religious observance. International Islamic University Malaysia lecturer Ahmad El-Muhamady, an advisor to a rehabilitation program run by the Malaysian police, says that this confusion can be exploited by Islamic extremists for recruitment purposes. (Source: [Channel News Asia](#))