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Believing in Extremism: What Drives Our Youths

A study of young adults in Malaysia of their normative beliefs about violent extremism and its associations with socio-demographic and psychological characteristics.

October 2019

Foreword

The politics of violence and extremist trends is on the rise and is hurting nearly every region in the world, from the Middle East, Africa, Asia to Europe and America. While not new, violent extremism and terrorism has become cross-border especially with the help of more modern tools and gadgets. Technological advancement has benefited humanity greatly, but it has also unintended consequences. Hijacked by extremist groups, giving them a whole new platform to spew their propaganda of hate, this phenomenon has reached even the most remote corners of the world – how else do we explain youths as young as 15-year-old British girl willingly joining ISIS half way across the world. Or how can the Christchurch terrorist be inspired by the Norwegian mass shooting. The internet has indeed broken-down barriers and borders, in more ways than one.

Malaysia, a small country of 31 million has also not been spared. According to our Home Ministry, as of 31 July 2019 – 519 have been arrested for terrorism related activities. That is a sizeable number especially when compared to the size of the country. At the same time, we are also seeing the rise in ethno-religious tensions. Hence, it is timely that as a member of civil society, IMAN Research has attempted to understand better Malaysian youths since they are the most disproportionately affected and influenced. Our study entitled “Believing in Extremism: What Drives Our Youths” looks at the normative beliefs of young adults in Malaysia about violent extremism and its associations with socio-demographic and psychological characteristics.

It is my hope that the recommendations from this study, targeted for both government and civil society, can help us as a country to address this problematic phenomenon. This study by IMAN Research could not have been possible without the help and support of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in particular the Regional Counter Terrorism Unit, to whom I would like to record our deep appreciation.



Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Razak
Chairman



Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Regional Counterterrorism Section, Kingdom of the Netherlands, whom without their support this report would not have been possible. However, the findings, analysis and policy recommendations of the Report are those of IMAN Research alone. We are thankful to our partners and stakeholders who provided assistance and expertise that greatly assisted the research.

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1. Executive Summary

In recent years, Malaysia has been jolted with news of Malaysians joining or wanting to join the Islamic State (ISIS). A key trend is the recruitment of youths using several methods most notably via social media. What is worrying is the high number of youths being recruited. The country is ill-prepared in addressing this phenomenon.

The purpose of this study is to investigate Malaysian youths' normative beliefs towards VE (NBVE), or simply their justification in endorsing violent extremism (VE). The study uses a combination of survey questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) that were carried out on a randomized, population-representative sample of Malaysian youths to determine the factors associated with NBVE. These were subsequently examined by IMAN's team, considering the role of demographic, social, and psychological characteristics in triggering such beliefs. The study was conducted in two states – Selangor and Sabah. The findings revealed differing profiles for both states. In Selangor, the results indicated the existence of a *psychosocial profile* among participants who endorsed VE as acceptable. They shared the following characteristics: manipulateness and ethnocentrism. Meanwhile, the Sabah sample revealed a *more demographic profile*: young adults with low levels of social capital were more likely to endorse VE. The report concludes with recommendations for developing a preventive action plan to combat VE narratives in Malaysia.

Three central conclusions emerged from the analysis:

1. **Support among youths:** Findings on VE among Malaysian youths consistent with most surveys previously conducted.
2. **The key drivers** for the support are two - ideology and ethnic/religious clashes or incidents.
3. **At-risk Group:** Through this study we are now more informed on Malaysian youths who are at risk. Their characteristics include gender-male dominated, their level of social capital, past history of delinquent behaviour and group affiliation. These characteristics combined with Selangor's key psycho-social risk factors of manipulateness and ethnocentrism and Sabah's lack of social capital defines the at-risk group.

Recommendations include the following:

1. Teaching Empathy: Empathy has the capacity to transform individual lives for the better while helping to bring about positive social change in schools and communities addressing issues such as racism, aggression and violence etc. This can be done formally through education by integrating social-emotional learning or SEL into the national curriculum as well as revamping the National Service programme.
2. Gendered Approach: It is recommended that preventing/countering violent extremism (pve/cve) policies include a gendered angle in addressing VE. Women can act as a bridge, using women's organizations, using their influence in families and communities to deploy unique solutions to support prevention, de-radicalization and psychosocial support.
3. Localised Policies: Prevention and intervention efforts to address VE can best be undertaken through a localised community partnership approach that makes use of existing local capacities to handle and prevent violence
4. Resilience training including online resilience: By leveraging on *community assets* to prevent youth from embracing VE. It is frequently theorised that youths become radicalised while in search for meaningful identity. Therefore, by strengthening social identity will help build community resilience to VE.
5. Programmatic approach: By designing programs which focus on the existing strengths within communities, capitalizing on those strengths and build long-term resilience to the threat of VE.

Conclusion

VE is preventable and researchers have produced necessary evidence describing the risk factors that push people into violent life courses and also programs and practices to prevent such violence from developing. Over the last few decades, there has been considerable advance in understanding the drivers of violence in an attempt to prevent violence and the returns on investment that its prevention can bring (Hughes et al., 2014). However, there are some macro issues including conflict, mass migration, globalization, and persistent inequality, which contribute into cycles of violence and threaten peace and economic advancement around the world. The impact of macro issues on VE awaits future research.



2. Aims and Objectives

This report highlights IMAN Research's study on the Malaysian youth population's sentiments towards VE within the context of ideology, religion, ethnicity, and culture, as part of ongoing efforts to promote preventive measures against VE. These are collectively referred to, as mentioned earlier, to NBVE. The study was conducted in two key Malaysian states - Selangor (including Kuala Lumpur) and Sabah - which contain a mix of rural and urban-based youths. These states were chosen specifically because they represented a wide spectrum of factors associated with NBVE amidst a contrasting socio-political landscape between Peninsular and East Malaysia.

The primary objectives of the study were two-fold:

- (1) To better understand, illustrate and contextualise the sentiments of a cross-sectional population of Malaysian youths towards VE, and
- (2) To strengthen the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots communities in combating violent extremist narratives, towards developing more effective prevention strategies against VE at the national level.



3. Identity, Extremism and Militancy: An Overview of Malaysia

Malaysia has an estimated population of 32.4 million, of which 29.1 million are citizens. While considered multi-ethnic, the dominant ethnic group is made up of Malays/Bumiputras (69.1%) who are predominantly Sunni Muslims and perceived to be the original settlers of the land. Islam is the official religion of the federation, although the religious freedom and the rights of other ethnicities are guaranteed under the Federal Constitution. The Chinese are the second largest community at 23%, followed by Indians at 6.9% (DOSM, 2018).

A federation of 13 states, Malaysia operates within a constitutional monarchy under a Westminster style parliamentary system. While technically a Federal system but in practice a centralist - the Federal government controls most policies and decision making with only land and religious matters left to the States. On the latter, the Sultan heads all religious matters for each state, assisted by the State Religious Department. However, since the 1980s, the Federal government has embarked on a program of systemisation of each state's individual Shariah laws to achieve uniformity between them (Mohamad, 2011). Malaysia gained her independence from the British in 1957 in a region long considered as volatile. Malaysia has always been viewed as one of the most stable countries in Southeast Asia, having had uninterrupted democratic elections since independence, political stability, is relatively secular, and experienced positive economic growth. In 1970, more than 49% of Malaysian lived in poverty, a stark difference from 2016 where only 0.4% live below the poverty line (DOSM, 2018).

Today, Malaysia is a highly open upper-middle-income country, having universal access to 12 years of basic education and healthcare, in-terms of gender equality Malaysia is doing relatively well with women making up the majority of students in public universities, and nearly 32.3 % of decision-making positions in public service held by women (Yong, 2016; The Star, 2016).

Since indicators show that Malaysia is doing socially and economically well. The question that arises is why is there a perception that Malaysia is facing multiple crises. The rise of religio-fascist rhetoric and militancy? According to a 2015 Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research Centre, 11% of Muslims in Malaysia are sympathetic with Islamic State struggle. In the same report, it

mentioned that 18% of Muslims in Malaysia found suicide bombing justifiable. It is difficult to say whether this is a rise for there are no similar polls conducted before but it is safe to say that Malay-Muslim support or sympathy towards other Muslim brethren's who are suffering is not new for example Malaysia support for Palestine.

3.1 The Malay-Muslim Dialectic

By virtue of its constitutional definition, Malay and Muslim identities are very closely linked in Malaysia (Frith, 2000). A Malay in Malaysia must be a Muslim, although a Muslim need not necessarily be a Malay. However, Frith identifies the relationship between Malay and Muslim identities as a dialectic, as they can be in conflict with one another at times, at which one identity will overpower the other (2000). Thus it is difficult to distinguish or differentiate whether the rise of extremism is religious or ethnic based but we can safely say that they can complement one another.

The year 2008 is significant because the clear shift on discourse of plural society or *Masyarakat Majmuk* or *Madani* happened post-2008. The Malaysian Constitution too has been subject to this shift in attitudes. While Article 3 of the constitution defines Islam as the religion of the federation (with the provision that other faiths may be freely practised), it was taken to mean that the Federal government (as do state governments) has the power to enact laws in relation to Islamic personal and family matters, as well as determination on matters of Islamic doctrine, besides the role of Islam in official ceremonies (Harding, 2012). However, in recent years, Article 3 has been interpreted by the judiciary to have wider and more purposeful meanings beyond ceremonial functions (Harding, 2012). This, along with the 1988 constitutional amendment to keep the jurisdictions of civil and shariah courts separate, has strengthened the public role of Islam in Malaysia (Harding, 2012).

3.2. Rise of Conservatism, Alt-Right, Ethno-Religious Nationalism?

Since independence, Malaysia has experienced a few incidences of racial/ethnic tensions that lead to violence. One of the biggest incidents was the racial riots on 13th May 1969, also known as the 13 May incident – a sectarian violence between Malays and Chinese community in Kuala



Lumpur. More recent incidents were the 2001 Kampung Medan riots, a sectarian violence between Malays and Indians community that started in Kampung Medan in Petaling Jaya; the Plaza Low Yat riot in 2015, where Malay Muslim youths demonstrated violently by destroying property and beating up members from Chinese community; and most recently in 2018, the Seafield temple incident, where a case of land acquisition for redevelopment turned into racial violence.

In addition to the existing racial tensions among Malays and other ethnic minorities, there is also the perception of rising conservatism and ethno-religious sentiment among Malay Muslims in the country. A survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2015 revealed that 60% of Malaysian Malay Muslims identified themselves as Muslims first. A 2013 Pew Survey on global Muslim attitudes found that 86% of Malaysian Muslims believed that Sharia should be the official law of the country. These findings concur with another Merdeka Centre survey on attitudes towards Hudud among Malaysian Muslims, where 71% of Malays polled said that they supported Hudud laws. However only 30% of those surveyed said that Malaysia was ready for its implementation. Meanwhile in response to another question in Pew's 2013 survey, 39% of Malaysian Muslims was of the view that violence can be justified against 'enemies of Islam'. A 2015 Pew survey reported that 11% of Malaysian Muslims have a favourable opinion of ISIS, while 25% claimed that they were unsure. In comparison, 79% of Indonesian Muslims have an unfavourable opinion of ISIS, and 18% unsure.

If we are to consider the outcomes of these surveys, the experience of increased religiosity among Muslims in Malaysia is not without its nuances. While overwhelming support is voiced for ideas that conform to orthodox Muslim belief (e.g. Quranic criminal penalties), there is a lot of disagreement when it comes to its actual implementation. However the idea of a struggle against 'enemies of Islam' has some appeal as we've seen from Pew's survey results.

3.3 The Rise of ISIS and Influence in Malaysia

The Islamic State (ISIS) terror threat that emerged from the Middle East in early 2014 may have finally propelled discussion and debate on the dangers of VE into the spotlight in Malaysia.



However, the truth is that Malaysia has been facing simmering extremist sentiments within its complex political and social fabric long before that, just as it is likely to continue experiencing this challenge long after ISIS has been defeated. The post-independence communist insurgency that lasted nearly two decades, coupled with a violent history of ethno-religious clashes and political instability has turned Malaysia into a hotbed for violent extremist groups to cement a following among disgruntled locals.

For many years, the Malaysian government - through a combination of legislation and education initiatives - has been able to contain the threat from spreading too far. However, the reality is that VE is not solely linked to ideology, but is tied to a range of elements that have risen to the surface in recent years. The Malaysian Chapter of the Southeast Asian Network of Civil Society Organizations on Preventing and Countering VE (SEAN-CSO) have pointed to a set of complex risk factors - namely a history of radicalization, strategic location in the region, uncertain political landscape, and socio-economic challenges as primary drivers for VE. These risk factors have arguably come to the fore in the last two decades or so, especially since the 2008 general elections in Malaysia that witnessed the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition lose its two-thirds majority in Parliament. Fast forward to 2019, in Pakatan Harapan (New coalition government) its first two years, Malaysia has seen the rise of ethno-religious Islamist and Malay groups and movements, and incidences such as the Anti ICERD Rally (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), Malaysia withdrawing from the signing of the Rome Statute, the Hindu Temple clashes, and recently, the public outcry over controversial preacher, Zakir Naik's presence and permanent residency in Malaysia, are polarising Malaysians. Amidst all this, it is purported that Jemaah Islamiyah Malaysia (JI) is making a comeback.

A key worrying trend of ISIS is its successful recruitment of youths. ISIS has employed several methods to lure Malaysian youths to join the jihad in Syria, most notably via social media and usrah (small discussion groups) in local schools, colleges and universities. ISIS has sophisticatedly employed social media to target mainly an educated youth population. According to chief assistant director of the counter-terrorism division of the Royal Malaysia Police Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, "We found that among those targeted by the recruiter was a Form Two (14 year old) student. The recruiter was communicating with this boy through Facebook, coaxing him to join IS in the war-torn country (Syria)." (Sani, 2016)

A number of Malaysian youth have attempted to join or have joined 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 the ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. In January 2016, a 16-year-old boy attempted to launch an ISIS-inspired so-called "lone wolf" 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)

While there is a significant number of media reports on the phenomenon and the number of youth joining ISIS, as well as the history of youth involvement in VE in Malaysia, there is very little body of work on youth and radicalisation in Malaysia. This study will attempt to provide new data and information on the subject that would benefit policy makers and relevant civil society organisations.

Malaysia's success in containing the threat of domestic militant movements like Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) and JI did not however prepare it for the rise of ISIS in early 2014. Unlike past terrorist groups that advocated travelling to actual conflict zones to wage physical jihad, ISIS redefined the spread of radical Islamist ideology by taking its battle into cyberspace. The organization has sustained an online warfare campaign to recruit followers and attract sympathisers from all over the world, including Malaysia. Many of these followers are not traditionally religious and have no previous affiliation to violent groups, but have been fully radicalised online by ISIS' propaganda videos and extremist narratives.

ISIS has embarked on an impressive recruitment campaign targeted at the general public, especially the youth, and members of existing militant movements in Malaysia. It has established a Malay-speaking unit on the frontlines in Syria, known as Katibah Nusantara, which has sustained the interest of Malay-Muslims and convinced them of the ISIS narrative that they have been wronged by Western powers like the US. The organization has also exploited the potency of religious prophecies revealed in the Quran by declaring itself as the 'Army of God' that is



awaiting the return of the Messiah for the 'end of times' war in Syam (greater Syria). Based on this notion, it has alarmingly inspired many disenfranchised and reborn Muslims to join its struggle, promising divine salvation in return. Malaysian police revealed that as of March 2018, 389 people had been arrested for ISIS-related activities (Bernama, 2018). Meanwhile, a 2015 Global Attitudes Survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre showed that 11% of Malaysian Muslims were sympathetic to the ISIS cause. The same report also revealed that 18% found suicide bombing to be justifiable. Malaysian authorities have also been placed on high alert due to the involvement of some 200 individuals from Malaysia and neighbouring Indonesia in the Katibah Nusantara movement. It includes former KMM-JI member Mohd Rafi Udin, who appeared in a beheading video in June 2016 calling on ISIS followers in the region to mount attacks locally (FreeMalaysiaToday, 2016). The Movida nightclub bombing in Puchong just days later injured eight people and was later classified as the first ever terror attack on Malaysian soil.

A positive note is that ISIS's influence has waned in the past year, as the central leadership in the Middle East has lost ground in its former strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa following a persistent military onslaught backed by Western powers. Despite a diminishing physical presence, however, the violent extremist ideology propagated by the group has permeated the Muslim psyche on a large scale. Malaysia, for one, is witnessing the rise of VE on two fronts: through an increasing right-wing base that wishes to see a more prominent role for Islam such as the implementation of hudud (Sharia punishment) as the main embodiment of an Islamic nation; and the mainstreaming of militant ideology that has seen ISIS narratives resonate not just with conservative and religious young men, but also with a large number of younger and more modern demographic, both male and female. What is perhaps more worrying is that there appears to be a growing distrust - fanned further by politics of hate and discrimination - among Malay-Muslims towards non-Muslim Malaysians and the obsession with having Islam more prominently enshrined in law and government than it already is.

3.4. Islamic Militancy

Islamic militancy in Malaysia is definitely not something new. While Malaysia has never experienced internal armed conflict which is usually the precursor for nearly all violent militancy experienced by neighbouring countries, there have been a substantial number of militant groups

recorded in Malaysia. Mohd Mizan Aslam had recorded up to thirteen such radical groups, with their common denominator being the interest in forming an 'Islamic State' through means of force. (Aslam, 2009) Among the religiously motivated militant movement in Malaysia are Tentara Sabilullah (1967), Golongan Rohaniah (1971), Koperasi Angkatan Revolusi Islam Malaysia (1972), Kumpulan Mohd Nasir Ismail (1980), Kumpulan Revolusi Islam Ibrahim Mahmood (1985), Kumpulan Jundullah (1987), Kumpulan Mujahiddin Kedah (1988), Kumpulan Perjuangan Islam Perak (1998), Al-Maunah (2000), KMM (2001), and JI (2001).¹

However, one of the most interesting to this study at least is the formation of the KMM in 1995.² The group was founded by Malaysians that were involved in the Afghan-Russian war as Mujahidins, with some of them claiming to be the first Malaysian mujahidins such as Zainon Ismail and Zulkifli Mohammad. KMM was perhaps the first group established as a result of foreign war.

The membership mostly consisted of Malaysian youths who had studied in Pakistan and later "took part in the battle in Afghanistan...between 1988 and 1995", such as Zulkifli Abdhir (alias Marwan), Lotfi Ariffin, and Nik Adli Nik Abdul Aziz - names that would later become prominent for terrorism-related analysis in the region.³ The experience of fighting with the Afghan Mujahideen enabled KMM to differentiate itself from 'localised', erratic, and directly confrontational style of other earlier groups, allowing the group to be better trained militarily, organised and transnationally connected.⁴ An important highlight of KMM is its inclusion in the regional radical network Rabitatul Mujahidin that discussed the idea of a regional Islamic Caliphate.⁵

¹ Examining the Leap: From Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Malaysia

² The name of the group started off as *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* and was later changed to *Kumpulan Militan Malaysia* as the Malaysian government "tried to keep the word 'Mujahidin' pure as it has a good meaning in Islam", Mohd Mizan Aslam, *A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, its Wider Connections in the region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia*, unpublished PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2009, p.110.

³ Ibid, pp. 104-105.

⁴ Both Ibrahim Libya and Al-Maunah had their fates sealed in standoffs (in Memali and Bukit Jenalik respectively), where the security forces would eventually move in to arrest or kill their supporters holed up in the location.

⁵ The meetings of *Rabitatul Mujahidin* did not include discussions about violence and attack, see Mohd Mizan Aslam, 'The role of Malaysia in Bali Bombing 2002: Myth of Reality?', paper presented at the 2nd International Conference on Management, Economics and Social Sciences, June 30-July 1, Bali, 2012, p.132.



One main feature that these groups share is that they are often linked to the largest Islamist Party in Malaysia, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).⁶ Many militants are members or former members of PAS. This is in no way saying that Pas is a militant movement or that it encourages militancy. The connection may be coincidental since until the recent establishment of Amanah, PAS was the only religious party that has openly stated that its aim is to establish an Islamic state via democratic means. Therefore, while sharing a similar goal with PAS, they diverge in methods as to how to form the Islamic State. It is without doubt that they belong to the fringes of Islamist politics in Malaysia. In many ways, these groups can be seen as the outcome of the increasing violent confrontation between PAS and the ruling ethno-nationalist party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), from the 1980s, up to the 2000s:⁷ radicalisation as a result of group competition. National Organisation (UMNO), from the 1980s, up to the 2000s:⁸

Evidently, the threat of VE itself dates back to the pre-independence era; however, a specific shift towards extremism in the form of radical Islamist ideology occurred in Malaysia during the decade-long Afghan-Russia war in 1979. At this time, many local sympathisers were driven by a sense of solidarity and religious kinship to travel to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet army. When the war ended, they returned home and expressed a desire to continue their violent struggle against 'local enemies' that they perceived to be controlled by Western (unIslamic) powers.

KMM and JI played an important role in solidifying the jihadist movement in Malaysia, which was invariably linked to Al-Qaeda. Their main goal was to wage jihad against secular governments in favour of uniting the region under a single Islamic caliphate (Harrigan, 2013). JI's Malaysian members such as Azahari Husin and Nordin Mat Top were the masterminds behind the 2002 Bali bombing and several other attacks, while Johor-born Yazid Sufaat was a biochemical weapons expert for Al-Qaeda. The latter was also linked to the September 11 attacks in the US as he had

⁶ Groups like *Tentera Sabibullah* (1967), *Al-Arqam* (1968), *Kumpulan Revolusi Islam Ibrahim Libya* (1985), *Kumpulan Perjuangan Islam Perak* (1986), *Kumpulan Mujahidin Kedah (KMK)*(1986), and KMM (1995) belongs to this category.

⁷ For the Islamisation race and its increasing radical discursive dynamics between UMNO and PAS, see Farish A. Noor, 'Blood, Sweat and Jihad: The Radicalization of the Political Discourse of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) from 1982 Onwards', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No.2, 2003, pp. 200-232.

⁸ For the Islamisation race and its increasing radical discursive dynamics between UMNO and PAS, see Farish A. Noor, 'Blood, Sweat and Jihad: The Radicalization of the Political Discourse of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) from 1982 Onwards', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No.2, 2003, pp. 200-232.



reportedly provided lodging to two of the hijackers during a secret meeting of senior Al-Qaeda operatives in Kuala Lumpur in 2000. Despite the threat of these groups, Malaysia managed to avert a terrorist attack on home soil as authorities clamped down on KMM-JI cells in the country following 9/11, with individuals like Lotfi and Yazid being detained under the country's Internal Security Act (ISA). Since 2014, however, a renewed threat has emerged in the form of ISIS. This has revived jihadist activity in Malaysia and sparked fresh concerns about the spread of radical ideology.

In summary, support and the participation of Malaysians in particular youths in VE are not new. The demographic that has been consistently targeted are youths. However, the main difference that we are seeing based on reports is that it is further expanding to include youths from different socio-economic backgrounds and the methods of outreach is predominantly social media, breaking the traditional cycle of "berguru" – a method of direct religious learning between a student and an Imam or Ustaz within the confines of school or religious cells.

4. Malaysian Youth

4.1. Youth Demographic

Malaysia has a relatively young population - as of 2016, 28% are below the age of 14 and 57.9% between the ages of 15 to 54 years old. The median age is 28 years old for both males and females and the voting age is 21 years old. During the 14th General Election in 2018 the voting turnout rate was 82.32%, the highest in national history. It is safe to say that many youths participated in the election. Malaysia also has among the highest rate of internet usage in the region, 66 % of the population are connected and 13 million are Facebook users.

This is not surprising, based on socio-economic indicators, rapid progress over the span of around 60 years, the country has transformed from a socially segregated community purely reliant on a commodity-based economy to a multi-racial industrialising nation. Its GDP increased from RM 12.8 billion in 1957 to about RM 1.3 trillion in 2015. Urbanisation grew from 28% in 1970 to 75% in 2015. A significant marker of improvement is the near eradication of poverty. Poverty has been reduced to less than 0.4% in 2016 from 51% in 1957; inequality, life expectancy, and other social and economic indicators, while presenting new challenges, have also shown tremendous improvements during the same period.

Based on general mainstream analysis on VE, where numerous studies have indicated that economic indicators such as poverty, social marginalization and frustrated expectations are the main push factors towards VE, the Malaysian context can be seen to be rather contradictory.

Since September 2016, almost 80% of the individuals detained in Malaysia for links to ISIS were under the age of 40 (Parameswaran, 2017). A recent study on the threat of ISIS in Malaysian universities (Aslam, 2017) found that those under the age of 25 are most susceptible to radical ideology as they are inexperienced and easily influenced. Aslam suggests that a lack of critical thinking skills and an overt sense of idealism make youths vulnerable to exploitation by groups like ISIS as they are more likely to resort to extreme measures when faced with the unpleasant realities of life. Furthermore, youngsters also possess a strong desire to behave and make decisions like adults, which draws them towards 'adult activities' like alcohol, sex and drugs. According to the renowned psychologist Zac Parsons, similar reasons inform their fascination with extremist groups like ISIS: "It's a world that is clearly run by adults, and they want to be part of that" (cited in Aslam, 2017).

4.1.1. How vulnerable are Malaysian Youth?

On March 26, 2016, the Associated Press reported that over the past two years, the Malaysian police had arrested more than 160 people suspected of having ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Just a few days earlier, police had detained 15 alleged members of ISIS whom they suspected of trying to obtain bomb-making ingredients in preparation for launching attacks. Those arrested ranged in age from 22 to 49 and included four women, a police official, an airplane technician, a mosque cleric and a student.⁹ These numbers have been worrying the Malaysia authorities. At the same time, crime and violence in general among young people have been on the rise in Malaysia.

Reports on the increasing incidence of violence such as gangsterism, vandalism, rape, and bullying and even murder are highlighted by the media regularly. According to statistics by the Royal Malaysia Police or Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM), juvenile cases has been significantly increasing, especially among those aged below 18 years old. Those who have been arrested for criminal engagement has risen from 3700 in 2012 to 7816 in 2013 with Selangor as one of the States that contribute the most in the juvenile crime cases. These acts in adolescence might develop further into more extreme behaviour in adulthood. Although these ideas on causes of such behaviour are widely being studied, but there is still not much supportive data on young adults aka youths. The key to the prevention of VE is to understand their root causes, the issues that drive young towards radical or even extremist behaviour.

Based on the information above, it is disconcerting that young adults are the predominant perpetrators involved in major violent incidents which include suicide bombings and religious radicalisation. (Sageman, 2005; 2008; Bloom, 2007; Atran, 2010). Young adult is the stage of life where an individual would be concerned in being independent, making life decisions such as to further study, work or start a family. However, it is also at this phase in youth that they are still idealistic and may react impulsively, such as supporting aggressively towards something they passionately believe in even if there are negative consequences (Virtanen et al, 2005), or includes committing criminal activities (U.S. Public Health Service, 2006). It also can be associated with

⁹ The Guardian, "Associated Press: 15 Isis Suspects Arrested in Malaysia Had Received Orders to Attack, Say Police," March 26, 2016, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/25/15-isis-suspects-arrested-in-malaysia-had-received-orders-to-attack-say-police>.

not only individual outcomes, but also their families and community (Tremblay et al, 2004). Thus, the high rate of youth violence in the country and its negative consequences is alarming and needs to be addressed. However, formulating strategies requires a solid understanding of factors contributing to VE.

In 2015, through IMAN Research's Assalamualaikum project which seeks to look at alternative narratives on VE from the view point of youths. IMAN spoke to Malay Muslim youths of both genders, living in both urban and rural areas in Peninsular Malaysia. In detail they were: (1) Malay-Muslims, (2) youths between the ages of 18 -35 years old, (3) backgrounds were from middle to working class with a mixture of those who had religious education and those who didn't, and (4) a balance of both genders was pursued to ensure representation. The locations for the FGDs included urban and rural settings and was conducted in Malay with the exception of Taman Tun Dr. Ismail, where the participants preferred to speak in English. The rest of the sessions were conducted in Malay – the preferred language. All were internet savvy and received most of their information via the internet either through mainstream news channels or social media outlet. The findings can be summarized into four key areas:

- Feeling of lack of empowerment

Majority of the respondents are well informed on national policies such as the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), Vision 2020 and in tune on issues that affect them such as rising cost of living, employment challenges etc. They are also critical of various national institutions such as the civil service, police force etc. However, all felt that they lacked the ability to make any change as citizens– feel overwhelmed and powerless. This is mostly due to the lack of space and platform available. Nearly all platforms is believed to be dominated by political parties. There is no room for unaligned individual participation. To add, many felt that the problem faced by the country such as corruption is so monumental that nothing will change for the better.

- Political cynicism

It is unsurprising that the lack of empowerment leads into political cynicism. Most of the respondents are cynical of the political process. After the 2008 GE, there was much hope that there would bring a new kind of politics that was issue-based but instead the country has been



seeing the increasing politicization of religion and ethnicity. The 2013 GE which saw the ruling party lose the popular vote yet still governing that has made them question what was the point of elections and voting.

- Identity

All agreed that their identity is an important component, but yet at the same time feel that it is a very complex issue. When asked how they defined themselves – they immediately responded by referring to themselves as Malay-Muslims. When asked to define what is Malay, many if not all were stumped by the question. Irrespective of the respondents' religiosity, all answered that their main identity was being Muslim.

- Ignorance of The "Other"

A worrying finding was the fact that many do not have interactions with non-Muslims. They acknowledge that this limits their understanding of issues and concerns faced by non-Muslims but nevertheless find it difficult to overcome. Respondents from the East Coast and Northern States stated that their first real interaction with Chinese Malaysians of their age group only started when entering university and even then it was limited to the classroom.

- " If "Real" Islam Was Implemented" - View on ISIS and The Concept of Islamic State

All respondents had an ideal or utopian view of the concept of Islamic State. All agreed that the belief in the concept of an Islamic state was an integral part of being a Muslim. While most had different interpretations of how to achieve an Islamic state, what they agreed the most on is that if Islamic State did exist then the current problems faced by the country would be solved such as corruption, unscrupulous leaders. . All the respondents agreed that violence is not an accepted method to achieve Islamic state and therefore do not agree with ISIS. Nevertheless, some were sceptical as to whether ISIS were really Muslims or if the violence was even real. Most of the respondents were apprehensive of the western media and felt that Islam and Muslims were always portrayed negatively. There was also the Sunni and Shia dichotomy of the war in Syria – some respondents felt that the war in Syria was a battle between the two and ISIS was Sunni but at the same time they are unsure of the validity of this. Much of what they know came from social media.



In summary the simplification of the Malay-Muslim identity as propagated by the State is showing its results among the Muslim youths today. They are insecure about their identity, resulting in them holding on to an Islamic identity that is not strongly rooted in local culture.

4.1.2. Mental Health

Malaysian Ministry of Health's Healthy Life-Style Campaign National Mental Health Survey 2000 (MMHSII) showed a worrying trend. The rates of mental health problems amongst Malaysian teenagers showed to be quite high with the percentage of those experiencing emotional problems is 49 % and aggressiveness is 41 % (Teoh Hsien-Jin). Unfortunately there is an intersection between mental health and violent extremism among the young; mental health are possible preconditions for radicalisation or extremism, although it is important to note that it is within the context of psychosocial impairments, trauma, other personal and environmental stressors (RAN, 2019). Based on the increase of mental health disorders among the young reported in the MMHS in 2000 and 2016, the rise in juvenile crime and the fact that historically youths have been involved in terrorist activities, it is worthwhile to explore from a mental health angle of VE among Malaysian youths.

4.2 Youth and Violence

There are over 1.8 billion young people in the world today, 90 percent live in developing countries, where they tend to make up a large proportion of the population (UNFPA). While there are no universally accepted definitions of youth, the United Nations understands youth as those between 15- 24 years for statistical purposes (UN).

Youth just like any other demographic, in general, are peaceful and law abiding citizens. However, based on literature, we cannot deny that the overwhelming majority of people who become violent extremists are youth — and most are male. There is evidence of the role of youth in perpetrating violence. Throughout history, young people - especially young men - have dominated the ranks of national armies, elite battalions, organised armed opposition, militia groups, criminal gangs and extremist groups and research that demonstrates an association between a high relative youth population (often termed a "youth bulge") and a higher statistical risk of armed conflict (Hilker, n.d.) However, the lack of clarity about the fraction of youth



populations vulnerable to VE makes countering or preventing their entrance into a violent extremist organization exceptionally challenging. It must be noted that there is no unifying definition of what is VE but based on the United States, Homeland Security definition, VE refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically-motivated violence to further radical ideological, religious, or political aims (Security, 2016).

The study of youth and violence in general is not new. History has shown that many disaffected youths have been the main contributor of violence and gangsterism as they join extremist groups and engage in guerrilla and militant movements. The proliferation of youth gangs in addition to the culture of violence theory (refers to how cultures and societies can sanction and legitimize violent acts) not only help stimulate violent behaviours but also justify these acts.

Studies in Latin America on youths and violence have shown that "... up to 15 percent of youth within gang-affected communities can reportedly end up joining a gang - although most studies suggest that on average the figure is somewhere around three to five percent." The choices available to urban youth are limited in these regions where there are situations of social and economic exclusion. The social fragmentation found in these areas inevitably lead to the development of an alternative social stratification of sorts in which gangsterism becomes "a resource with which to obtain an acknowledged identity" (Briceño-León & Zubillaga 2002). The same study shows that with the decreasing economic opportunities in these regions, and with more youth unemployment, youths tend to engage in crimes as gangs can offer more economic prospects and possibilities when the countries themselves cannot. As such, both the economic and social motivations of gang membership also allow youth gangs to become increasingly connected to more organized criminal groups such as extremist ones.

5. Violent Extremism (VE)

5.1. Definition of Violent Extremism

Extremism itself is a relative term and is open to many interpretations and what more violent or non-violent extremism. Peter Coleman and Andrea Bartoli describe extremism as “[...]activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary (Schmidt 2014). However, how do we define “ordinary” , if normalcy is daily violence, then do we define extremism on the level or type of violence? A form of benchmarking is definitely needed but this can be tricky for there is no size fits all. For Malaysia, IMAN has tried to look at the change in attitude and narrative within communities particularly the Malay-Muslim majority. How has fringe discourse on topics such as militancy and Hudud law has become mainstream? We refer to Moghaddam’s eleven indicators that refers to an extremist mindset (Saucier, 2009):

- a. Perceived deprivation a broader dissatisfaction with the world;
- b. Refusal to become merely a good copy of some externally imposed (e.g., Western) model of personhood feelings of being treated unfairly and a subjective sense of injustice
- c. Perception that one has no voice in decisions and no way to improve the deprived, dissatisfying, and unjust situation
- d. An aggressive attitude toward an external enemy (in Moghaddam’s view, displaced aggression) with the belief that a certain external enemy is the source of all big problems
- e. A belief that the ends justify the means, which means doing anything to destroy or weaken the enemy, including killing civilians
- f. A “we must kill or we will be killed” style of thinking, as well as an “us versus them” style of thinking
- g. A belief that the cause is all that is worth living for
- h. A felt obligation to conform to all norms set by one’s group or cause and
- i. A conviction that one heroic act will improve the world.

This definition helps to explain the context of extremism for it goes beyond the simplicity of denouncing democracy or hating the West but a starting point to understanding where the anger

and distrust comes from. For the Malaysian context, it needs to be seen from a cultural-racial and religious ideology angle. Historically, acts of violent extremism are recognized to be ideologically driven from actions conducted during the communist insurgency, to the so-called jihadists from the past decades and to the current ISIS fighters. Cultural-racial violence can be due to the accumulation of cultural or religious imposition, under-siege mentality due to perceived loss of political power, economic subjugation, fear of proselytization and so forth. These are manifested for example, in the racial riots of 1969, the Kampung Medan incident in 2001, and the more recent Plaza Low Yat case, the Seafeld temple riot and anti-ICERD rally.

5.2. Radicalisation and the Road to VE

Youth radicalisation and the associated use of violence have become a growing issue of concern since it is seen as the precursor to VE and youths eventually joining violent extremist organisations (VOE). Over the last decade, Europe has experienced a variety of attacks against civil society emerging from the violent radicalization of specific extremist groups (EC, 2016; Horgan, 2009, as cited in Aiello, Puigvert, & Schubert, 2018). Several examples of religious inspired terrorist attacks are the London underground bombings in 2005, and the attacks carried out in Cambrils, Barcelona during summer of 2017. In both cases, the offenders were young men; the London attackers were aged 18, 19, 22 and 30 and in Spain between 17 and 25 years old (Aiello, Puigvert, & Schuberts, 2018). The 2016 Munich attack where nine people were gunned down was committed by an 18 year old. Not all attacks are necessarily religiously inspired; for example the rise of right-wing extremist terrorist attacks such as the 2011 Norway attacks, referred to in Norway as 22 July were two sequential lone wolf domestic terrorist attacks by Anders Behring Breivik who killed 77 people. The Enschede, Netherland mosque attack in 2016 where Molotov cocktails were thrown at the mosque killed about 30 people were inside, including children.

5.2.1. The Link with Religion (particularly Islam)

Some researchers have made links between religion and VE, that religious orientation and attitudes are responsible for VE (Al-Ahram, 2000). However, research has shown that violence and extreme behaviour do not correlate with intrinsic religious orientation. Regardless of the



justification used to commit a violent act be it religious or ethnic concepts, the key factor is that the perpetrator lacks empathy which is a psychological construct. While anxiety and depression are particularly a common response to violent exposure (Breslau, Davis, Andreski, & Peterson, 1991), the lack of empathy has also been cited as a result of exposure to violence, either personal or community based violence (Sams & Truscott, 2004). Exposure to violence should be considered a serious problem for young adults because of the harmful consequences related with it. Such factors of emotional or mental disorder, health problems, socio-economic level and the violent media consumption can be risks for future criminal behaviour and VE.

5.2.2. Youth more susceptible to radicalisation?

The research on both qualitative and quantitative, on youth radicalization in recent years has been on the rise. Many research are focussed on the reasons for radicalisation but what is missing is the key element in understanding the dynamics that take place at the very end of the pathway of radicalisation — that is, how people actually receive and perceive messages/content, and what conditions make them more receptive to extremist recruiting.

According to most studies, youths who are the most susceptible to radical messaging were those who perceived themselves to be politically and/or economically marginalized, resulting in a sense of purposelessness and lack of hope for the future that is pervasive. Poor socio-economic status does not necessarily result in susceptibility, instead it's a sense of relative deprivation, combined with feelings of political and/or social exclusion. For example, unequal development that only serve the interests of urban elites, perceiving that one's ethnic group or sect is more marginalised by the government than other groups increases feelings of alienation and susceptibility to radicalization.

Ideology matters, but not necessarily its core messaging, be it Islamic fundamentalism or white supremacy. Rather, radical groups use religion and ideologies to legitimize grievances, placing themselves as agents of change and promising empowerment and a sense of purpose.

In understanding the foundations of radicalization, VE and terrorism, there is also a significant number of research work in relation to psychology and health, but the research is predominantly

focused at the individual level. As of date, efforts on searching for answers based on psychopathology or mental illness (Horgan, 2008; Humaidi, 2012) and psychological characteristics have been unsuccessful (Horgan, 2003) as it shows no difference between terrorists and non-terrorists in their way of thinking, emotion and behaviour. A better analysis from a psychological and social perspective is needed (Borum, 2011).

Most of the research studies on violence and extremism tend to focus on two aspects only: (1) the relationship between the violence and extreme behaviour and (2) personality traits and parental behaviours. Other important aspects such as socioeconomic, cultural and psychological contexts are unexplored. In addition, most of the research only focus on acts committed by the victims or the extremist. Not enough attention has been given to a person at risk of becoming a perpetrator.

Violence and extreme behaviour are considered as one of the main aspects of human traits that would change its form according to social, economic, political and cultural factors (Berkowitz, 1993; Gelles, 1999; Ohlin and Tonry, 1989). VE is a collective of actions of those who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further personal, political or social objectives, sometimes without direction from or influence by a foreign actor. Analyzing the risk and protective factors that contribute towards VE is almost similar with countering VE (CVE) in a way to minimize the risk of individuals being inspired by violent extremist ideologies or recruited by violent extremist groups. VE does not suddenly appear as there are certain aspects that drive the development of attitude towards extremism, and the causes of these attitudes are widely studied. However, limited supportive evidence is drawn from relevant populations, especially among young adults.

5.3. The Role of Social Capital

When it comes to gangsterism, according to research, family cohesion plays an important role in membership (Dissel, 1997). The absence of it promotes youth gangsterism, as Dissel suggested, "gangs provide members with a sense of belonging, as well as opportunities for economic improvement for gaining a sense of power, acceptance and purpose"(pp. 405-411). It is often argued that young people become gang members not only due to social disadvantage



or poverty but also because they seek resources and solace in these groups which their families otherwise are not able to provide.

This reinforces the role of social capital as a form of resilience within communities. Social capital generally refers to the texture of social cohesion within a given society. Important drivers of social capital are trust, solidarity, tolerance, as well as common standards and values. As damage of social capital is not always obvious (and also difficult to measure), this perspective has been under-researched in conflict analysis for a long time. In fact, damage to social capital appears to be one of the highest obstacles to development through different impact chains: It not only fundamentally reduces societies' performance capacities but also leads to long-term behavioural changes, which can be very detrimental to economic development opportunities (Henning, 2016).

The concept of social capital is not new, according to OECD. The definition of social capital is “networks with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups”. (OECD, 2001). It can be explained as real-world networks between groups and individuals for example, friends, family, former colleagues, etc; these social networks are more tangible than just shared norms or values. Social capital can also be measured in many ways and (lack) is known to be associated with violence, suicide and mental health (Bhui, Everitt, & Jones, 2014). According to Bhui et al. (2014), social capital, or the lack of it has been attributed as a key factor of radicalisation and terrorism. Social assets are either a risk or resilient factor in the early phases of radicalisation when preventive interventions might make the biggest impact.

However, there are dimensions within social capital that must be noted and which can be categorised into two: structural social capital and cognitive social capital. As noted in Grootaert and Van-Bastelaer (2002), structural social capital facilitates information sharing and collective action and decision-making through established roles and social networks supplemented by rules, procedures and precedents, while cognitive social capital, on the other hand, refers to shared norms, values, trust, attitudes and beliefs, and is a more subjective and intangible concept (Chou, 2006).



A study conducted in Honduras in 2014, a country with the highest murder rate in the world, showed that cognitive and structural social capital were inversely related to risk of violence: people with high cognitive social capital had a lower risk of violence compared to people with low cognitive social capital, whereas people with high structural social capital had a higher risk of violence compared to people with low structural social capital (Hansen-Nord & et al, 2014). However, when we dig deeper to consider the findings of a wider range of research studies on the roles and experiences of young people in situations of violence, the picture becomes more complex than these dominant headlines and dichotomous images of children as victims and youth as perpetrators of violence.

5.4. Social Media – the new community

Since the introduction of social media (socmed) during the late 1990's, socmed has been constantly evolving and growing in popularity. According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of adults using some form of social media is around 65 %. (Bitner, 2016) There are many reasons that make socmed so popular; for one, it is a powerful marketing tool – its ability to reach a wide range of people, provide immediate information as well is a platform to build and nurture relationships. It is for this reason that makes socmed the go-to platform when it comes to soliciting recruits into violent extremist organisations. It is an efficient propaganda machine; platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are used to spread misinformation and propaganda on a constant basis without using an intermediary – it directly connects to your pc or mobile phone. Therefore the “incitement to radicalization towards VE” or commonly known as “violent radicalization” via the internet is believed to have grown in recent years into a worrying phenomenon. This is despite evident evidence that other offline factors, including face-to-face communications, peer pressure and false information constitute more powerful forces. (Alva, Frau-Meigs , & Hassan, 2017). It is not clear if these platforms were removed (through Internet shutdowns, for example), this would put an end to the problem.

The challenge of socmed is that it is used by the users to satisfy personal or group need for incendiary information they like and want rather than the measured information they need. This has resulted in increased polarization of societies and making it increasingly difficult to see the



full picture and understand alternative points of view. Fear, distrust and loathing of the “other” fuels hatred—the underlying emotional driver of radical ideologies such as jihadism, white supremacy, and fascism. Individuals can find other radicals through online communities rather than debate with their immediate peers or family, enabling hateful rhetoric to circulate freely in certain circles.

VE should not and cannot be tackled solely through legal measures alone, such as through law enforcement. An effective response would require bringing together the affected community and policymakers and creating a multi-layered plan that takes on all of the forces that lead to radicalization. An interesting example is from Mechelen, Belgium, a diverse city of 130 nationalities which includes refugees. It has helped shape the EU's actions on the prevention of radicalisation and terrorism. While investing heavily on security by making the city with the most CCTV in Belgium, the city also pushed a strong integration policy to ensure that no community was isolated or left behind. The key is an inclusive policy and fight against segregation by translating it into policy addressing the most vulnerable communities.

5.5. Normative Beliefs about VE

Normative behaviors are what is used by people in society, behaviors that have been agreed upon collectively as a society as being acceptable. Normative beliefs on the other hand are individuals' own awareness or cognitions about the acceptability or unacceptability of a behavior. These beliefs serve to regulate actions by prescribing the range of permitted and prohibited behaviors (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Individuals who endorse normative beliefs about VE view use of violent behavior as acceptable.

For simplicity we will refer to normative beliefs about VE as NBVE. Since the 1980s, social cognitive information processing models of aggression have become one of the main theoretical models explaining mechanisms underlying violent behavior in young adults (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann, 1988). As noted by Crick and Dodge (1994), these social cognitive information processing theories conceptualize beliefs about the acceptability of violence as knowledge structures. These knowledge structures are influenced by demographic, psychosocial, and health characteristics, and these in turn may be responsible for deficiencies in social-cognitive

information processing, thereby increasing the likelihood of choosing violent problem-solving strategies resulting in an increased likelihood of behaving violently (Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011).

5.5.1. Social-demographic and Psychosocial Characteristics

People in their late teens and early twenties are known to be involved and are the main perpetrators in major violent incidents (Sageman, 2005; 2008; Bloom, 2007; Atran, 2010). With respect to demographic characteristics, research indicates that poverty was not strongly predictive of who becomes a terrorist or extremist (Sageman, 2004; Pape, 2005, Krueger, 2007; Atran 2010); however, hardship under occupation (Pape & Feldman, 2010), social marginalization (Sageman, 2008), frustrated expectations (Gambetta et., 2007), loss of significance (Kruglanski et al., 2008), and national humiliation (Merari et al., 2010) are frequently reliable factors that usually have different economic components. As for psychosocial characteristics, research indicates that regardless of whether incidents of VE are motivated by religious or ethnic concepts, the fact remains that extremists oppose values such as empathy. Individuals who display ethnocentrism would perceive their in-group as superior to ethnic out-groups. In the presence of socio-economic threat, individuals can form hostile, unfavourable attitudes towards out-groups. Such attitudes are known as ethnocentrism (Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002).

Efforts on searching for answers based on psychopathology or mental illness (Horgan, 2008; Humaidi, 2012) and psychological characteristics to identify differences on cognitive processes, emotion and behavior are currently unsuccessful (Horgan, 2003). Therefore, analysis from a combination of both psychological and social perspective (Borum, 2011) is recommended.

In exploring psychological and social characteristics which includes exploring the normal mental states and processes that build on characteristic attitudes, dispositions, inclinations and intentions which may affect an individual's tendency for involvement in violent extremist groups and actions. The focus is thus looking at the so called "Dark Tetrad" (in particular, the manipulateness domains of psychopathy) and its relation to VE. Psychopathic individuals often employ destructive manipulative strategies for personal gain, irrespective of morality (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). Health characteristics such as depression, anxiety, and health problems can be the risk for future criminal behaviour and violence extremism.

For decades, research on psychology and health in understanding the foundation of radicalization, VE and terrorism was focused at the individual level. Most of the research studies on violence and extremism have tended to focus on the relationship between the violence and extreme behaviour on the one side, and on personality traits and parental behaviours on the other, leaving some other important aspects, such as socioeconomic, cultural and psychological contexts, uncovered. And also, most of the research only zeroed on acts committed by the victims or the extremist. Not enough attention has been given to persons at risk of committing the violence. Taken together, previous study has mentioned that support for VE would be particularly high when experiences of social capital, violent media consumption, negative life events, socio-economic hardship, and exposure to crime (at risk young adults) are coupled with deficiencies in social-cognitive information processing such as moral and legal neutralization (Nivette et al., 2017). Hence, the primary objective of this paper was to examine the role of demographic, social, and health characteristics on NBVE among young adults in Selangor and Sabah.

In conclusion, this study proposes to provide further evidence on understanding the association between youths and VE, to identify which factors could lead to VE, who supports it and so forth. The opinions and perception of youths towards violent acts, the characteristics and background including the influence of culture and religion. It offers a roadmap for further detailed research into what could decrease the escalation of VE and pinpoints priority areas where additional concerted and cross-sectorial efforts should be made by the Government of Malaysia, the local authorities and community.

5.6. Conclusion

Based on the current literature it is without doubt that extremism is taking hold of the Malaysia. The result of the continued growth of extremist discourse in Malaysia and the rise of ISIS has given birth to two types of extremist groups; violent and nonviolent. Both of these groups are winning over the hearts and minds of youth who feel disenchanting with the State and disempowered by local politics. There is a strong and urgent need to shift the trends and win over youths in particular through more than mere political rhetoric.



The strong hold that violent extremist organisations (VEO) has on social media realm is beyond worrying and continues to be left unchallenged. Attempts by the government to address the matter such as holding events and workshops in local universities and mosques are having no effect - they are not correctly targeting the demographic. There is however, significant room for independent scholars/leaders and civil society in general to fill in the vacuum. There are a few assumptions why there is a vacuum – no media presence and inability to keep up-to-date with modern technology in particular the internet and social media.

6. The Study

6.1 Why Normative Beliefs on VE in Selangor and Sabah matters

Both states were considered ideal choices for the purpose of this study as they are representative of the heavily contrasting demographics and socio-political challenges in West and East Malaysia. As one of the largest and most urban states in the Peninsular, Selangor, which in this study also includes Kuala Lumpur, has a high concentration of youths, which maximised the likelihood of gathering findings that closely represented overall attitudes and beliefs towards VE. This was balanced out by a study of Sabahan youths, which was pertinent as the state vastly differs from the Peninsular in terms of its social and cultural construct. Both states do however have a history of radicalism and militant activity, and this is briefly outlined below:

Selangor: Due to its status as the commercial and administrative centre of the country, Selangor has naturally borne the brunt of racial and religious strife since independence. It is therefore seen as an ideal location for extremist movements to expand their influence. The Low Yat and Kota Raya racial clashes in 2015 have demonstrated that petty squabbles can quickly turn violent, owing much to the prevalent atmosphere of uneasiness and abhorrence towards “the others”. These have been compounded by the emergence of extremist political groups like Perkasa and ISMA, whose actions have strained race relations in Malaysia. Malaysia has also witnessed a rising number of hate crimes towards religious minorities that involve places of worship (i.e the ‘Cow head’ protest outside the Selangor state secretariat in 2009, calls for the removal of a Taoist shrine from a Penang park in 2016, etc), racial slurs, and unlawful discrimination. Deep-seated feelings of persecution stemming from these incidents could hence render segments of society susceptible to radicalization by the likes of ISIS, which will have grave implications for national security. In that regard, the Movidia nightclub attack in 2016 should be considered merely the tip of the iceberg.

Furthermore, Selangor is known to contain many radical ‘hotspots’ for groups like ISIS and JI, which have long been operating under the radar. This is exacerbated by less than ideal socio-economic conditions in certain parts of the state. Despite often being touted as the ‘richest state’ in Malaysia, the effects of income inequality, unemployment, and rising cost of living are severely



felt here. Additionally, Selangor registers the highest internet penetration rate and online freedom among all the states in Malaysia (Freedom House, 2017), which is a double-edged sword as this has made it easier for groups such as ISIS to spread its propaganda and recruit followers online.

Sabah: Cross-border militancy is a persistent problem for Sabah due to a long history of migration with the wider Southeast Asian region, specifically southern Philippines, which is known as a hotbed for militant movements such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Among the key factors fueling such activity is the long-standing political sensitivities involving Philippines' claim over Sabah, which was historically a part of the 'Sultanate of Sulu'. The issue remains a hotly contested topic among Sabahans, many of whom have retained a cultural affinity towards their Filipino counterparts. The geographical proximity between southern Philippines and Sabah territories such as Lahad Datu, Sandakan, Tawau and Sipadan island has created a spillover effect of groups like ASG, which has members in these territories who are ready to carry out lucrative kidnap-for-ransom activities. The state experienced its first major act of terrorism in April 2000 when ASG militants stormed the resort island of Sipadan and kidnapped 21 tourists and resort workers. Sipadan, which lies on the "geopolitical fault line" between the borders of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, has been described as a place where "Smugglers, pirates and separatist groups thrive," (International Herald Tribune, 2000). Sabah continued to witness a significant number of abductions over the next decade, sparking a clampdown by authorities that resulted in the capture of several Indonesian nationals and locals for being alleged members of JI and DI.

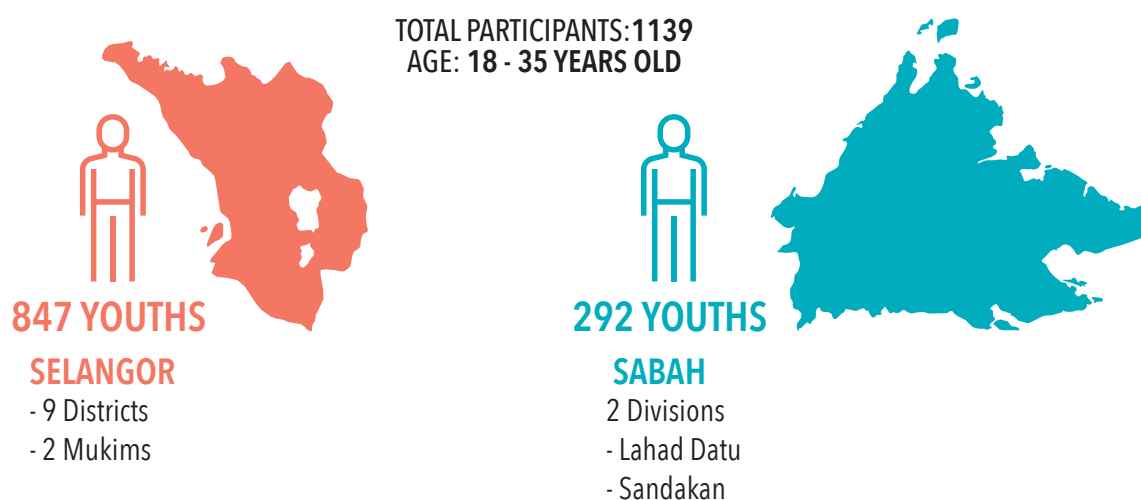
The militant threat in Sabah reached its pinnacle in February 2013 when a group of around 200 armed insurgents, who were loyalists of the Sulu Sultanate, invaded a village in Lahad Datu with the aim of reclaiming its 'lost territory' of Sabah to recreate the past sultanate. The invasion ended approximately a month later following a series of skirmishes between security officers and the Sulu militants that resulted in the deaths of nine soldiers, six civilians, and 56 militants. The attack - a first of its kind on Malaysia's sovereignty - prompted the government to beef up security by establishing the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) to protect the state's eastern coast from external threats. Despite the strengthening of security measures under ESSCOM,

including imposing a sea curfew in Sabah waters from dusk to dawn, there were six kidnapping incidents between 2015 and 2016.

With the emergence of ISIS, militancy in Sabah has evolved into a greater global problem following the “bai’ah” (pledge) made by ASG to become the Islamist terror group’s key affiliate in the region. In early 2017, the Special Branch’s Counter Terrorism Division nabbed members of an ISIS cell headed by the former UM lecturer Dr Mahmud. It was later revealed by the Malaysian Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar that Dr Mahmud had been using Sabah as a transit point for militants from Peninsular Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and even Rohingyas from Myanmar’s Rakhine state to converge in the stronghold of ASG in Marawi City. Dr Mahmud’s cell had joined forces with the ASG and was able to unify different radical groups in the region to form an official ISIS entity in Southeast Asia. Sabah, if not already, has the potential of being a breeding ground for militancy and VE, making intervention programmes an immediate necessity. However, in building counter-narratives to combat VE, a clear grasp of Sabahan sentiments (particularly the youth in relation to the long-standing issue of migration from southern Philippines) is vital to understand the reasons why locals can be reluctant to actively participate in eradicating cross-border militancy.

6.2 Methodology

A combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (FGDs) approaches were applied for this study. A cross-sectional survey were employed among a population of Malaysian young adults (aged 18 to 35) from Selangor and Sabah. For the survey study, participants were recruited using



a multistage sampling technique by geographical districts and mukims (divisions) within both states. In Selangor, a total of nine districts and two mukims were randomly selected from each district to form a sample of 847 youths. Meanwhile for Sabah, two divisions were randomly selected - namely Lahad Datu and Sandakan. At divisional level, two districts were randomly selected to recruit a sample of 292 youths. A total of 1139 participants were therefore assessed in this survey study. Information on age and gender breakdown for both samples will be presented below.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in both Selangor and Sabah to further inform on the quantitative results and provide better context to the data.

The Selangor Sample

A two-stage sampling technique (spanning from districts to mukims) was performed to recruit the Selangor sample. There are nine districts in Selangor, totalling 73 mukims. In Stage 1, to determine the number of participating districts required in this study, we picked an arbitrary point with the use of a random number table. Based on this procedure, we had to select nine districts. In Stage 2, to determine the number of participating mukims required, we again picked an arbitrary point with the use of a random number table. Based on this procedure, we had to select two mukims. Hence, two mukims from each district were randomly selected. When this sampling technique was done, 847 young adults from Selangor (45.6% male, 54.3% female) were recruited in this cross-sectional study. The mean age for the Selangor sample was 24.34 (SD = 5.01).

The Sabah Sample

A three-stage sampling technique (spanning from divisions to districts, and to mukims) was performed to recruit the Sabah sample. Sabah is divided into 7 divisions and has 25 districts. In Stage 1, to determine the number of participating divisions required in this study, we used random number table. Based on this procedure, we had to select 2 divisions (i.e., Lahad Datu and Sandakan). Lahad Datu division has two districts, whereas Sandakan division has four districts. In Stage 2, to determine the number of participating districts required, we used random number table again. Based on this procedure, we selected two districts. In Stage 3, to determine

the number of participating mukims required, we again used random number table. Based on this procedure, we selected two mukims. Hence, two mukims from each district were selected. When this sampling technique was done, 292 young adults from Sabah (46.9% male, 53.1% female) were recruited. The mean age for the Sabah sample was 22.92 (SD = 4.34).

Measures

In this study, participants completed a self-administered questionnaire. This questionnaire was informed by the review on the possible factors associated with VE (presented in Chapter 4), and was designed to collect information such as follows.

Demographic Characteristics

Information such as age, gender, type of housing, living arrangement, and household income was obtained. We also measured participants' socioeconomic status with the four-item Hollingshead (1975) system. With respect to history of risky behavior, participants' information on past criminal and drug related behavior was obtained with two yes-or-no items. For social capital, we measured participants' social capital with three items. These items were derived from Bhui et al.'s (2014) study.

Health Characteristics

For general health, based on Bhui et al.'s (2014) study, information on general health was obtained with four items. As for depression, we used the Malay version of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9-BM; Sidik, Arroll, & Goodyear-Smith, 2012a). Participants rated the PHQ-9-BM on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) through 3 (nearly every day). For anxiety, the Malay version of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7-BM; Sidik, Arroll, & Goodyear-Smith, 2012b) was used. Participants rated the GAD-7-BM on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) through 3 (nearly every day).

Psychosocial Characteristics

For psychopathy, the 26-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRPS; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) was used to measure manipulateness and impulsivity. Participants rated the SRPS on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree). In

the present study, we measured participants' major negative life events with eight yes-or-no items. These items were derived from Agnew (2006). Based on Nivette, Eisner, and Ribeaud's (2017) recommendations, we measured participants' violent media consumption with four yes-or-no items. For group identification, participants selected their group membership from a list of groups. We measured participants' ethnocentrism with five items. These five items were derived from Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders (2002). Participants rated items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree). We measured participants' subjective religiosity and organized religiosity with 13 yes-or-no items. These items were derived from Vergani, Johns, Lobo, and Mansouri (2017). As for religiosity, we measured participants' religiosity with a single item. Participants rated this item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all religious) through 5 (strongly religious).

Normative Beliefs about VE

A scale was developed to measure participants' normative beliefs about VE. This scale contains three domains:

1. NBVE in relation to specific event with no ethnic/religious undertones,
2. NBVE in relation to specific event with ethnic/religious undertones, and
3. NBVE in religion.

To access these NBVE domains, we developed three age appropriate and culturally specific scenarios:

For (a), participants in Selangor first read "A was driving along a highway during rush hour traffic. As he was driving towards a toll booth, the jam became worse and the queue was about 100m long. Suddenly a car cut in front of him, and he had to press on the emergency brakes to avoid an accident. A then proceeded to reach for his car-lock, got out of his car and hit the front screen of the car that had cut him with the car-lock.", whereas participants in Sabah first read "A has been trying to get a parking spot at the market area for over 20 minutes. He finally spots one and as he prepares to park, B swoops into the spot. A has to make a sudden break to avoid an accident. A then proceeded to reach for his car-lock, got out of his car and hit the front screen



of the car that had cut him with the car-lock.” This variation was made necessary as toll booths are not found in Sabah.

For (b), participants in both samples first read “You live in a diverse housing area. One night, a religious funeral procession made some of the residents uneasy. They decided to raid the procession and force the people to end it.”

For (c), participants in both samples first read “An organization (X) claiming to represent the true teachings of Islam, considers all countries to be in contravention of Islamic rule and worthy of being attacked and destroyed.”

For a, b and c, participants rated on whether they agreed or disagreed with the actions in the scenarios on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (fully not OK) through 4 (fully OK).

Pilot Study

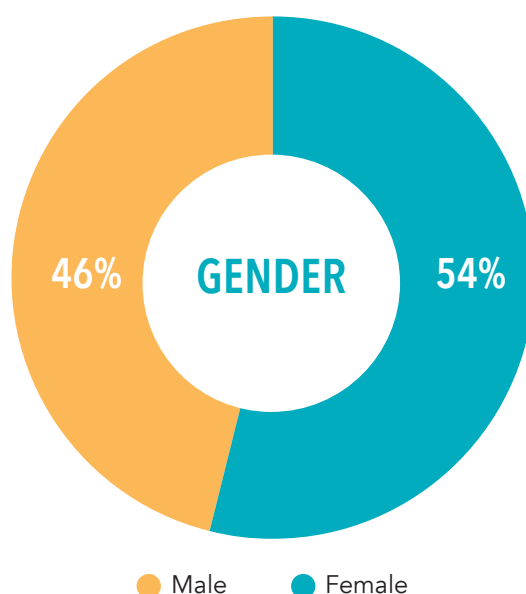
All scales were translated based on Beaton, Bombardier, Guillemin, and Ferraz’s (2000) recommendations. To examine their initial psychometric properties, we conducted a pilot study ($n = 200$) involving undergraduates from National Defence University of Malaysia. Cronbach’s alphas for all the study scales were adequate ($\alpha > .70$).

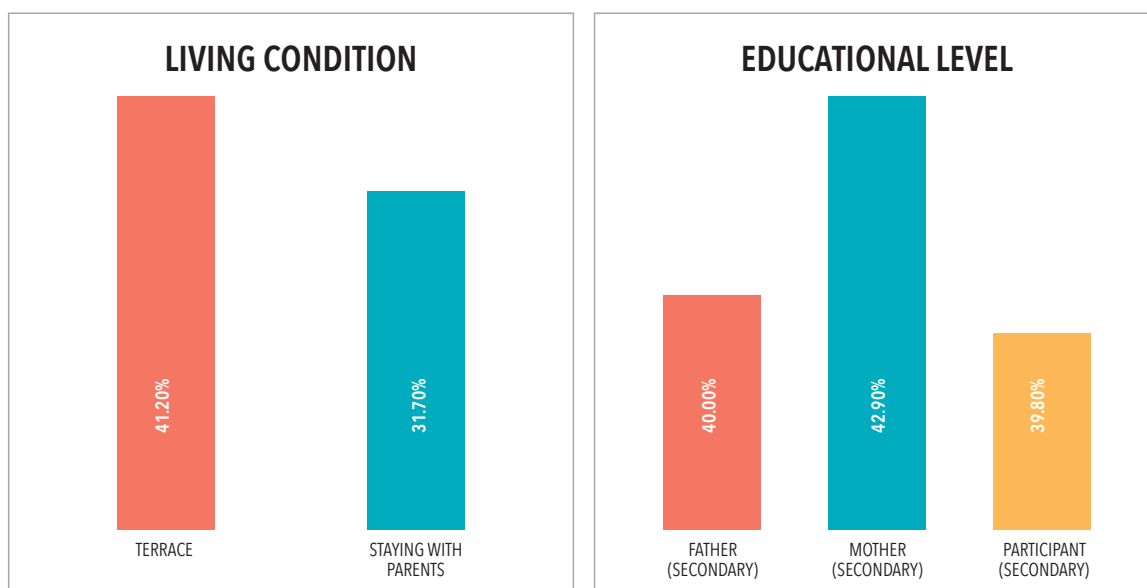
7. Findings

This study is the first in Malaysia to assess young adults normative beliefs about VE in the context of religion, ethnicity as well as examining the role of demographic, social and health characteristics in relation to normative beliefs on VE.

As mentioned earlier, the current state of evidence on the push and pull factors of Malaysian youths towards VE is limited. Studies on VE in Malaysia are mostly reactive towards current geopolitical sentiments. Most recent studies on VE focus on ISIS recruitment and what most concur is that the demographic pattern of those being recruited are not similar except for the fact that most are men, Malay and profess Islam. The socio-economic backgrounds of those who have been detained for either joining Daesh or attempted to join range are predominantly young men and a mix of university educated and semi-skilled labourers. Current data are also qualitative in nature. To add, most of the research focus on intervention programmes for already radicalised individuals and not preventive in nature.

Before we go to results, a brief background of the sampled population. In our sample, the average age was 24.34 years old, slightly more than half were females. More than a third live in village houses, and almost similar proportion lived in terrace houses. In general, about a third lived within a nuclear family arrangement, with a slightly similar proportion still living with their parents. Household income on average was RM3542.6, and the highest proportion of education was up to secondary school, for participants, as well as their parents.





The biggest category of occupation were either students or laborers (about one fifth), followed by those working in services as clerks and sales.



Other selected psycho-social information gathered, such as social capital found about a tenth reported low social capital, with almost the same proportion indicated having high social capital. About 30% reported low general health, and 21% reported depressive symptoms (i.e., PHQ-9-BM scores ≥ 10) and 35.9% reported anxiety symptoms (i.e., GAD-7-BM scores ≥ 5). Almost a third (27.5%) experienced at least one major negative life event in the past 12 months. Almost all professed as being religious (98%), and about a quarter (23.4%) belonged to an organisation (formal and informal).

Demographic Information (N = 1139, Selangor = 847, Sabah = 292)

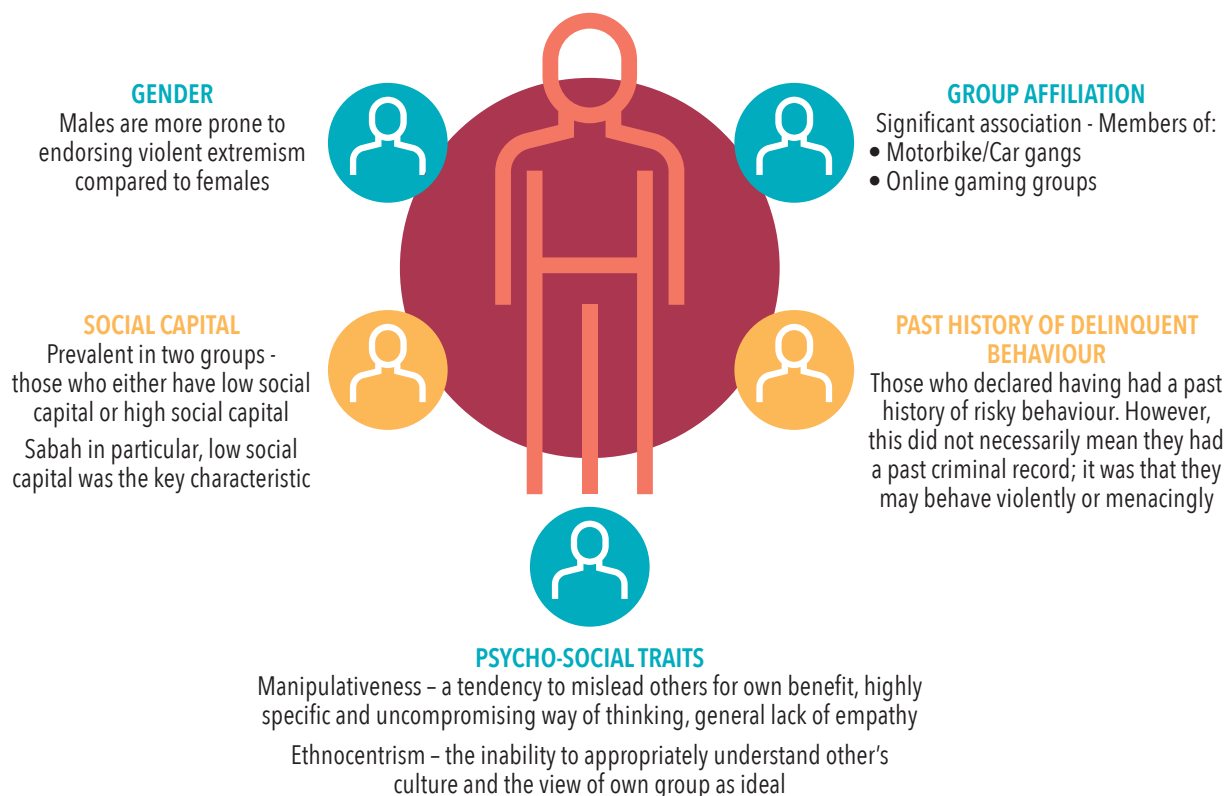


Results indicate that there exist psychosocial profiles of participants who endorse VE as acceptable. These profiles assist in understanding a vulnerable or at risk population who are susceptible to VE. However, targeting at risk population can prove more difficult, therefore addressing the matter from a public health perspective looking at prevention would better.

7.1 Survey key Findings

#1. Support across religious and ethnic groups towards VE– Propensity towards violent extremism among the cross-sectional population of youths that were sampled		
Prevalence rate: 10 %	Selangor: 8.5 %	Sabah: 9.7 %
The belief towards violent extremism is further supported by the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Strongly supported by a belief or ideology which may be based on doctrines or teachings that encourages or justifies violenceb. Triggered or fuelled by ethnic/religious clash or incidentc. Acceptance of aggressive behaviour as a means to solve problems.		
Sabah youths were slightly more likely to endorse violence in each of the given scenarios than their Selangor counterparts.		

#2. An At Risk Group : those who are most likely to endorse violent extremism; they may have not committed a violent crime or act as of yet but believe that violence can be used and justified including terrorist acts.



Summary:

Young Malaysian adults that support VE, are likely to be male, with either low or high social capital, have a history of delinquent behaviour, identify themselves as belonging to a group, sees the world and others through a cultural or ethnic bias, and display dark psychological traits such as manipulateness.

7.2 Further investigation via Focus Group Discussions in Selangor and Sabah

The study explored further the understanding of key concepts of VE as those understood by the survey respondents. Through controlled focus group discussions (FGD) held in both Selangor and Sabah, the study delved further to discover what extent were the local drivers of “push and pull” factors to VE, understood, and whether there was a general agreed understanding of what was VE. Additionally, it also sought to identify if the Malaysian youths’ views differed from the

more universal understanding of VE and its nuances. Another important purpose of the FGDs was to discover whether the scenarios outlined in the quantitative study could measure palpable support towards VE.

7.2.1. Perception of what is VE

#1. The type of violence used such as bombings, killings etc					
Eg: Syrian War	Sept 11 th Terror Attack	Ariana Grande concert attack	Random mass shooting: - US shootings - Mumbai attacks	Colonialism	Sabah respondents: Issuance of citizenship to undocumented, torture, human trafficking and kidnappings
#2. Based on Belief or ideologically driven					
<p>The second most frequently identified feature across all groups was extreme or radical beliefs or ideology. The Sabah sample provided further details stating that it can be observed across all ideologies at its extreme end of the spectrum (i.e. Islamist and Liberalist). Ideological extremist also means that the individual depends on a single opinion, and these</p>					

ideologies can be based on politics, ethnicity, colour and creed. Ethnocentrism promoted by grass root political parties was also identified as a form of violent extremism.

Islam: Based on incidences in Malaysia and Indonesia, Islam is considered a feature of violent extremism as reported by the Selangor sample.

#3. Individual Thought process

The whole sample is in agreement that having specific style of thinking is a feature of violent extremism, specifically fanaticism or having excessive enthusiasm or unreasonable zeal towards on a certain subject. The Selangor sample provided further context, such as negating others' beliefs, enforcing one's ideas to others and becoming obsessive over a specific political thought.

Attitude: Having a particularly negative attitude towards their surroundings (Selangor) and being judgmental towards others (Sabah)

#4. Suppression of Human Rights

Suppression, specifically against women were cited across sample as a violent extremism feature, with examples from Selangor stating the case of Malala. The Sabah sample also included suppression towards other vulnerable groups. Violation of human rights is a feature of violent extremism (Sabah)

#5. Movement or organisation

Violent extremism is also defined as being part of a movement, with ISIS specifically mentioned by the Selangor sample. Another related feature is that a lone perpetrator is not involved in violent extremism as it requires to be part of an organised group (Sabah).

#6. Social media

Violent extremism is associated with the use of social media to influence and recruit, usually in a divisive approach. Another context social media is utilised is to provoke vulnerable individuals to engage in violent extremism

#7. Other insights

There is local context: Specifically, in the Sabah sample, participants talked about opposing perceptions. For those who perceived VE is rampant due reported ransom kidnappings and the perpetrators are believed to be external individuals/groups (Not Sabahan). Whereas some participants viewed violence is rampant but not violent extremism, due to high level of surveillance that is deterring violent extremism.

A means to gain attention: The Selangor sample stated that it is the only platform that ensures visibility. Social media has become saturated and it is difficult to gain attention. The nature of information on social media is free flow with limited censures, challenging the single narrative often used by those promoting violent extremism. Due to the openness of social media, discussion on the support of violent extremism can alert security

The development of violent extremism – it is a process: The Sabah sample discussed about the development of violent extremism among individuals and saw it as a process. Recruitment would involve normalizing violence, followed by indoctrination. A participant shared their observation of a recruitment that took place in a university in Selangor.

Extremist Ideas: The Sabah sample also talked about their perception on extremist ideas in comparison to violent extremism. Most agree that it is just as dangerous as violent extremism itself. The effect of meeting others with similar ideas was also discussed; individuals with similar violent ideology may feel empowered to take action

7.2.2 Perception on the causes of VE

#1. A Problematic way of thinking

The main cause of violent extremism defined across groups was the lack or limited critical thinking ability. This makes them susceptible in accepting information or opinions from influencers without question. It also implies that the individuals lack cognitive ability in assessing risks of violent extremism towards themselves and to the community at large. For younger individuals attracted to violent extremism, it might also be a reflection of socio-emotional-cognitive limitations. This perception is also associated with the

perceived failure of the education system in producing individuals that are able to think critically – in general education is exam oriented and not holistic. A participant from Sabah shared an incident where a known student became taksub (unquestioning or obsessed) with a tabligh organization. This however was not consented by parents, which tragically led to the student's suicide.

Groupthink (type of thinking in which individual members of a group tend to accept a viewpoint or conclusion that represents a perceived group consensus, whether or not they believe its valid) is another type of cognitive bias identified by all Selangor and Sabah FGD groups. Other similar descriptors of groupthink effect are peer pressure, racism towards out-groups.

#2. Deindividuation

Individuals become emboldened to act violently when they are part of a group. In some situations, a person's identity with a group overrides their own identity and self-awareness, which can lead to a mob mentality. This is also known as deindividuation, which tends to prevent critical thinking and dissent. Deindividuation was identified across all groups to be one of the causes of violent extremism. A related concept identified by the Selangor sample is conformity, where the individual will submit to the group's expected norms.

#3. Psychological factors

Another cause of violent extremism identified by the Sabah sample is psychological concerns such as individuals with inherent or acquired violent tendencies. Violent tendencies could have been nurtured via social learning and harsh discipline techniques at home or school. Inherent risk-taking behaviour among the young is also identified as a push factor towards violent extremism. Youths still seeking an identity and who are impulsive and reactive in character may also be attracted to violent extremism.

Mental illness: All the groups stated mental illness as a causal attribution, particularly in a situation where environmental, economical and societal stressors, and substance abuse are present and can trigger genetic predisposition to violence.

#4. Interpretation of faith

All groups stated interpretation of faith as a cause of violent extremism. The Sabah sample provided further context by relating it to overtly rigid ideologies, only having a singular and harsh measurement of piety, the continued struggle for the demand of stricter sharii compliance instead of managing diversity. Historically movements have also been known to reinterpreting ideology, which instigates cultural and ideological clashes in communities.

#5. General lack of Social Capital

General lack of empowerment among youths was identified by all groups as a cause for violent extremism, although the two samples provided different contexts. The Selangor sample cited feelings of detachment from society and the allure of rebellion can prompt individuals to engage in violent extremism. In addition, the failure of other platforms for youths to express their dissatisfaction, may lead some to see violence as an alternative, or as a last resort.

The Sabah sample identifies the lack of empowerment leads to attachment to groups or organisations that can look after their interests. The same process takes place among individuals that feels victimised.

#7. Other Insights

Perception on Protective Factors: All groups discussed on their views of factors that may stop an individual from becoming a violent extremist. The Selangor sample specifically discussed what differentiates violent extremism and non-violent extremism with similar extreme ideas is the kind of upbringing they were exposed to – secure and positive upbringing prevents an individual from engaging in violence. Happiness as the result of socio-demographic and financial stability was also considered as protective.

Multiple factors: In general, all groups are in agreement that the causes of violent extremism are complex. Vulnerable individuals experiencing multiple problems may seek

groups or organisations that can provide them the benefits, assistance, and mental relief that they are looking for.

Perception on the impact of violent extremism: There is a feeling of insecurity due to terror warnings in public places issued last year (2017). Participants observed higher security presence in KLCC during New Year for example, higher alert levels in airports especially after a terror incident anywhere in the world, and higher alert or security concerns among specific communities such as among the LGBT community.

Sabah Specific

Living condition: living conditions play a role in causing violent extremism, especially in slums and PPRTs (low cost housing projects). The influence of violent extremism organisations that can provide financial benefit is a factor for those facing economic pressure with no access to other forms of financial help. Rampant criminal activities and the deemed incompetency of rule of law can lead to the normalization of violence, vengeance, and the need to seek alternative provider of safety. Witnessing arbitrary arrests of parents and family members may also be the cause of distrust towards authorities.

Lack of legal documentation: As an extension to the previously mentioned issue of lack of legal documentation, apart from problems accessing education, it also affects access to other services such as health, employment, financial and welfare institutions. This pushes individuals to seek other providers and in the context of Sabah, criminal organisations and violent extremism organisations can fulfil a need.

Education: indirectly associating those who engage in violent extremism are likely to have low levels or no formal education. The context in Sabah is also related to the lack of access to education due to physical or logistical barriers, as well as lack of documentation to access free education provided by the state. The education system itself in the view of the Sabah sample focusses on exam results at the expense of non-performers who will seek recognition of their abilities from other sources.

Lack of social support: identified lack of engagement with youths in general is pushing vulnerable youths to violent extremism ideologies or organisations, in order to make sense or help them deal with their challenges. The Sabah sample discussed the importance of practicing moderation in thought or *umatan wasatan* to protect people from being influenced by violent extremism ideas.

Politics: violent extremism is seen as a viable solution to long standing social, political and economic problems faced by Sabahans. On the other hand, violent extremism is a tool utilised by politicians to further their political causes by seeking a wider political audience.

The participants were initially asked to discuss and elaborate their perceptions of VE, whereby a key defining feature across all groups was that it involved physical violence such as bombings and use of firearms in conflict zones or even peaceful situations. Notable examples were provided by the Selangor sample such as the September 11 attacks and the Manchester Arena suicide bombing during the Ariana Grande concert in 2017. Interestingly, violent acts by authorities and state-sponsored terrorism were also categorized as VE by the Selangor sample, who specifically referred to the school shootings in the US and colonialism as examples. The Selangor sample also concurred that having a specific style of thinking was linked VE behaviour, especially when it leads to fanaticism and negating others' beliefs.

Meanwhile, the understanding of VE in Sabah was largely predicated on localized factors. For instance, the issuance of citizenships to undocumented migrants were regarded to be a form of VE. The Sabah sample subsequently identified terror-related activities such as torture, kidnappings (with specific mention to previous kidnap-for-ransom incidents in Kunak and Semporna), and human trafficking as forms of VE. The localized context of VE in Sabah corresponded to the socio-demographic profile that was similarly derived from the quantitative findings. In particular, support for and causes of VE in Sabah were consistently informed by low levels of social capital (politics, living conditions, education, lack of legal documentation and social support) and this was evident across both sets of findings.



The Sabah and Selangor samples also registered several similarities in terms of their perceptions about the causes of VE. Both groups defined VE to be caused by a combination of the demopsychosocial-health variables that were identified based on existing studies on VE - such as cognitive susceptibility, deindividuation (where group identity overrides individuality, leading to mob mentality), mental illness and a lack of empowerment.

8. Analysis

For decades, research on psychology and health in understanding the foundation of radicalization, VE and terrorism are at the individual level. Most of the research studies on violence and extremism have tended to focus on the relationship between the violence and extreme behaviour on the one hand, and on personality traits and parental behaviours the other, leaving some other important aspects, such as socioeconomic, cultural and psychological contexts, uncovered. Also, most of the research only focused on acts committed by the victims or the extremists. Not enough attention has been given to persons at risk of committing the violence. Hence, the primary objective of this paper was to examine the role of demographic, social, and health characteristics on NBVE among young adults.

8.1. Support for VE

The support for VE among Malaysian youths correlates with most countries. In that sense, Malaysia is not an outlier. This figure also supports surveys previously conducted by Pew Research and Merdeka Centre which illustrate a pattern of VE sentiments among Malaysians, especially when ideology is taken into consideration. For instance, attitudes towards the ISIS cause and views on suicide bombing that were studied in the 2015 Pew Research survey can be inexplicably linked to ideologically-driven beliefs.

The key drivers for the support are two - ideology and ethnic/religious clash or incident. The latter, which was most significant within the Selangor sample co-relates with current tensions plaguing the Peninsular. For example; the strong support shown for the anti-ICERD rally on December 9, 2018 where police officials had estimated of around 55,000 people had participated. The anti-ICERD supporters saw that ratifying ICERD as violating Article 153 of the Federal Constitution which protects Malay/Indigenous rights. Another incident was the strong opposition towards the ratification of the Rome Statute which was deemed as removing the powers of the Sultan, the guardian of Islam and Malay rights. In both incidents the Government complied and withdrew ratification. The anger by the predominantly Malay-Muslim community was evident - they saw the application as a direct attack on Malay and Muslim rights. On a positive note, the vast majority of youths indicated that they were not okay with violence in the vignettes presented. At least 90% of the participants did not support VE

8.2. "At Risk" group

It is important to point out that social capital is a key factor that should be explored further to better understand the demographic of at risk youths. Social capital must be explored through both dimensions: structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Past history of delinquent behaviour is not a surprising result since existing literature shows a link between radicalisation and past criminal behaviour. Previous research (Jensen et al. 2016, 2017; LaFree et al. 2018) based on the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset shows that U.S based extremists who engage in criminal acts prior to radicalizing are at an increased risk of engaging in ideologically motivated violence once they have adopted extremist beliefs. (Jensen et al, 2018). In summary, those who have moderate levels of social capital both in Sabah and Selangor are least likely to endorse VE.

Social identity, the sense of group belonging of where we are likely to derive our sense of identity, is a strong influencer. (Chen & Li, 2009) According to McDermott, group identity is used in social psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science to better understand or explain such phenomena as ethnic and racial conflicts, discrimination, political campaigns and etc. (Chen & Li, Group Identity and Social Preferences, 2009). Participation in motorbike/car groups and gaming groups not only provide short thrills but sense of purpose and group think. Further exploration of these groups would provide better insight on why they support violent extremism.

The psycho-social risk factors contributing to violence or aggression in youth have been heavily researched from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including biological, ethological, anthropological, and sociological frameworks. (Kashani, Jones, Bumby, & Thomas, 1999). Unfortunately, due to its complexity, investigation on youth violence requires a multidimensional psychosocial framework that includes individual, family, peer, school, and community/ cultural variables (Borduin & Schaeffer, 1998; Henggeler, 1989; Kazdin, 1996; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Ollendick, 1996; Stoff, Breiling, & Maser, 1997). The identification of psycho-social risk factors within this multidimensional framework has served as the basis for interventions and prevention strategies in the mental health field. Manipulativeness and ethnocentrism were problematised as traits contributing to xenophobia, fascism, and violence. Manipulativeness is defined as a



tendency to mislead others for one's own benefit. Those who possess such behaviour often feel the need to have control over people and circumstances. This trait is innately linked to having a highly specific and uncompromising way of thinking, which is a key feature of VE. Such individuals tend to use manipulative tactics to enforce their ideas and negate others' opinions. Meanwhile, ethnocentrism is a belief that one's ethnic group is superior to others. Ethnocentric individuals usually view other races or cultures negatively, and are likely to engage in hate-speech or discriminatory practices. When it comes to VE, ethnocentric individuals are the ones most likely to possess radical beliefs or ideology.

8.3. Summary

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that VE tendencies among youths do not stem from a singular reason, but are rather sparked by a combination of risk factors that have been highlighted here. Furthermore, it can also be deduced that the root causes of violent behaviour do not arise in isolation from the individual's surroundings. Instead, there is often a distinct demo-psychosocial-health profile that pushes people towards violence. Vulnerable individuals who have experienced multiple problems are increasingly likely to then search for 'kinship' with groups and organizations that provide the benefits, assistance and mental relief they are looking for.

This was further supported by evidence from the FGDs, with participants agreeing that the causes of VE are complex. Indeed, the definition and perceptions of VE shared by the participants coincided with universal ideas of VE. The causal attributions of VE also validated the existing literature on the 'push and pull' factors that were reflected within the independent variables in the quantitative section of the study. However, Sabah detracted from the norm slightly as a local context took precedence when it came to understanding VE. This was attributed to the state's connection to criminal activities such as kidnappings and human trafficking, as well as the problem of irregular migrants, which subsequently informed Sabahan youths' perceptions of VE. Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, the study recorded several distinctive motivations towards VE for Sabah and Selangor.

9. Recommendations

VE is preventable and researchers have produced necessary evidence describing the risk factors that push people into violent life courses and also programs and practices to prevent such violence from developing. Over the last few decades, there has been considerable advance in understanding the drivers of violence in an attempt to prevent violence and the returns on investment that its prevention can bring (Hughes et al., 2014). However, there are some macro issues including conflict, mass migration, globalization, and persistent inequality, which contribute into cycles of violence and threaten peace and economic advancement around the world. The impact of macro issues on VE awaits future research.

IMAN strongly proposes that resources is further allocated towards preventing VE for long term goals and sustainability. However, trying to weed out potential extremist or terrorist would be like finding a needle in a haystack, which is a waste of limited resources and worst, can be counterproductive. Instead, policies and programmes that target and uplift communities will have higher chances of positive impact and desired outcomes. It is critical that all stakeholders are involved in the process of coming up with long term sustainable strategies for P/CVE.



9.1. Policy

It is important for countries like Malaysia to realise and actively pursue a preventive approach towards radicalization, even more so than CVE efforts. Such an approach requires a 'whole of society' commitment that rightly begins with the cooperation of CSOs to train local communities and grassroots organizations in working with vulnerable groups within their constituents and



subsequently addressing the risk factors associated with VE. The influence of 'soft power' is largely underrated when it comes to preventing conflict and VE, when in fact CSOs play a crucial role in mitigating high-risk situations. The Global Coalition for Conflict Transformation (GCCT) notes that while governments are responsible for more punitive measures such as identifying, detaining, and sentencing violent extremists, CSOs are best equipped to engage with the community and confront the challenges of recruitment and radicalization (Nemr and Bhulai, 2018).

The current reality in Malaysia is that there is insufficient public policy when it comes to p/cve. Local government agencies like the Southeast Asian Research Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT) has worked with undergraduate students to counter violent narratives online, while the Malaysian police has established a dedicated Counter-Messaging Centre (CMC) in 2016 to counter ISIS' digital propaganda (Yaakob, 2018). However, are these enough?

Educational programmes and exposure to counter narratives should begin as early as at the primary school level, whereby impressionable young Malaysians can easily imbibe the values taught to them.

9.1.1. Teaching empathy

In addressing the challenge of at risk youths especially traits such as manipulateness, ethnocentrism and even to decrease reoffending delinquents, research has shown that introducing early intervention with empathy training has tremendous impact. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Empathy has the capacity to transform individual lives for the better while helping to bring about positive social change in schools and communities addressing issues such racism, aggression and violence etc. This can be done formally through education by integrating" social-emotional learning or SEL. SEL integration is when students and teachers can transfer the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they've learned through direct instruction to practical environments such as home, community, and the workplace. The more varied the contexts in which students develop and practice their social-emotional competencies, the easier it will be for them to generalize the approaches they've been taught. The goal of SEL integration is to design learning environments that maximize the opportunities for students to develop and practice social-emotional skills in as many different

contexts as possible. One good example of SEL is Global Citizenship Education (GCED). UNESCO's efforts in helping countries leverage on education as a tool to prevent VE and mitigate its root causes by integrating a human-rights based Global Citizenship Education (GCED) programmes into the curriculum as well as teacher's training.

Several studies target youth as a vulnerable group to radicalization therefore recommend that young people should be educated 'on citizenship, political, religious and ethnic tolerance, non-prejudiced thinking, extremism, democratic values, cultural diversity, and the historical consequences of ethnically and politically motivated violence'. (Aiello, Puigvert, & Schubert, 2018). Therefore, Malaysian authorities should strongly reintroduce a revamped version of the National Service programme and include empathy training.

9.1.2. Gendered Approach

The phenomena of VE has re-opened the conversation around women, conflict and peace. Initial perception of women were solely as perpetual victims. Binary classification as either "victims" or "combatants" concealing their nuanced roles in extremist conflict. In reality, the roles of women are complex. They may perpetuate extremism, either by joining extremist movements voluntarily, or through force or they may be associated with male fighters as wives, mothers, daughters and community members. While this study didn't delve deeply into gender differences but it does recognise the role that gender has when addressing at risk groups.

It is recommended that pve/cve policies include a gendered angle in addressing VE. Women can act as a bridge, using women's organizations, using their influence in families and communities to deploy unique solutions to support prevention, de-radicalization, psychosocial support and rehabilitation from extremism. Finally women may move between these roles, depending on the situation they find themselves in and the opportunities they are given.

Empowering women is one of the priorities under the United Nations' (UN) action plan on PVE, and Malaysia can freshly contribute to this approach by involving women in its preventive strategies. As studies reveal that more women are being radicalized, there are similar opportunities for women to be part of the solution. For instance, mosques and religious departments should train more female experts (ustazahs) to reach out to young women and men



who are at risk of radicalization. This altogether ties in with the need to increase engagement with religious scholars in the PVE process, which IMAN has been advocating for some time.

9.1.3. Localised Policies

P/CVE is usually a national government concern, but much of the day to day of radicalization occurs in local towns and neighborhoods. However, integrating local actors into programs to prevent and counter VE is often done poorly or not at all. The findings of this study shows that NBVE is different between Selangor and Sabah and that they are driven by most local context in particular in Sabah. Therefore, a locally designed policy in addressing VE is needed for Sabah. It is without doubt that prevention and intervention efforts to address VE can best be undertaken through a localised community partnership approach that makes use of existing local capacities to handle and prevent violence.

9.1.4. Resilience training including Online Resilience

The literature on resilience at an individual level is focused on identifying patterns of positive adaptation, higher functioning, wellness and growth. When applied to communities, a psychological perspective would define resilient communities as those that are capable of withstanding stress and change.

Communities have long been understood to be critical to violence prevention regardless of the type of violence. Benchmarking on best practices on preventing violence via a of a public health approach, where “full participation of communities to engender a sense of ownership of this problem and its solutions” (Mercy et al., 1993, p. 8). Among the recommended interventions was an emphasis on changing how people interact, creating programs and social/economic conditions that strengthen ties, reducing inequities and discrimination, and increasing civic engagement (Mercy et al., 1993).

Community-based efforts to prevent violence is not a new approach. The approach towards crime prevention have for decades embraced community participation. In the context of VE and youths, communities have assets that may contribute to preventing youth from embracing VE. According to Al Raffie, 2013 it is frequently theorised that youths become radicalised while in



search for meaningful identity. Therefore, by strengthening social identity may be an important means of building community resilience to VE.

Schanzer and colleagues (2010) identified the assertion of Muslim American identity as an important protective factor in addition to the understanding that this identity is compatible with other identities including American. They further found that “the creation of robust Muslim American communities may serve as a preventative measure against radicalization by reducing social isolation of individuals who may be at risk of becoming radicalized”. (Ellis & Abdi, 2017)

This includes online resilience, youths need to be encouraged to become resilient users of the internet, they need the tools to be able to act positively when meeting the challenges of the online world which includes fake news, propaganda and violence.

9.2. Programme

Addressing P/CVE cannot only rely from a security angle, It has to be a cross sectional and sectoral programmatic efforts are needed to tackle VE. It also has to include strong participation of community and community based organisation – civil society organisations. Flexible, community-driven projects, should be articulated from an “assets-based approach.” Assets-based approaches to countering VE recognize the already-present capacities and values within a community, and then engage those as “assets” to build sustainable community and institutional strength. By designing programs which focus on the existing strengths within communities, capitalizing on those strengths and build long-term resilience to the threat of VE. For example programmes that enhance religious leaders role with youths on PVE. Based on best practices, engagement of religious leaders and institutions is found to be an extremely important entry point for championing peace-making and conflict resolution. Therefore, training religious leaders to work with youth can support counter radicalization. Another example is PVE training on addressing “at-risk” youths with youth-based organisations and CSO who have youth wings.

Advancing community conversation on P/CVE is also needed in Malaysia where the discourse is almost absent except in specific departments at the policy level. These conversations should bring forward practical idea from the view point of communities on the following:



- Engagement. Building relationships between communities, civil society organizations, and government agencies for the purposes of preventing violence.
- Prevention. Community-wide implementation of programs, policies and activities to mitigate the risk or allure of joining violent extremist organisations by creating healthy environments that reduce the appeal. For example creating “safe space” forums where young people have healthy outlets on sensitive topics without the fear of stigma or shame.
- Intervention. Create “crisis counselling,” spaces within communities this is about dissuading at-risk individuals seeking to engage in violence, but who have not yet taken any significant steps. Religious centres and schools play an important role in this

It is critical to avoid generic programmes. Programmes should be customised to fit specific local needs and context. It must be able to address issues plaguing youths within the community.

9.3 Research

To ensure evidence based policies at the national and local, Malaysia needs to further invest on research. However, with limited resources and time, it is crucial that the research undertaken provide us the necessary answers or guide. We are already aware of “at risk” groups – focus should be put on further understanding the causes, trigger factors of radicalization and needs of young people at risk. Radical youths are not necessarily bad, some may argue that youths should be radical. Therefore how do we identify when youths radicalism uplifts society and when do they endanger it? How did the problem of violent extremism and radicalization evolved in the context of national, international politics and local and regional ethno-religious tensions? What lessons could we learn from history?.

There is definitely a need for more mix-method research in the area of VE work in Malaysia. Current body of work still does not provide significant understanding on the regional, national and local dynamics of VE in Malaysia let alone youths. Further investigation on the “push and



pull” factors are needed especially exploration of social capital dimensions. Research will definitely contribute to better policy and programme designs.

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