

## Theology in Malaysia: Between the Mainstream and the Periphery

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### Abstract

Ever since the beginning of the Sultanate, which was for most of its history ruled from Malacca, the Aš'arī theology has been the dominating theological discourse of Muslims in the region. This is mainly due to the influence of Sufi traders and scholars, who are generally considered to be responsible for the expansion of Islam over such a large territory. These people were mostly followers of the Aš'arī theology. Although this theology had prevailed in Malaysia for centuries, its predominant position was challenged by the global reform idea which emerged during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Beginning with the Afġānī and 'Abduh-inspired '*Kaum Muda*' reform movement, global changes continued to influence Malaysian Islam throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was especially notable during the period of Islamic revivalism during the 1970s and 1980s, a period which brought the synthesis of the 'traditional' Islamic theology with a new theology inspired by Islamic revivalists. This battle to define the official Islamic theology of Malaysia became even more interesting at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rapid spread of the internet. However, besides the clashes between the two Sunni theologies, which are involved in a protracted struggle to become the official state theology, the period of Islamic revivalism also witnessed the arrival of Shiism in Malaysia. The presence of this stream of Islam in Malaysia can be regarded as a direct result of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Although only a relatively small number of people adhere to this branch of Islam in Malaysia, Shiism has been viewed suspiciously and as a threat to the religious establishment and to the country's security. This paper explores the clash of the theologies in modern Malaysia by examining the history of Islamic theology in the country.

**Keywords:** *Kaum Muda*, *Kaum Tua*, *iṣlāḥ*, *taġdīd*, Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), Aš'arī, Wahhabism, Salafism, Shiism, *pondok*, Sufism, Malay Archipelago, Malaysia, Iranian Revolution, *Perlis Darul Sunnah*.

### Introduction

Many researchers have traditionally viewed Muslims in the Malay Archipelago (Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Brunei, Southern Philippines, and Singapore) as being followers of the Aš'arī theological school of thought. This is because the Aš'arī has been the most prevailing *madhab* (school of thought) of '*aqīdah* (creed) in the region since the early days of Islam in the Malay Archipelago.<sup>1</sup> The Islam practiced by Muslims in the region is chiefly made up of elements of the Aš'arī, Šāfi'ī and Ġazālī schools of thought. While

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. E. Hall, *Histories of South East Asia*, London: Oxford University Press 1962, pp. 39-43; Yahaya Abu Bakar, "Melaka Sebagai Pusat Pendidikan Islam Abad ke-XV masihi", *SARI*, jilid 4, no. 1, January 1983, p. 33, 50.

Malaysian Muslims belong to the Aš‘arī school of theology as regards their creeds and beliefs, they adopt at the same time the Šāfi‘ī *madhhab* way towards dealing with *fiqh* (legal injunctions) issues and strictly adhere to the Ghazalian way of mysticism in their *taṣawwuf* (spiritual) life. This is perceived as the mainstream Islam, or the Islam officially endorsed by the authorities in the region, especially in Malaysia.

However, in order to discuss the different theological trends in Malaysia in a fair and accurate way, one should not confine oneself to what is considered to be the ‘mainstream’. An analysis of the history of Islam and of the differing forms of Islam in Malaysia would enable the subject to be examined in a more comprehensive fashion. Although the previously outlined ‘mainstream’ Islam has been dominant for the last hundred years in Malaysia, the emergence of al-Azhar graduates and scholars influenced by Saudi Islam since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century supposed a challenge to the status-quo. People adhering to this in a Malaysian sense ‘peripheral’ form of Islam – something that can perhaps best be described as a ‘fringe group’ – tried to make Malaysian Muslims perceive their religion in a new fashion. In this context, they introduced another way of looking at both theological issues and other practical *fiqh* issues. Ultimately, this phenomenon was to prove a fertile breeding ground for the development of another Malaysian-Islamic ‘fringe grouping’ following the emergence of the global Islamic revivalism movement. This second ‘fringe group’ later managed to merge with elements of mainstream Malaysian Islam and upsurge the principle form of Islam propagated by the Malaysian state. This ‘synthesis’ between the fringe movement and mainstream Islam successfully harmonized the central state-endorsed Islam with that propagated from the fringe of society to create a newly accepted form of Islamic theology among Malaysian Muslims. Nevertheless, the honeymoon period of this symbiotic form of Islam theology only lasted until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when in the wake of the global ‘internet revolution’, the consensus which had previously been arrived at disintegrated.

In the meantime, the 1979 Iranian revolution also had a minor impact on the diversity of different theologies in Malaysia. The revolution not only influenced what was known as the ‘Islamic revivalists’, especially those belonging to the Islamic party of Malaysia (PAS), who were thereby given a boost of hope and rejuvenation and encouraged to embark a new struggle aimed at establishing an Islamic state akin to the Iranian model. At the same time, it also resulted in Sunni Malaysians engaging with Shiite Iranians for the first time. In the period following the Iranian revolution, an increased number of Malaysians started to pay more interest to the Shiite doctrine. Indeed, the numbers showing an interest in this doctrine considerably outnumbered those interested in the revolution itself. Some Malaysian families, mainly those supporting the PAS, began sending their offspring to seminaries (*hawzah*) in Iran. After attending these seminaries, these young people subsequently returned to Malaysia in order to spread their beliefs. Despite their relative insignificance and rather small numbers, they still managed to create some headlines and appear on the front pages of various newspapers. This was due to the decision of the Malaysian authorities to detain their members, a decision which was seen as ‘persecution’ by the detainees.

In a similar way to the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this new clash of theologies has provoked an increasingly ferocious battle between the established or once-dominant school of theology and people championing another Islamic theology. People propagating this new theology attempted not just to reach the middle of Malaysian society with their

views, but also to remove the central Malaysian theology from its position, despite its long history. The struggle became more colorful with the emergence of a new theological strand in Malaysia, the *Shia* form of Islam. Despite the relatively small numbers adhering to this strand of Islam, their presence in the country had a direct impact on the actions of the religious authorities, who were forced to react to the threat supposed by the emergence of a new strand of Malaysian-Islamic theology. Shiites have since been viewed as a threat to the country's established theological framework and to the country's security. The different Islamic theologies which have attracted followers in Malaysia since the religion's arrival in the Malay world in the 13<sup>th</sup> century are briefly discussed and elaborated on in this article. The author believes that in this way a concise account of the differing theological approaches in Malaysia can be presented which, placed into a historical timeline, will enable a greater understanding of the general picture.

### **Aš'arī as the Earliest Theological Doctrine in Malaysia**

Most historians agree that the arrival and the spread of Islam throughout the Malay world in the 13<sup>th</sup> century did not take place forcibly but was instead brought about by Muslim traders, Sufis and Arab missionaries – predominately Sunnis from Ḥaḍramaut (Yemen) and Gujerat.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic religion successfully penetrated all sections of Malay society, from the lowest levels to the top echelons of society such as the royal family. The multifaceted approaches adopted towards preaching Islam were to a great extent based on the works and contributions of Sufi and Sunni scholars from the Šāfi'ī (deceased 820AD) school of thought (*madhab*). These scholars played significant roles in shaping Malays' spiritual and intellectual understanding of Islam, not only in worship (*ibādah*), but also in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*ilmu l-kalām*).<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, the Islamic teachings have been mostly dominated by *Ahlu 's-Sunnah wa-l-Ġamā'ah*. With regard to the *madhab*, the Šāfi'ī school of thought is the most prevailing in questions relating to *ibādah* and *fiqh*. With respect to the theological creed, the Malay world has been mostly influenced by the Aš'arī theological doctrine that was initiated by Abū Ḥasan al-Aš'arī (deceased 936AD) and al-Matūrīdī (deceased 944AD). As a result, both the state authorities and the population in general have traditionally understood the Islamic mainstream discourse towards understanding God as being Šāfi'ī in jurisprudence and Aš'arī in theology. In contrast to the Šāfi'ī *madhab*, which was stated clearly in the majority of the Malay states' constitutions, the theological aspect was not mentioned specifically in any official legal document. Nevertheless, the Aš'arī theological creed has remained the most influential theological doctrine and its teaching dominated the thought of most Muslims in Malaysia until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, most of the knowledge and Islamic intellectual discourse was usually imparted and disseminated through traditional Islamic religious schools such as *madrasas* and *pondok* institutions as well as through various places of worship such as mosques and *surau* (small mosques). All of these public and private religious institutions became led by

<sup>2</sup> Syed Naquib al-Attas, *The General Theory of the Islamization of Malay-Indonesia Archipelago*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Mohd Syukri Yeoh, Abdullah & Ahmad Redzuwan, Mohd Yunus, "Taṣawwuf: An Impetus to Islamic Revivalism in the Malay World", in: *Tawarikh: International Journal for Historical Studies*, 2 (2) 2011, pp. 175-90.

a number of Muslim scholars ('*ulamā'*) who are strong adherents of the Aš'arī theological doctrine. This development played a major role in the creation and dissemination of the Aš'arī theological doctrine.

The Aš'arī discourse is a mostly rational one which adopts an approach based on human 'reasoning' (i.e. considering the facts in order to arrive at a logical conclusion)<sup>4</sup> at the same time as making use of the evidence contained in al-Qur'ān and al-Ḥadīth (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). This approach enables us to postulate that the Aš'arī discourse covers most of fundamental discussions on God such as the divine nature of God and His attributes and acts. For instance, the doctrine tries to define God's existence and confines its discourse to merely twenty of God's attributes (*Ṣifat 20*). They are the essential attributes of Allah: (1) *Wuğūd* (the Necessary Existence), negating attributes, (2) *Qadīm* (Beginninglessly Eternal or Without Beginning), (3) *Bāqī* (Everlastingly Abiding or Endless), (4) *Muḥālifa li-l-Ḥawādīth* (Utter Dissimilarity from Creation), (5) *Qiyāmuḥu bi-Nafsihi* (Absolutely Self-Subsistent), (6) *Waḥdāniyya* (Oneness), (7) *Qudrah* (Possessed of Almighty Power), (8) *Irādah* (Possessing Will), (9) *ʿIlm* (Knowledge), (10) *Ḥayāt* (Possessed with Life), (11) *Samā'* (All-Hearing), (12) *Baṣar* (All-Seeing), (13) *Kalām* (His Speech), and those attributes that follow from the existent (*Wuğūd*), (14) *Kaunuhu Qādīran* (He is Powerful), (15) *Kaunuhu Murīdan* (He Wills), (16) *Kaunuhu ʿĀliman* (He is Knowledgeable), (17) *Kaunuhu Ḥayyan* (He is Alive), (18) *Kaunuhu Samī'an* (He Hears), (19) *Kaunuhu Baṣīran* (He Sees), (20) *Kaunuhu Mutakalliman* (He Speaks).

Uthman El-Muhammady<sup>5</sup> contends that the Aš'arī theological doctrine is one of the main domains of Islamic mainstream Sunni discourse in Malaysia. He argues that the Malaysian mainstream theological discourse is not only limited to the Aš'arī and Mātūrīdī interpretations, but also extends to other prominent Muslim classical theologians such as aṭ-Ṭahāwī (deceased 935AD), Abū Ḥanīfah (deceased 767AD), aš-Šāfi'ī, al-Bāqillānī (deceased 1013AD), al-Bağdādī (deceased 1037AD), Imam al-Ḥaramain (deceased 1085AD), al-Ġazālī (deceased 1111AD) and ar-Rāzī (deceased 1209AD). According to El-Muhammady, the Aš'arī discourse in the Malay world has mostly been based on the following theological texts: *Ummu l-Barāhīn* by As-Sanūsī (deceased 1490AD), *Matn al-Ġauharah* by al-Laqqānī (deceased 1631AD), *Bidayatu l-Hidāyah* by Šamsuddīn of Acheh (deceased 1630AD), *Farīdatu l-Farā'id* by Šaiḥ Aḥmad al-Fatānī (deceased 1908AD), *Ward az-Zawāhir* by Šaiḥ Dāwūd al-Fatānī (deceased 1769AD) and *Aqīdatu n-Nāğīn* by Šaiḥ Zain al-ʿĀbidīn al-Fatānī (deceased 1910AD). Interestingly, most of the above-mentioned scholars were taught in the *Masğidu l-Ḥarām* (Holy Mosque) in Mecca and were involved in Sufism.

For many centuries, formal and informal traditional religious schools, such as *madrasah*, *pondok* and other public religious institutions were the quintessence of Islamic education in Malaysia and played a significant role in disseminating and expanding Aš'arī theological doctrine. However, the scenario shifted in the early 1920s, mainly as a result of the

<sup>4</sup> There are some writers who claim that the Aš'arī theological doctrine used Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic principles in deriving the 20 attributes. See URL: <http://www.asharis.com/creed/> (last retrieval: 3 January 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, "Mainstream Islamic Intellectual Discourse and the Malay World: Issues and Perspectives", 2009, *Traditional Islam Blog*, URL: <http://traditionalislamblog.wordpress.com> (last retrieval: 3 January 2012).

introduction of a modern *madrrasah* system initiated by young ‘*ulamā*’ who were mostly graduates of the al-Azhar University in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, due to the increasing number of English vernacular schools founded by the British administration in Malaysia, the traditional religious schools declined in importance within Malay society. This phenomenon became more apparent when Malaysia gained independence in 1957 and the government introduced a new formal educational system that placed more emphasis on academic curricula than on religious subjects. For instance, the 1957 Education Ordinance allocated government schools just two hours a week for Islamic lessons as part of the formal school syllabus. The teaching of Aš‘arī theological doctrine declined in the following years, and was largely confined to the remaining traditional religious schools. This decline was exacerbated by the tendency of most Malay parents to send their children to the national schools in order that they might obtain adequate and appropriate qualifications for labor market.

### Islamic Theology on the Fringe of Malaysian Society: *Kaum Muda*

Amongst the early challenges faced by the dominant Aš‘arī theological doctrine in the Muslim community of Malaysia was the emergence of the Pan-Islamism reformists during early 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaya.<sup>7</sup> These reformists were chiefly al-Azhar graduates who were heavily influenced by the *Salafiyah* ideology of Jamal ad-Dīn al-Afġānī and his disciple, Muhammad ‘Abduh, whose doctrine emphasized the importance of reviving the Muslim *ummah* globally through their progressive idea of re-opening the gate of *iġtihād*, relinquishing innovation (*bid‘ah*) and reconciling some elements of modernity into the Islamic culture of the people (i.e. education, learning modern positivistic sciences, learning modern languages and the emancipation of women, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Besides their call for a revival, they were also adherents of the theological idea developed by al-Afġānī and ‘Abduh, which emphasized that the purity of monotheism (*tauḥīd*) was the creed of Muslims. This concept stressed the necessity of returning to the creed of the earliest Muslim generation known as the *Salafu ṣ-Ṣāliḥ* (the pious generations).<sup>9</sup>

Apart from their progressive ideas, the reformists, who were widely known as *Kaum Muda* (Young People), also vocally voiced their resentment towards some of the cultural practices of the Malay community, which they perceived to be *širk* and *bid‘ah*. This conviction derives from their beliefs that the purity of *tauḥīd* should be the central *raison d’être* in Muslims’ life. The large number of ideals propagated by *Kaum Muda* created an atmosphere of hostility towards the establishment, and caused a considerable backlash from the country’s religious authorities. Many incidents of debates and clashes are recorded as having occurred between the *Kaum Muda* and the establishment. In most cases, these

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<sup>6</sup> For further reading, see: Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *Islamic Education in Malaysia*, RSIS Monograph, No. 18, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Farish A. Nor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS (1951-2003)*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MASRI), vol. 1, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Ğamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1968.

<sup>9</sup> *Salaf* is an Arabic noun which translates as “predecessor”, or “forefather”. In Islam it refers to the first three generations of Muslims, the so-called “Pious Predecessors” (Muhammad ibn ‘Umar, *The Salafī Methodology, its Definition, Distinct Characteristics & its Call Towards Rectifications*, Michigan: Sunnah Publisher 2010).

ended in endless polemics.<sup>10</sup> Due to the *Kaum Muda*'s open support for *tauḥīd* and their rejection of certain practices and rituals of the community (those which they categorized as being *bid'ah* and *širk*) these people were given the label 'Wahhabi'.

The theology of the *Kaum Muda* was mainly based on the *muhadditūn*<sup>11</sup> or *Hanābilah*'s<sup>12</sup> method. This method was perfected by Ibn Taimiyyah (deceased 1328AD), who formulated a new formulation of understanding *tauḥīd*. Ibn Taimiyyah asserted that a true believer (*mu'min*) is the one who unifies Allah in three dimensions of *tauḥīd*. Hence, *tauḥīd* is divided into three tenets or major categories, '*tauḥīd al-ulūhiyyah*' (believing that Allah is one with no partner or associate in His divinity); '*tauḥīd ar-rubūbiyyah*' (believing in Allah and His Lordship and that Allah is the Owner and sustainer of the universe) and '*tauḥīd al-asmā' wa-ṣ-ṣifāt*' (believing that Allah is the sole owner of His unique names and attributes).<sup>13</sup>

The *Kaum Muda* adopted a mixed approach towards disseminating their ideas. They both published literature and were also aggressively involved in publishing their own periodical newspaper – akin to the actions of their namesakes in Egypt. *Saudara*, *Pengasuh*, '*al-'Ur watu l-Wuṭqa*', *al-Iḥwān*, *al-Imām*, and *al-Munīr* are amongst the periodicals published by these reformists.<sup>14</sup> In Perlis, a state located in the northern part of Malaysia, the *Kaum Muda* became supported in a political sense by the ruler of the state.<sup>15</sup> The state publically declared its support of the reform ideas, and proudly established its own approach towards understanding Islam, which has been known as the 'Sunnah' way of Islam right up until the present day.<sup>16</sup> As this approach was based on the concept of *iḡtihād* (i.e. the practice of making a legal decision by citing passages from the Qur'an and Sunnah without turning to a *madḥab* [legalistic school of thought]), the state religious enactments and rulings are not bound to any *madḥab*, in contrast to other states in Malaysia.

However, despite clashes between the two groups, most of the issues involved in their dispute were clearly *fiqh* (legal) matters, in which theological debates played only a marginal role. In fact, the *Kaum Muda* managed to find a compromise, and referred to the *Ṣifāt 20* without launching any attacks on this approach. In some places (i.e. Perlis), the *Kaum Muda* also improvised the teachings of *Ṣifāt 20* by supporting the arguments with Quranic verses and the Prophet's traditions that relate to the discussions.<sup>17</sup> Although the *Kaum Muda* did not succeed in bringing Salafi theology into the centre of Malaysian Islam during this period, the impact on the public discourse on theology managed to create a paradigm shift in the way intellectuals and other progressive scholars considered this issue. Other scholars and intellectuals thus started exploring this new territory, some of whom

<sup>10</sup> Gordan P. Means, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia*, Petaling Jaya: SIRD 2009, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars of hadith, who were known to be not attached to any of the established *madḥab* (schools of thought).

<sup>12</sup> The followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. Despite their proclamation of non-attachment to any established *madḥab*, mainstream Muslims view these people as followers of Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (deceased 855AD), the prominent hadith scholar and one of the four great *fiqh* imams of *Ahlu s-Sunnah* (mainstream Islam) of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century of *hiḡra*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Taimiyyah, *Maḡmū' al-Fatāwa*, Riad: Dār Ṭaibah, vol. 1, 1998, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Mohd Radzi Othman / O. K. Rahmat, *Gerakan Pembaharuan Islam: Satu Kajian di Negeri Perli dan Hubungan kaitnya dengan Malaysia*, Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia 1996, pp. 28-30; 81.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

were later able to synthesize the theological approaches followed by the different streams of Islam present in Malaysia.

### The Islamic Revivalist Era

Despite the failure of the *Kaum Muda* movement to spread the *Salafīyyah* theology to the majority of the country's Muslim population, the creed had a secure base in Perlis, which has continued to be known as the '*Daru s-Sunnah*' (the abode of the Sunnah) right up until the present day. However, the second attempt to introduce the *Salafīyyah* '*aqīdah*' (Salafi theology) into the mainstream was successful during the period of Islamic revivalism from the 1970s to the 1990s.

The revivalists with their various different faces and approaches were deeply indoctrinated by the *Iḥwānī* (Muslim Brotherhood) movement in '*aqīdah*', which emphasized the purity of faith and creed by way of the manifestation of *tauḥīd*. The understanding of *tauḥīd* according to the most prevailing discourse in *Iḥwān* makes reference to Ibn Tai-miyyah's classification of *tauḥīd* into three categories (*tauḥīd ar-rubūbiyyah*, *tauḥīd al-ulūhiyyah* and *tauḥīd al-asmā' wa-ṣ-ṣifāt*). This is due to the fact that not all *Iḥwāns* are adherents to the Salafi method. The founder of *Iḥwān*, Ḥasan al-Bannā himself did not propagate the Salafi method in his approach to theology. The Salafi discourse emerged after his demise, especially after the publication of Sayyid Quṭb's exegesis, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān (Under the Shade of al-Quran)* and Fathī Yakan's most popular book *Māḍā Ya 'nī Intimā' ī li-l-Islām (What is the Meaning of my Affiliation to Islam?)*.<sup>18</sup>

The influence which the *Iḥwānī* had on the revivalists becomes clear when the books read by followers of the revivalist movement are considered. Perhaps the most important of these were: Fathi Yakan's most famous indoctrination book: *Māḍā Ya 'nī Intimā' ī li-l-Islām (What is the Meaning of my Affiliation to Islam?)*<sup>19</sup>, Haji Abdul Hadi Awang's '*Aqīdatu l-Muslim (Muslim's Creed)*'<sup>20</sup> and Abū 'Urwah's *Risālatu l-Usrah (Usrah Manual)*<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), as one of the leading revival-

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alias Othman, on 26 December 2012, 11:00am – 8:00pm.

<sup>19</sup> The translated version of this book by Alias Othman (see: Fathi Yakan, *Māḍā Ya 'nī Intimā' ī li-l-Islām (Apa Erti Saya Menganut Islam)*, trans. Alias Othman, Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Salam 1989) has been widely used by the revivalists in their *usrah* (circle) as introductory material for the regimentation (interview with Alias Othman, on 26 December 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Hadi Awang is currently the president of PAS (Parti Islam se-Malaysia [Malaysian Islamic Party]). He authored the book '*Aqīdatu l-Muslim*, which is a compilation of a series of *kulliyah* (lectures) which he had previously held on '*aqīdah*'. In the book, 'Abdu l-Hādī emphasizes the central idea of *tauḥīd* within the framework of the three *Salafīyyah* tenets of *tauḥīd* ('Abdu l-Hādī Awang, *Aqīdatu l-Mu'min*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan GG Edar 1990, pp. 78-81).

<sup>21</sup> Abū 'Urwah is the pseudonym used by the author Saari Sungip, currently a state assemblyman for the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party). He penned the book while belonging to and leading a section of the Islamic student movement called 'Islamic Representative Council' (IRC), which was established in the UK by Malaysian Muslim students during the 1970s. He wrote several books as manuals for the group's inner circles (*usrah*) and named them *Risālatu l-Usrah (Usrah Manuals)*. The books were then printed by Pustaka Salam in Kuala Lumpur and were used by many revivalists as discussion material (interview with Alias Othman, 26 December 2012). In the first series entitled *Konsep-Konsep Umum Dalam Islam (General Principles of Islam)*, the author commenced his book with a discussion on '*Aqīdatu t-Tauḥīd*' (Tauḥīd Belief) where he asserted the importance of *tauḥīd* in Muslims' life through the *Salafīyyah* method involving the three tenets of *tauḥīd* (Abu Urwah, *Konsep-Konsep Umum Islam (General Principles of Islam)*, Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Salam 1989, pp. 9-32).

ist movement of this time, proudly declared their method of change as being ‘*dakwah Salafiyyah*’<sup>22</sup> in accordance with the model preached by the *Iḥwānī* movement.<sup>23</sup>

In the three major books used by the revivalists for indoctrination purposes, the doctrine contained in the three tenets of *tauḥīd* has been the major pillar of all *dakwah* and propagation movements which have taken root in the country. In the revivalists view, the manifestation of the *tauḥīd ulūhiyyah* demands that each Muslim accept the concept of *ḥākimiyyatu l-lāh* (that Allah is sovereign on earth), and thus that this ideal can only be truly reflected through the establishment of an Islamic state (*daulah islāmiyyah*). Despite their adherence to the three tenets of *tauḥīd*, the revivalists have still been able to accommodate their views to the traditional ‘*Ṣifāt 20*’ as part of their beliefs. In spite of methodological differences in defining the ‘unity’ or ‘oneness’ of Allah in His essence and His attributes, all concur with one common conclusion: that *tauḥīd* entails transcendence (*tanzīh*) which is the act of denying or rejecting anything that will lead to immanence *taṣbīh* between Allah and His creation. Any such act will be regarded as being blasphemous, as it associates (*ṣirk*) Allah with Creation. In such a case, the harmonization of the two approaches – that of the revivalists on the one hand and the ‘traditional’ Malaysian approach on the other – epitomized the non-confrontational nature of the revivalists as regarding theological issues. This was only consequent given that their main objective is not to bring about a change in a theological, but instead in a political sense.

The Islamic education syllabus of the schools began to integrate the Salafi approach based on the three tenets of *tauḥīd* into the ‘*aqīdah* (creed) subjects first during the period in which Anwar Ibrahim, the former ABIM leader, was education minister in the Malaysian government. Since this period, school children have been taught not just the traditional approach involving the *Ṣifāt 20*, but also the three tenets of *tauḥīd* when being taught about the Muslim faith.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the *Salafiyyah* creed has managed to move from the periphery into the centre of Malaysian public life. However, it should be noted that only this section of *Salafiyyah* ‘*aqīdah* was widely accepted, and not the whole package of *Salafiyyah* credo.

This harmonization continued without any problems until recently. However, in the last few years ultra-traditionalists, mainly those influenced by the radical ideas of the *Aḥbāš* sect from Lebanon,<sup>25</sup> managed to stir a storm in a teacup with their attack on the three tenets of *tauḥīd* in the mainstream media.<sup>26</sup> The theological debate that is normally confined to the closed circles of the *pondok* and classical traditional classes became public through the internet. In the meantime, the emergence of the ultra-conservative Salafi<sup>27</sup> preaching a radical idea emanating from the deviant views of the Aṣ‘arī school of thinking

<sup>22</sup> However, this brand of ‘Salafi’ must not be confused with the current understanding of Salafism. The *Salafiyyah* of ABIM refers to the purified version of *tauḥīd* in their worldview, something that is akin to the *Salafiyyah* version of al-Afḡānī and ‘Abdū, or the *Iḥwānī-Ġamā‘ati’s* (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) (2010), “Profil ABIM”, URL: <http://www.abim.org.my/> (last retrieval: 10 September 2011).

<sup>23</sup> M. Mokhtar Shafii, “*Hassan al-Banna – Sumbangannya Terhadap Pendidikan dan Kebangkitan Islam*”, in: *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam ABIM*, jilid 10, bil. 1, Ogos 2002, pp. 9-17.

<sup>24</sup> Othman / Rahmat, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Majalah al-Islam, “*Gerakan Ahabash Sesat di Lubnan*”, in: Majalah al-Islam, November 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Utusan Malaysia, “*Tauhid tiga serangkai disyariatkan di dalam Islam?*”, in: *Utusan Malaysia*, 30 November 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Utusan Malaysia, “*Bahaya pemikiran kelompok Ahabash*”, in: *Utusan Malaysia*, 22 November 2009.

has also turned the theological debates into a ferocious zero-sum game in the public sphere. This situation was also enabled by the ‘internet revolution.’

### **Shiism: The Minor Periphery**

Amid the aforementioned clash between the two Sunni theologies struggling to become the principle Islamic theology in Malaysia, the Iranian revolution from 1979 resulted in a minor peripheral trend of theology developing in the country.<sup>28</sup> Shia Islam, as the core-underlying principal of the Iranian revolution, has been exported to Malaysia and has had an impact – albeit limited in nature – on the diversity of different theologies existing in Malaysia. The revolution did not only influence what were known as the ‘Islamic revivalists’, especially the Islamic party of Malaysia (PAS) – who were boosted and ‘rejuvenated’ by the revolution and were also inspired to embark upon a new struggle aimed at the establishment of an Islamic state akin to the Iranian model – but also resulted in Sunni Malaysians starting to engage with Iran and with Shiite Iranians.<sup>29</sup> It can be clearly seen that against the background of this new discourse, a new movement was established within the PAS which became known as the ‘Scholars Leadership’ (*Kepimpinan Ulama*). The movement is similar to the *Wilāyatu l-Faqīh* of Khomeini.<sup>30</sup> The Scholars Leadership insists that the religious scholars should lead Muslim countries, and especially Malaysia.<sup>31</sup> In the view of its adherents, PAS, as an Islamic party which is chiefly interested in upholding the Islamic faith, should fill its leadership positions with religious scholars.<sup>32</sup>

However, the Shiite doctrine, which has as previously mentioned been disseminated by the ‘Religious Scholars Leadership’, has not as yet had any great impact on Malaysian society. Its – still limited – influence on Malaysian society started when the PAS began to engage in extensive relations with Iran. In this context, many PAS leaders started visiting this country on a frequent basis, and many Iranian Ayatollahs were invited as guests to a considerable number of the party’s big events.<sup>33</sup> As a result, a considerable number of PAS activists started sending their children to seminaries (*hauzah*) in Iran in order to further

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<sup>28</sup> Tuan Che Mat Che Min, “*Gerakan Syiah Dan Pengaruhnya Di Malaysia*”, dalam koleksi Kertas Kerja Seminar Akidah MABIMS Tahun 1413h/1993m, Kementerian Hal Ehwal Ugama Negeri Brunei Darussalam, *Ajaran Sesat: Kemunculan, Bahayanya, Pemulihannya*, Brunei: Kementerian Hal Ehwal Ugama Negeri Brunei Darussalam, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Chandra Muzaffar maintains that the Iranian revolution has significantly influenced Malaysian Islamists, and most specifically the PAS. The revolution inspired these Islamists to believe that “Islam could establish a state in modern times” (Chandra Muzaffar, “*Islamic Resurgence: A Global View*”, in: Taufik Abdullah / Sharon Siddique (eds.), *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies 1986, p. 36.)

<sup>30</sup> Farish Nor maintains that many PAS leaders have greatly admired the way in which the revolutionary government of Iran has strived to reinvent Iranian society following the Iranian revolution. In Nor’s view, the PAS leaders have admired how the Iranian government has dictated new norms and standards for everything from popular political discourse to standards of dress and behaviour (Farish A. Nor, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 335).

<sup>31</sup> Mujahid Yusof, *Menuju PAS Baru, Krisis, Peluang dan Dinamisme*, Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Insider 2010, pp. 75-79.

<sup>32</sup> Farish Nor, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 335.

<sup>33</sup> JAIS (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor), *Himpunan Ajaran, Amalan, Dan Fahaman Yang Telah Diwartakan Menyeleweng Dan Sesat Dalam Negeri Selangor Sepanjang Abad Dua Puluh*, Selangor: Bahagian Penyelidikan Dan Pembangunan, JAIS, 1994, p. 132.

their tertiary studies.<sup>34</sup> In the following period an increasing number of these PAS activists began to pay more attention to the Shiite doctrine, and rather less to the revolution itself. These students were later to return to Malaysia and to spread their beliefs of the Shiite doctrine.<sup>35</sup>

Although these facts are well known, no literature or official records are currently available which reveal the exact number of Malaysian graduates from Iran who have become propagandists (*du'āt*) of Shiism in Malaysia. This is because of the Shiite practice of *taqiyyah* (i.e. acting innocently) which involves Shiite followers concealing their true identity when dealing with other people. Similarly, it was also reported that Shiism had also spread throughout university campuses during the 1990s by a number of university lecturers and other academics. These pro-Shiite academics have reportedly extensively organized events, debates and other discussions aimed at subtly propagating the Shiite doctrine on university campuses.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike Salafis, Shiites have been treated as *ajaran sesat* (deviant teaching) by the federal religious authority (JAKIM) and by most of the state religious authorities (*Jabatan Agama*).<sup>37</sup> Hence, the treatment received by Shiites was and is enormously distressful in nature. Essentially, Shia theology has been banned, and some Shiite activists have been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA)<sup>38</sup>. In some cases, the state religious authorities raided Shiites' *Husainiyyahs* (worshipping places)<sup>39</sup>, and its followers are viewed with suspicion. Shiism at large is still subject to discrimination and followers suffer ill treatment

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<sup>34</sup> According to some reports, a number of Malaysian students have studied at a Shia seminary in Qom / Iran, since the early 1980s. These students have chiefly come from families supporting the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). The children have here been trained to become preachers and scholars of Shiite traditions and theologies. In 1984, for example, six students from *Madrasah al-Falah* in Malacca were sent to Qom to further their studies. In the same way, some other students from *Madrasah Darul Atiq* in Johore Baharu and *Madrasah Gunung Semanggol* from Perak were sent to Qom for the same purpose. According to internal reports, these students later graduated and returned to Malaysia as Shiite preachers (*du'āt*), and were active all over the country (Che Min, op. cit., p. 98.)

<sup>35</sup> JAIS, op. cit., pp. 99-101.

<sup>36</sup> Che Min, op. cit., pp. 98-102.

<sup>37</sup> See for example: JAIS (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor), *Khutbah Jumaat: Penyewengan Syiah Di Malaysia*, 6 April, Selangor: Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor 2012.

<sup>38</sup> The Malaysian government has attempted to locate Shiites and to prevent them from spreading the teaching of Shia Islam, as they fear that such teachings will create disputes amongst Muslims in the country (M. Z. Ashari, "Penetapan Mazhab Ahli Sunnah Wa al-Jamaah Sebagai Definisi Islam di Malaysia: Hak Penyebaran Agama bagi Kumpulan Agama Minoriti", in: *Jurnal Undang-undang & Masyarakat*, 15 (2011), pp. 31-42). The Internal Security Act has essentially been used to detain Shiite activists without granting them a fair trial. The Federal Religious Authority (JAKIM) justified the detention under this act as a pre-emptive measure and as allowing those whom they believed have been misguided by the teachings to become rehabilitated. According to Abdul Hamid Othman, a minister in Malaysian Prime Minister's Office in charge of Islamic Affairs in JAKIM, a group of 300 Shiite activists were detained between October and November 1997 (Berita Harian, "300 Pengikut Syiah Jalani Pemulihan", 13 November 1997). In addition, Suhakam, a former Shiite detainee, reported that he had been detained with his other Shiite comrades between 2 October 1997 and 31 December 1999. It was not the only incident that involved the mass-detention of Shiite activists. Another series of detentions took place between 20 October 2000 and 5 January 2001 (Leong Kar Yen, "Use Of ISA Against Shia Followers Unislamic and Unconstitutional", 2001, *Malaysiakini*, URL: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/3500.2001> (last retrieval: 17 December 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Gaddafi Musli / Shahrul Redzuan Zulkifli / Muhaamad Hafis Nawawi, "Markaz syiah diserbu lagi", in: *Harian Metro*, 25 May 2011.

at the hands of the authorities, actions which are perceived as persecution by Shiites.<sup>40</sup> The religious authorities initiated considerable anti-Shiite propaganda in an effort 'to curb' the spread of Shiism, a stream of Islam that they genuinely believe to be 'heretic' and 'deviant'.<sup>41</sup>

Shiites adopted an attitude of quietism for decades due to the pressure which they were placed under. This quietist approach was partly derived from the Shiite '*taqiyyah*' (acting innocently) doctrine that directly gave a kind of overt practice to their beliefs. However, following the raid on their *Husainiyyah* on 15 December 2010, Shiites have begun to resort to litigation in order to be able to make use of their right to practice their belief which they genuinely believe to be guaranteed under the Federal Constitution.<sup>42</sup>

### Battling to Become the Mainstream Form of Islam

Amongst the consequences which the global internet revolution has had for the Malaysian Muslim community has been the spread of religious debates in the public sphere. Religious discourses that were once shaped just in the seminaries, classes or in closed religious circles have migrated to the virtual forums – from the chat rooms, websites, mailing groups, blogs and recently 'Facebook'. This situation has resulted in the dawning of a new era in the discourse of theology in Muslim community in Malaysia. The author has labeled this new era the 'internet theology' period.

The 'internet era' has created a new dimension and has changed the way in which Muslims look at theological issues. The Salafi theology that was once alien to people has now returned and is widely embraced by many younger people, due to the ease with which they can access information on the internet. This situation has led to the emergence of a new trend of Salafism that is fighting its way to the centre of Malaysian Islam. The revivalists' approach towards theology has been viewed as an adulterated and non-authentic approach to the original 'Salafi' doctrine or creed. Through the available sources of Salafi '*aqidah*' material on the internet, some Muslims have begun to emulate what they call the genuine teaching of Salafi theology.<sup>43</sup> The spread of the Salafi '*aqidah*' can be seen as a

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick Lee, "Malaysian Shiites face growing persecution", in: *Free Malaysia Today*, 14 January 2012, URL: <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com> (last retrieval: 17 December 2012).

<sup>41</sup> JAKIM endorsed a *ḥuṭbah* (Friday sermon) script, which was read all over Malaysia on 5 May 1996 explaining the heretic nature of the Shiite sect. The script was read in all parts of the country in order to create a public opinion on the issue. In addition, the state assembly in In Johore endorsed a decree calling for the ban of Shiite doctrine due to its deviant teaching on 27 September 2012 (Faisal Tehrani, "*Does Heiner Biedfielt Know What Happened in Malaysia?*", speech delivered in Facolta di Scienze Umanistiche, Universita Degli Studi in Bergamo, Italy, on 25 October 2012. The speech was held as part of the meeting of the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights and Ethics of International Cooperation, which took place from 25 to 27 October 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> This group mainly follows the Saudi Arabian form of '*aqidah*' teaching, which is predominately based on the *Ḥanābilah* approach. The material used by this group in explaining their creed include literature written by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (*Uṣūl as-Sunnah*), Ibn Taimiyyah (*al-'Aqidah al-Wāsiṭiyyah*) and Muḥammad 'Abdu l-Wahhāb (*Risalatul l-Tauḥīd*, *Ṣarḥ al-Uṣūl at-Talāṭah*, etc.) and other contemporary Salafi scholars such as former Saudi mufti, Abdullah Bin Baz, the most prominent Saudi scholar, 'Abdullāh ibn 'Uṭaimīn, and the modern Jordanian based, Albanian origin scholar, Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī (interview with Datuk Alim Panglima, Prof. Madya Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin), former Mufti of Perlis and Advisor of Institut al-Qayyim, Penang on 26-30 January 2013, Cairo, Egypt).

result of the activities of the revivalist movement, who by turning the mainstream discourse of *'aqīdah* into something that is closer and similar to the Salafi *'aqīdah* helped to create fertile ground for the expansion of such tendencies.

However, those who subscribe to this doctrine vary in their approach. Some take a moderate approach towards dealing with the 'Other',<sup>44</sup> whilst others launch ferocious attacks on 'people holding diverging views', who they label as *Ahlu l-Bida'* (innovators). The embracement of the genuine Salafi teaching implies the rejection of non-Salafi and what they call pseudo-Salafi<sup>45</sup> teachings. Due to their conviction that they hold a monopoly over the truth and their narrow acceptance of others, who they view as *Ahlu l-Bida'* (innovators), Salafi adherents engaging in attacks on people holding differing views have managed to create more enemies inside Malaysian society, and have occasioned an increase in hostility towards the establishment (both towards the traditionalist approach and that espoused by the revivalists).

The radical Salafi approach to these debates have especially focused on the issues of *tauḥīd al-ulūhiyyah*<sup>46</sup>, *širk*<sup>47</sup> and actions that lead to it, and of *tawassul*<sup>48</sup>, *bid'ah*<sup>49</sup>, and the deviant sects other than *Ahlu s-Sunnah*. Together with the aforementioned role played by the internet, Malaysian students who have graduated in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Kingdom have made the greatest contribution to the spread of this form of Islam in Malaysia. These students were / are greatly influenced by the Salafi movements and *dakwah* whilst studying in the above-mentioned countries<sup>50</sup>.

In the meantime, the traditionalists have also gained momentum in retaliating to the rise of Salafism. The traditionalists have been aided in their fight against the rise of Salafism by Sufis and traditionalists from all over the globe, whose acquaintance they have

<sup>44</sup> Some groups that are associated with this moderate Salafism are very cautious in spreading their *da'wah* (propaganda), and are often primarily known for their charity works and religious classes such as *Pertubuhan Kebajikan al-Nidaa (al-Nidaa)*, *al-Khadeem*, *al-Tibyan*, *al-Qayyim*, *al-Islah of Perlis*, etc.

<sup>45</sup> This label refers mostly to people who adhere to the Salafi *'aqīdah*, who at the same time are able to accept the Aš'arī doctrine, the followers of whom are categorized by the radical Salafi as *Ahlu l-Bida'* (innovators) or deviants. This categorization of the Ash'ari as the deviate sect can be seen in numerous writings relating to the radical Salafi. The label 'pseudo-Salafi' has also been used to refer to the revivalists (specifically the *Iḥwān*) (interview with Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, 26 January 2013).

<sup>46</sup> *Tauḥīd al-ulūhiyyah* means to single out Allah (alone) for worship. Salafis believe that Allah alone is to be worshiped, that all prayers should be dedicated to Him and that followers should direct petitions for help to Him. In this context they condemn Sufis and other sects as committing *širk* by making *tawassul* (intercession) through *Šuyūḥ*, saints (*awliyā'*) and shrines (see URL: <http://www.islamic-life.com/tawheed-divine-unity/article-tawheed-uloohiyyah-worshiping-oneness-allah>, last retrieval: 15 March 2012).

<sup>47</sup> *Širk* is the deification or worship of anyone or anything other than Allah or more literally the establishment of partners or associates placed beside God. It is the vice that is opposed to the virtue of *tauḥīd* (see: Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico Religious Concepts in the Quran*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2007, pp. 130-1.)

<sup>48</sup> *Tawassul* is the Islamic understanding of intercession. The method of *tawassul* is a matter of some dispute within the Muslim community. Salafis oppose the practice of intercession except with the name of Allah, his attributes, good deeds of the Muslims and prayer by pious people. According to the Salafis, other means of *tawassul* are to be considered as *širk* (see URL: <http://www.islamtomorrow.com/wasila/1.asp>; <http://www.fatwaislam.com/fis/index.cfm?scn=fd&ID=536>, last retrieval: 15 March 2012).

<sup>49</sup> *Bid'ah* is any type of innovation in Islamic teaching. In Arabic, the word *bid'ah* generally carries a negative connotation. It linguistically means "innovation, novelty, heretical doctrine, heresy" (Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, New York: Spoken Language Services, Inc. 1994, p. 57).

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, 2013.

made through global networking. This ‘reawakening’ of the traditionalists as a response to the perceived threat posed by Salafism is evident from various activities and events organized by traditionalists and by Sufis in the last few years which have been aimed at disseminating Aš‘arī theology and Sufi rituals such as *maulid*, *burdah*, *ṣalawāt*, *ḍikr* etc.<sup>51</sup> This situation has provided both the ultra-traditionalists and the fanatics (or what the author prefers to call the radical traditionalists) with extra momentum and has prompted both groupings to launch their war of hatred against Salafism at large.<sup>52</sup> By working with the established religious authorities in many Malaysian states, these groups were able to convince the officials to ban what they called ‘Wahhabism’. People following the latter form of Islam were thus placed into the same category as people adhering to other ‘deviant’ forms of the religion.

At this stage, the radical traditionalists and the radical Salafi started to attack each other in two ways: they became engaged in both a ‘war of words’, and have also utilized the new media and the mainstream media.<sup>53</sup> As for the establishment, the state authorities have responded in a series of different ways to the purported threat posed by Salafism, with the response depending on the influence which the traditionalists have gained in the various Malaysian states. For its part, the federal religious authority (JAKIM) takes a more neutral approach to the Salafi method of ‘*aqīdah*’ as compared to the states’ religious authorities. The JAKIM has consequently increasingly regarded the Salafi method of Islam as merely another facet of *Ahlu s-Sunnah wa-l-Ġamā‘ah*’s.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Some of the most prestigious and well-known events organized by the *Sufi* groups include: *Seminar Ṣūfī Kebangsaan (National Sufi Conference)* organized by the Religious Authority of Negeri Sembilan (Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri Sembilan) on 17-19 August 2002 and the sequel to the seminar organized by the office of Negeri Sembilan Mufti (Jabatan Mufti Negeri Sembilan) on 12-14 August 2004 – both these seminars were held in Negeri Sembilan; *Ijtimak Pondok se-Nusantara (South East Asian Pondok / Madrasah Assembly)* on 12-15 April 2007; and visits by, among others, Sufi Ṣuyūḥ from the Middle East, such as Ḥabīb ‘Umar from Yemen, ‘Alī Ġum‘ah (the Grand-Mufti of Egypt), ‘Umar Hāšim (the former al-Azhar University rector) and Aḥmad aṭ-Ṭayyib (current al-Azhar University rector) from Egypt.

<sup>52</sup> The *Al-Aḥbāš* movement is regarded as the most ferocious of all groups opposing the Salafis. This group vociferously criticizes Salafism – a movement which they label ‘Wahhabism’ – on a frequent basis. A few other figures have also publically attacked the ‘Salafis’ in the Malaysian mainstream media, such as Zamihan al-Ġārī, a Jordanian graduate, who proudly declared himself to be the disciple of the well-known ‘*ulamā*’ in Jordan, Ṣaiḥ Ḥasan Saqqāf, a person who is deeply disliked by the Salafis. In addition, Dr Uthman el-Muhammady, a senior fellow in ISTAC (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization) in Kuala Lumpur has also criticised the Salafis.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the following websites: URL: <http://abu-syafiq.blogspot.com>; <http://al-ghari.blogspot.com>; <http://bankwahabi.wordpress.com>; <http://sokongsalaf.wordpress.com>, etc. These belong to the radical traditionalists and are full of hate-filled articles and comments on the Wahhabis and Wahhabism. In contrast, the radical Salafis through their prominent preacher, Ustaz Rasul Dahri, and their websites (e.g. URL: <http://an-nawawi.blogspot.com>; <http://aqidah-wa-manhaj.blogspot.com>; <http://fiqh-sunnah.blogspot.com>; <http://rasuldahri.tripod.com>; <http://jihadsalafi.blogspot.com>; etc.) are also relentlessly spraying accusations and attacks on others, including on people who they label ‘pseudo-Salafis’.

<sup>54</sup> JAKIM or *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (the federal religious territory) of the Malaysian government write in the conclusion to their *Panel Kajian Aqidah (Aqidah Research Panel)* that, in their view, Salafism is just another method of *Ahlu s-Sunnah* theology (JAKIM, *Fail Panel Kajian Akidah JAKIM kali ke-14 Tahun 2000*, Putrajaya: JAKIM 2000). This was asserted by the JAKIM research officer, Mohd Aizam Mas’od, in his article in the *JAKIM Journal (Jurnal Penyelidikan Islam)* in 2006, in which the author mentioned that Salafism is not a deviant group, but instead part of the mainstream ‘*aqīdah*’ (Mohd Aizam Mas’od, “*Isu Wahabiyyah: Menanganinya Secara Realiti*”, in: *Jurnal Penyelidikan Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: JAKIM 2006, pp. 101-14).

The worst part of this debacle is that some radical traditionalists are actively infiltrating the security forces with the aim of taking further action against the ‘Wahhabis’, who they regard as being potential terrorists whose actions are capable of bringing chaos to the community.<sup>55</sup> This unfortunate situation deteriorated still further when the security forces used the traditionalists in order to target a number of influential individuals who they associated with Wahhabism / Salafism. They thus included these people in a list of potential terrorists sought by the Malaysian authorities.<sup>56</sup>

In this highly charged atmosphere, the struggle to dominate the centre of Malaysian society is becoming increasingly unhealthy and transforming the competition into a zero-sum game akin to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle between the *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua*. However, despite the clashes which have arisen since the advent of the ‘internet era’, the revivalists’ legacy in harmonizing the two chief theological approaches in the country (i.e. the traditionalist and the *Kaum Muda*) still remains in the public sphere,<sup>57</sup> despite some attempts by radical traditionalists to have it replaced with something different.<sup>58</sup> As for the mainstream Muslims, though many of them are in favor of rejecting the Wahhabi / Salafi approach in *‘ibādāt*, they have nevertheless no problem in accepting that *tauḥīd* indeed consists of three tenets. Furthermore, the mainstream Islamic movements, that is the Islamic party (PAS), ABIM, JIM and PUM remain, with the exception of a small minority within these parties,<sup>59</sup> undisturbed by what is happening and retain their firm belief in a form of theology created by a harmonization of the Salafi and the traditionalist approach.

<sup>55</sup> The media made use of leaked information to report that a well-known traditionalist preacher and officer in the Federal Religious Authority, Zamihan al-Ghari, who is in complete disagreement with Salafi views, had briefed the vice-chancellors of government universities in one of the closed events organized by the security forces discussing the causes of terrorism inherent in Wahhabism / Salafism. He went further and listed a few names, including the ex-chief minister of Perlis, Dato Seri Shahidan Kassim, the Islamic party leader, Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, the ex-mufti of Perlis, Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, and some people working for an Islamic NGO known as *Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM) as potential terrorists (Berita Harian: Malaysia, 28 June 2010, URL: [http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/IsuJitiadakaitanfahamanWahabi\\_JamilKhir/Article/](http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/IsuJitiadakaitanfahamanWahabi_JamilKhir/Article/), last retrieval: 10 February 2012). In addition, the same person sharply criticized the visit of Syeikh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, the grand imam of the *Masḡid al-Harām* (Mecca holy mosque). He expressed the view that the imam was preaching a deviant teaching of Wahhabi (*Malaysian insider*, Malaysia, 27 April 2011, URL: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/isu-wahabi-zamihan-terus-kritik-dakwa-imam-besar-masjidil-haram-bukan-kebal/>, last retrieval: 12 March 2012).

<sup>56</sup> In the period following the leaking of the aforementioned report, the media reported that another conference on the same topic had been organized by *Majlis Keselamatan Negara* (MKN) (the State Security Council). The speaker, a prominent adherent of the radical traditionalist theologian, Dr Uthman Muhammady, was reported as having named the ex-mufti of Perlis, Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, the current mufti of Perlis, Dr Juanda Jaya, and 40 young scholars of the ruling party (UMNO) as potential terrorists due to their alleged Wahhabi / Salafi views (*Malaysian insider*, Malaysia, 29 July 2011, URL: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/wahabi-aktiviti-pengganas-macam-langit-dan-bumi-kata-persatuan-ulama/>, last retrieval: 12 March 2012).

<sup>57</sup> For example, as part of the high school syllabus of Islamic education, the issue of the three branches of *tauḥīd* and *Ṣifāt 20* remains the core subject taught in *‘aqīdah*.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, the article *“Tauḥīd Tiga Serangkai Disyariat Dalam Islam”* written by Panel Penyelidik Yayasan Sofa, Negeri Sembilan for the news portal Utusan Malaysia, on 30 November 2009, in which the author deliberately associates the three tenets approach of *tauḥīd* with the trinity in Christianity.

<sup>59</sup> This minority exists inside the ABIM, which during the leadership of Dr Yusri Muhammad was reported to be slowly leaning towards the Sufi and traditionalist doctrines (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *“Islamist*

## Conclusion

It is important to understand that the development of theologies in the Muslim society of Malaysia was more due to external than internal factors. The global changes started with the expansion of Muslim traders, a process that went hand in hand with the expansion of Islam into the eastern part of the world. This expansion, which was brought about by Muslims emanating from the Southern Arabia peninsular and from South Asia, was primarily responsible for the emergence of the early theological discourse. The discourse remained the mainstream until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of Pan-Islamism and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The rise of the reformists represented by *Kaum Muda* brought a new challenge to the establishment. This challenge to the official 'state theology' was to remain unresolved until the emergence of the revivalist movement. The emergence of the revivalists supposed a degree of harmonization between the two major theologies (the theology disseminated by the traditional Aš'arīs and that of the reformists, which stressed the three tenets of *tauḥīd*). The harmonization of the two Islamic theologies succeeded in creating a new ambiance of theology and in transforming this newly 'harmonized' theology into the country's new 'mainstream' Islamic theology. This harmony was shattered by the arrival of the Shia branch of Islam on the periphery of both Malaysian society and the country's theological discourse in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. The presence of Shia Islam in Malaysia has prompted the country's religious authorities to make extensive efforts to curb the spread of this in a Malaysian sense new theology. Interestingly, both the traditionalists and the reformists were able to come to agreement on the approach to be taken to deal with this newly emerging theological trend.

The convergence of the official religious discourse of the Malaysian state and that promoted by fringe groupings did not last long following the emergence of the global phenomenon of the internet. The IT revolution has brought about a paradigm clash between the two previously united theological approaches, and has engendered a more radical and extreme situation in the country. The emergence of more radical Salafi groups whose roots can be traced back to the reformists has prompted a severe reaction from the traditionalists. In the meantime, the Malaysian authorities have continued to put the Shiites under pressure, and have criticized Shiism as being a teaching which is incompatible with Malaysian Islam. If the Malaysian theological discourse, which has changed considerably in the recent past, once again changes over the next few years, this renewed reshaping of the country's religious discourse will once again be a result not of domestic, but of external factors.