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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 which is combining intelligence sharing, legal enhancements and community resilience is critical to disrupt the evolving

nexus between international terror networks and domestic security threats in Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysia, network, transnational, terrorist, radicalisation

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 have exploited digital platforms, regional instability and ideological narratives to influence individuals and groups within Malaysia, resulting in tangible domestic threats.

This study explores how international terrorist networks impact domestic terrorism in Malaysia through three primary mechanisms which is recruitment, radicalisation and terrorism financing. The analysis focuses on the methods used by transnational actors to penetrate Malaysian society, the vulnerabilities within the local context and the state's counter-terrorism responses. The significance of this study lies in understanding how global threats evolve into local challenges, thereby informing more targeted, preventive, and adaptive policy measures. The objective is to critically assess the operational links and ideological influence of foreign terrorist networks on Malaysia's domestic extremist landscape while highlighting recent case studies and state-level responses. This will contribute to broader discussions on regional security, counterterrorism cooperation and policy resilience.

Objectives/Research Questions

1. To investigate the influence of international terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS @ Daesh, Jemaah Islamiyah, *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD) and Abu Sayyaf on the processes of recruitment, radicalisation and terrorism financing in Malaysia.
2. To analyse the socio-political and technological factors contributing to the vulnerability of specific communities in Malaysia such as the Rohingya refugees and southern Thai diaspora to recruitment and radicalisation.
3. To evaluate Malaysia's counterterrorism responses and regional partnerships, particularly in intelligence-sharing, legal frameworks and multilateral operations, in mitigating the impact of transnational terrorism on national security.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining case study analysis with network analysis to explore and interpret the influence of international terrorist networks on domestic terrorism in Malaysia. Case study analysis forms the core of this research. By examining the statistic of foreign nationalities arrested in Malaysia, specific incidents such as the 2016 ISIS-linked Movidia nightclub bombing, the dismantling of Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah (JI) sleeper cells in Selangor and Johor (2020–2021) and the arrests of Malaysian fighters returning from Syria and Iraq, this approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns, modus operandi and influence mechanisms used by international terrorist networks to affect local operatives. These cases are selected for their representativeness and relevance, as they illustrate different stages of radicalisation, operational planning and financing within Malaysia's domestic terrorism landscape. In addition, the study incorporates network analysis to map the transnational and domestic linkages between terrorist actors. This involves identifying key nodes (individuals, cells, facilitators) and the connections (ideological, financial, logistical) that bind them. For instance, the analysis traces how Malaysian militants maintained digital contact with ISIS @ Daesh commanders in Raqqa or how Southeast Asian jihadi networks like *Katibah Nusantara* enabled recruitment and movement across Malaysia, Indonesia and the southern Philippines. This network-centric lens helps to visualise and understand the structure, flow of influence and operational coordination between foreign and domestic elements of terrorism. Together, these methodological tools enable the study to develop a nuanced, evidence-based discussion on how international terrorist organisations project their influence into Malaysia's domestic security space. The findings aim to contribute to policy and academic discourse by offering insights into the nature of transnational terrorism in Southeast Asia and recommending holistic counterterrorism strategies grounded in both preventive security and ideological resilience.

Findings and Discussions

This study finds that international terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS @ Daesh, JI and few other groups as discussed earlier have significantly shaped Malaysia's domestic security landscape. Their influence operates through targeted recruitment, ideological dissemination and transnational financing. Case studies involving Malaysian ISIS affiliates and JI-linked arrests in Johor and Sabah demonstrate how digital platforms, refugee communities, and regional extremist ties facilitate local radicalisation. Online indoctrination, particularly in Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesian, has expanded the reach of propaganda narratives from magazines like *Dabiq*, *Al Fatihin* and *Rumiyah*, while returning foreign fighters which is trained in conflict zones like Syria, Iraq and Mindanao continue to pose a serious threat due to their battlefield experience and entrenched extremist ideologies.

Financial networks supporting terrorism have similarly evolved in complexity. Investigations revealed how charities, *hawala* systems, criminal syndicates and cryptocurrencies are exploited to fund militant activities, often bypassing traditional financial oversight. The involvement of certain NGOs in covertly financing foreign militant operations uncovered through collaboration between the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and Bank Negara has demonstrates how terror financing mechanisms have adapted

to modern regulatory environments. These developments highlight that while militant threats are transnational in origin, their financing and support structures increasingly manifest within Malaysia's own economic and social systems.

This paper reaffirms that international terrorist networks maintain a substantial, multi-layered influence on Malaysia's domestic terrorism landscape. Their operations exploit ideological narratives, weak border security and socio-economic grievances within vulnerable communities. Malaysia's active participation in regional and global counter-terrorism initiatives, including maritime security operations, intelligence sharing and legal reforms, reflects a robust and evolving response. However, sustained investment in counter-radicalisation, deradicalisation and multi-agency cooperation remains crucial. Moving forward, Malaysia must strengthen its resilience against emerging threats such as cyber-radicalisation and AI-driven extremist propaganda to secure its national stability.

Conclusion

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 which is combining intelligence sharing, legal enhancements and community resilience is critical to disrupt the evolving nexus between international terror networks and domestic security threats in Malaysia.

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