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State-backed discrimination against Shia Muslims in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the origins of legalized discrimination, religious hatred, and systematic marginalization of a community of Malaysian Muslims – the Shias – perpetuated in the name of Islam. It demonstrates how a central government-derived *fatwa* (religious legal opinion) banning Shi'ism and the propagation of Shia teachings in the country since 1996 has been used to justify a range of human rights violations, not limited to the religious freedom of this minority group. Apart from Syariah legislation, the state has utilized this *fatwa* alongside other tools, including the religious bureaucracy and the media, to persecute Shia in Malaysia. Anti-Shia efforts are also supported and propagated by non-state Islamists who often work hand-in-hand with state actors.

KEYWORDS

Shia; human rights; politicized Islam; Malaysian state; freedom of religion

Introduction

At the start of 2017, a short video titled “*Projek Akidah: Syiah Melayu*” (Faith Project: Malay Shias) was uploaded to YouTube to warn Muslims about the dangers Shi'ism posed to Islam in Malaysia. This video condemned the beliefs and practices of this religious minority as deviationist. It also cautioned viewers to especially beware of Malays who had embraced Shi'ism because they were surreptitiously propagating these teachings in the guise of political and student leaders, writers, academics, and businesses. Besides offering tips to identify Shias, the video named individuals who allegedly were key Shia leaders and hence, by implication, dangerous.

Produced by a little-known group called *Pertubuhan Jaringan Ummah Kelantan* (Muslim Community Network Association of Kelantan), the significance of this video was in the volume it added to allegations made by other anti-Shia material already circulating in the country, online and offline. These in turn are part of a broader campaign which has sought to demonize Shi'ism and its adherents by invoking fear, hatred, and hostility. This also has legitimized actions that restrict the religious freedom of Shias as well as their other basic human rights.

For a population that has largely kept to itself and remained out of the public eye, the attention Shias have attracted is curiously disproportionate. Indeed, there is little verified information about the total number of Shias in Malaysia. This is partly because of the large

semi-transient presence of foreign tourists and students who are Shia adherents. As such, while the Home Ministry places this figure at 250,000,¹ others estimate the number to be as low as 2000 or as high as 200,000 persons.² Based on news reports, it appears that besides Malays and Indians, Shias in the country are of Pakistani, Iranian and Myanmar-ese origin. Further, they are believed to reside mostly in the states of Selangor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Johor.³

There is even less consensus about when Shi'ism arrived in Malaysia. Some observers argue that it only spread following the Iranian revolution in 1979, when Shi'ism gained global prominence. Prior to that, what is identified today as expressions belonging to the Shia sect in Southeast Asia were, in fact, only latent tendencies, termed as “*Alid piety*” (love towards the Prophet’s family).⁴ According to Mohd Faizal Musa (2013), Shi'ism has deep cultural roots in the Malay world,⁵ and “*Alid piety*” ignores the important doctrine of *taqiyya*. This requires Shias to take precautions and downplay or deny their religious beliefs in public to avoid exposure to danger. Because of the difficulties in proving that there has been more to Shi'ism in the region than merely a literary or ritualistic past, some detractors have used the concept of “*Alid piety*” to justify labeling this sect as un-Islamic.

Their low-key existence and the lack of information about who they are may have added to the mysteriousness of this community in Malaysia, and indirectly contributed to the process of myth-making around them. However, the severity of the negative views and actions directed at Shias appears to be the result of a deliberate plan, one that involves a concerted effort at portraying them as different, a threat to Sunni Islam, and thus deserving of ill treatment.

This article examines contemporary discrimination against Shias in Malaysia. We go beyond the reasons why this community has been targeted, to answer the question of what factors have made this possible. Drawing from official documents, news reports, and interviews with members of the Shia community, we argue that the hatred and violence directed against Shias has been normalized through various official mechanisms and reinforced by support from anti-Shia civil society groups and actors. We also argue that the state has played a key role in this process, by being complicit in allowing human rights violations against Shias to occur, and actively promoting the scapegoating of this Islamic sect.

Towards this end, we trace the origins of Shia scrutiny in Malaysia and show how this community came to be subjected to the long arm of the state via greater legal regulation. We examine measures that have been adopted to demonize Shi'ism, in particular Friday sermons, censorship controls, and the media, as well as the role of state and private actors in this process.

¹This appears to be based on the number of known Shia centers in the country which the Ministry claims has grown from three to ten in the last ten years. See *FMT*, August 6, 2013.

²Muhammad Haji 2014.

³Personal interviews conducted by co-author, Mohd Faizal Musa, 2010.

⁴Marcinkowski 2006; Feener and Formichi 2015.

⁵For instance, *boria*, a choral street performance, was a cultural expression of Shi'ism brought to Penang Island during British rule by Indian sepoy troops, many of whom were Twelvers and Ismailis, i.e. two of the larger Shia branches. By the nineteenth century the local Sunni Malay population had assimilated *boria* as part of their own cultural heritage. See Marcinkowski 2006.

Why Shias?

The vehemence of state-backed discrimination against Shias in Malaysia today stands in contrast to a time prior to the turn of the century, when members of this religious sect carried on their lives without incident. This begs the question of what has caused this change. A number of writers have offered different explanations which can broadly be grouped as follows: one, the rise of conservatism and extremism linked to the spread of Wahhabism and Salafism;⁶ two, the link between this and Malaysia's foreign policy, specifically, its relationship with Saudi Arabia; three, the politicization of religion in Malaysia and the rise of the Syariah lobby;⁷ and four, the anxieties of Malay Muslims towards those whose Islamic practices do not match up to the state's Sunni version, compounded by intra-Muslim conflict arising out of this.

As noted earlier, the 1979 Iranian Revolution led to a revival of Islam across the globe and shone the spotlight on Shi'ism. Perceiving Iran as a threat to its standing in the Muslim world, Sunni-dominant Saudi Arabia increased its efforts to roll out Wahhabi Islam.⁸ In the 1980s, this reached Malaysia in the form of petrodollar aid that mostly went into Islamic education, either in the form of scholarships to study in the Middle East or funds to boost local religious schools. Many of those exposed to Wahhabi-Salafi ideas during this time, however, adopted a "quietist" position and remained outside the realm of politics.⁹

Under the Mahathir regime (1981–2003), Saudi-backed Islamization programs provided an official platform to promote a narrow understanding of Sunni Islam as orthodox, at the expense of other religious minorities in Malaysia.¹⁰ Initially, these focused on symbolic and ritualistic aspects of Islam. For instance, during this period Sunni educational institutions were established and more mosques built. The government also introduced Islamic banking, increased Islamic radio airtime and television content, and funded Islamic arts.¹¹ By the late 1990s, this phase of Islamization had led to an interpretation of the religion that was distinctly more conservative and rigid.

Unlike before, the new phase, "Syariahtization," was marked by a "politically driven enterprise to promote and reinforce hegemonic Islam"¹² in order to strengthen state power, in particular, that of the center. It was backed by the "Syariah lobby," comprising state and non-state actors, whose primary goal has been to turn Islam into the reference point for all matters – public and private – in the nation.¹³ By politicizing religion, they

⁶Wahhabism and Salafism originated in Saudi Arabia. The founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn 'Abdal-Wahhab, enjoyed the patronage of the Saud family that came to power with his support, and with this, the movement grew in strength and influence. Wahhabis subscribe to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence which uses a literal and puritanical reading of the Quran, resulting in a rigid and ahistorical understanding of the Holy Book. The term "Salafi" was coined by a Wahhabi scholar, Muhammad Nashiruddin al-Albani. There are at least three known variants of Salafism, one of which endorses the use of violence to attain political power. It also demands the strict application of Islamic laws. Such Wahhabis and Salafis believe that like Sufism, Shi'ism contravenes the teachings of Islam and so must be harshly dealt with (As Segaf 1992; Blanchard 2006).

⁷tan 2012.

⁸Norshahril Saat 2014.

⁹Ibrahim Abu Bakar 2007.

¹⁰Besides Shi'ism, Sufism – which was "the most widespread form of Islam in Southeast Asia, and active in the Malay [S]tates until the Pacific War" – has also been declared heretical by the Malaysian Government (Nagata 2011, 25). See also Muhammad Haji 2014.

¹¹Barraclough 1983; Means 2009.

¹²tan 2012, vii.

¹³tan 2012.

have also demanded that Islam be recognized as the state religion and ultimately, all other religions made subservient to it, Syariah made the supreme law of the land; and Islamic values inform standards of sexual morality. To succeed in this, the Syariah lobby has relied on ostracizing and penalizing Muslims who do not conform to the official version of Islam vetted by the Federal Government and other religious functionaries. Besides Shias, those targeted have included liberal Muslims, LGBTs, human rights proponents, and other Muslim minorities.

This change coincided with the greater influence of Wahhabi-Salafi elements within UMNO (United Malays National Organization) (A glossary of abbreviations and Arabic terms and their respective meanings is listed in the [appendix](#)), the dominant party of the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, especially after they were invited to form its young *ulama* (religious scholars) wing in 2010. These members were drawn from a group (*Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia*, ILMU, Association of Malaysian Scholars) that believes in upholding the ascendancy of Islam by controlling political power; eschews democracy as un-Islamic but strategically allows members to partake in the electoral process so that UMNO continues to rule; and opposes deviant Islamic teachings including Shi'ism.¹⁴ Their entry into UMNO added greater religious legitimacy to state actions against Muslims who contradict official Islam, at the same time fostering an Islam that is intolerant of difference.

Speaking at a roundtable discussion on the threat of religious fundamentalism, Syed Farid Alatas, a renowned sociologist, argued that the “Salafization of Sunni Islam” was one of the reasons why the national government launched a campaign in 2013 to vilify and demonize Shia followers.¹⁵ It also explains how in 2014, the Malaysian Government could allow Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani, a leading Saudi cleric and former imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, into the country to freely share his views, despite the notoriety of his position on Shias, and the fact that he is banned from entering the United Kingdom for issuing an extremist edict in 2013.

A former Malaysian diplomat concurred with Syed Farid, claiming that Malaysia's obsession with Islam and Syariah has helped Wahhabism gain a huge influence, thus putting the whole region at risk.¹⁶ Others like Mohd Kamilzuhairi Abdul Aziz, a local Shia community leader, have directly connected the negative spotlight on Shias to the Wahhabi influence:

The problem here is not the Sunnis, but the Wahhabis ... JAIS [Selangor State Religious Department] and JAKIM [Department of Islamic Development Malaysia] are not Wahhabi, but there are elements that are trying to penetrate it. [...] Before the (Iranian) Revolution, Shiites could mix with other people. Every year we call about 2,000 people (from all communities to join in our festivities). Nobody here believes that we go out to

¹⁴Mohamed Nawab 2014; Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2015. Despite the growing prominence of some Salafi *ulama* (e.g. Fathul Bari Mat Jahya who is also on the UMNO Youth Executive Committee), it is important to note that they do not wield unbridled influence within the government. Traditionalist Islamic views, which continue to hold strong among some in the religious bureaucracy, have helped to reign in the Salafist advance. For instance, the Johor state government banned sixteen religious speakers from preaching, including Fathul Bari (*The Star Online*, February 3, 2016).

¹⁵*TMI*, October 18, 2014.

¹⁶*TMI*, March 30, 2015. More than a decade ago, Singapore-based scholar Syed Alwi Ahmad sounded the same warning bells. He argued that by sending students to Middle East universities and colleges, Malaysia was exposing them to Wahhabism that could potentially result in an “Islamic insurgency” in the region (*Malaysiakini*, August 16, 2004). This is visible today in the form of the militant movement, the Islamic State.

slaughter people ... The bad reputation comes from those who attack us ... not even the police (in Malaysia) disturb us ... before 1997, we weren't that significant.¹⁷

To be sure, the rise in anti-Shia sentiments in recent times has gone hand-in-hand with Malaysia's closer relationship with Saudi Arabia, a country known for repressing its own Shia community.¹⁸ Particularly since Mohd Najib Abdul Razak became Prime Minister in April 2009, Malaysia has further privileged Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy. This comes after years of a "diplomatically stable" relationship with Iran, where despite the latter's Shia-majority standing, the countries enjoyed healthy bilateral trade ties.¹⁹ Under the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009), these ties were especially good.²⁰ For instance, Malaysia participated in two global initiatives,²¹ one of which reaffirmed the Muslim world's acknowledgment of Islam's diverse branches, including the two Shia sects which the National Fatwa Committee (NFC) had ceased to recognize in 1984;²² and the other which produced the Islamabad Declaration that proclaimed no Sunni nor Shia would be subjected to "murder or any harm" and urged Muslims to "refrain seriously" from "name-calling, abuse, prejudice, or vilification and invectives" along sectarian or ethnic lines.²³

The Saudi Government has financially assisted Malaysia in return for the latter's endorsement of its actions in Muslim societies, including measures against Shias. For example, in 2011, the Saudi monarchy pumped USD\$8.15 million into Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).²⁴ Prime Minister Najib reciprocated by supporting the Gulf Cooperation Council's actions against the people's uprising in Bahrain. He also labeled protestors in Bahrain "terrorists" and accused them of undermining "the stability and security of the country."²⁵ In early 2017, two influential Saudi clerics praised Malaysia for banning Shi'ism and called on authorities to continue efforts to curb its teachings because the sect was a threat to the country.²⁶ The recent state visit by Saudi King Salman in February 2017 is cause for further worry for this religious minority, especially as the two countries announced intensifying joint efforts to deal with "the many threats relating to the misuse of Islam, such as IS and deviant teachings."²⁷

Exactly how closer Saudi-Malaysia relations will impact the local Iranian Shia community in Malaysia remains to be seen. In the past, unwilling to lose an important trading partner, the Malaysian Government rejected calls to cut ties with Tehran for its supposed role in propagating deviant Shia teachings. The fact that there have been many Shias from Iran and Iraq who have been crowned champions in the fifty year-old International Qur'an Recital Competition hosted by Malaysia also suggests that officially sanctioned

¹⁷FMT, January 16, 2012.

¹⁸For details of Shia persecution in Saudi Arabia, see Constantin 2016.

¹⁹Asmady and Remali 2015.

²⁰Bernama, March 1, 2006.

²¹The first, in 2005, involved the signing of the Amman Message by members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Abdullah attended this meeting, together with Abdul Hamid Othman, then *de facto* Minister of Islamic Affairs (TMI, November 29, 2013). The second was the 34th Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in May 2007, where Malaysia's representative was its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Syed Hamid Albar.

²²More will be said on this decree below.

²³United Nations Security Council 2007, 91–93.

²⁴WSJ, January 26, 2016.

²⁵Bernama, March 22, 2011.

²⁶Berita Harian, January 14, 2017.

²⁷MMOL, February 28, 2017.

aggression and discrimination is selective.²⁸ To be sure, despite the harshness of official actions against Shias, Malaysia has continued to keep its doors open to Iranian businesses and students.²⁹

In his 2014 Annual Report, Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, argued that collective religious hatred was not something naturally occurring but was a result of political maneuverings. Corruption, an authoritarian climate, and a narrow understanding of political identity all contributed to this situation. When corruption is rife, public institutions are unable to fulfill their roles, and eventually, people lose faith in them and retreat to their own religious communities to address their grievances. This results in a breakdown in communication between different social groups. With authoritarianism and the closure of spaces for dialogue and exchange, it is easier for religious minorities to be blamed for failures of the state or those in power because there is no room to present counter-evidence to challenge these false accusations. This raises the likelihood of becoming victims of collective religious hatred. It is also a problem when states use religion to establish or assert a form of national identity which excludes religious minorities, labels them a danger to national unity, and allows discrimination against them.

Policing beliefs: legal curbs

The Internal Security Act

In October 1997, ten people were imprisoned under the Internal Security Act (ISA) – a law providing for detention without trial – for allegedly being adherents of Shi'ism and disseminating teachings that were in conflict with Sunni Islam. The ten were portrayed as militants, opposed to the monarchy, and “dangerous revolutionaries who could undermine national security.”³⁰ More had been arrested at the time but were released on the condition that they renounced their faith and reverted to Sunni Islam.³¹ This marked one of the first times that state action against Shia “transgressions” came to public attention.

The next known incident involving the ISA and Shias occurred three years later when six men were arrested and held from October 20, 2000 to January 5, 2001. This victimization of Shias under the ISA was not well understood until 2001 when Abdullah Hassan, one of those arrested in 1997, filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) about his detention conditions.³²

While the ISA was used in these two instances, the Malaysian Government made it clear that it also had at its disposal other repressive laws like the Sedition Act 1948, Public Order (Preservation) Act 1958 and the Emergency (Public Order and Crime Prevention) Ordinance 1969 to deal with those accused of spreading deviationist teachings.³³ Importantly, up to that point, few spoke about using the country's Islamic (Syariah) laws to deal with

²⁸Kosmo, June 14, 2015.

²⁹Asmadi and Remalli 2015.

³⁰Netto 1997.

³¹Personal communication with Lutpi Ibrahim, a former professor at the Academy for Islamic Studies, University of Malaysia, June 13, 2015.

³²Abdullah had been accused of “receiving secret funds, distributing pamphlets, and sponsoring secret meetings ... and certain activities on teachings deviating from the teachings of Islam that may cause confusion and disunity among the Muslims in Malaysia.” See *Malaysiakini*, June 18, 2001.

³³Suaram 2002.

such alleged transgressions. Instead, secular legislation like the ISA, which had also been used to incarcerate political detainees for indefinite periods, was the government's instrument of choice. In stark contrast to contemporary times, the absence of Syariah as a tool to regulate Shias during this earlier period, and the basis of their persecution – which centered on the preservation of public order and stability as opposed to protecting the sanctity of Islam – is noteworthy.³⁴

The 1996 fatwa

This changed when the NFC issued a *fatwa*, “*Shia di Malaysia*” (Shias in Malaysia), in 1996. At a special *muzakarah* (conference) it organized to discuss this problem, the NFC passed several resolutions which were reflected in the *fatwa* it subsequently issued.

The first was to reaffirm an earlier decision of another NFC *muzakarah* in 1984, that two Shia sects the government had recognized up to then – the *Zaidiyyahs* and *Jaafariyyahs* – were no longer acceptable. Second, where matters of creed, religious laws, and ethics were concerned, Muslims in the country could only abide by “the teachings of Islam based on the doctrine of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah*.”³⁵ This definition of official Islam was to be written into the Federal and State Constitutions, and all religious laws amended to reflect this decision. Third, “the propagation of any teachings other than that of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah* [would be] prohibited.” Accordingly, the “publication, broadcasting, and distribution of any books, leaflets, films, videos, or other material relating to the teachings of Islam that contradicted with the doctrine of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah* [was also] prohibited and unlawful (*haram*).”³⁶

Anti-Shia expressions in the form of several publications and articles in the Malay press first appeared as early as 1990.³⁷ Notable was a piece by Mohd Asri Yusof from the International Islamic University. This was presented at a seminar at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) organized in late 1992, and later appeared in a volume titled *Syiah Imamiyah, mazhab ke-5? [Twelvers Shia, Fifth Sect?]*.³⁸

The Federal-inspired *fatwa* in 1996 was a pivotal turning point, paving the way for subsequent efforts at ostracizing the Shia minority. That the *fatwa* was a federal initiative ought to have raised warning bells about the central government overstepping its boundaries to encroach into the jurisdiction that state governments had over Islam. Instead, most states – Sabah and Sarawak are the exceptions – took their cue from the center and eventually passed variations of this *fatwa*. Unlike elsewhere in the Muslim world where *fatwa* are considered as mere legal opinions, in Malaysia these have been given the force of law. Contravening them incurs a maximum penalty of RM 5000 and/or

³⁴This distinction between secular and Islamic laws has been accentuated since the turn of the century as the Syariah lobby asserts its demand for Syariah to be upheld as the law of the land.

³⁵This refers to the teachings of the Shafie school of Sunni Islam.

³⁶JAKIM 2015, 8–9.

³⁷One of the earliest to censure the Shias in his piece “Bahaya Syiah” [Shia danger] was Ashaari Muhammad. Ironically, he was later detained and accused of running a deviationist sect, the Al-Arqam. The group was banned in 1994, but continued to successfully exist as different business enterprises for many years, first as the Rufaqa Corporation and later as Global Ikhwan.

³⁸Marcinkowski 2006.

three years jail time, sufficient to compel many Muslims to conform to or at least not question the state-endorsed version of Islam.³⁹

The 1996 fatwa in Selangor

Among the first states to adopt this legally binding *fatwa* was Selangor. In February 1998, following discussions with the Majlis Agama Islam Selangor (MAIS, Selangor Islamic Religious Council), the State Mufti⁴⁰ banned Shi'ism using the powers provided under subsections 31(1) and 32 of the 1989 Administration of Islamic Law Enactment. With this, any Muslim who defied this “*Fatwa tentang fahaman Syiah*” [Fatwa about the Shia creed]⁴¹ by “following, embracing, propagating, teaching, learning, writing, translating, and printing or possessing any materials regarding [the] Shia faith” could be charged under the Syariah Criminal Offences (Selangor) Enactment 1995. Also noteworthy are Sections 12 and 13 of the law which punish those who challenge or act in contempt of the religious authorities (including the Sultan), or hold or share any views about Islam contrary to a *fatwa*.

In December 2010, JAIS invoked this law to conduct one of the largest anti-Shia raids in the country. Over 200 Shia adherents including citizens of Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Myanmar were arrested at a Shia community center in the Gombak district of Selangor. Of those detained, only two, a local Shia leader and an Iranian cleric, were put on trial. While they were eventually acquitted on technical grounds,⁴² the raid heralded a new practice of persecuting Shia followers using Syariah criminal offences legislation.

Hardly six months later, in May 2011, around forty JAIS officials tasked with enforcing Syariah laws in the state, local municipal council members, and police broke up another Shia gathering, a lunch celebrating the birthday of Fatimah Zahra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴³ Four people were arrested for allegedly proselytizing. They were later released on bail. In September 2013, the authorities again raided the center in Gombak, seizing property, money, and numerous valuable items. They also caused severe damage to the premises.⁴⁴ In April the following year, there was another raid at the same center. JAIS, together with police and officials from the Registrar of Societies, arrested a local Shia leader who was giving the opening speech at a luncheon. In this instance, though targeted by JAIS, the victim was charged with running an unlawful society under the Societies Act 1966.⁴⁵ The case was subsequently dropped.

In recent years, state action against Shias has focused on those who attend events to mark Ashura, a day Shias observe to commemorate the death of Hussain, a grandson of the Prophet. In October 2015, for instance, sixteen Shia followers suspected of attending

³⁹This may soon change if Parliament approves proposed amendments to the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355) and raises maximum penalties under this law to thirty years imprisonment, a RM100,000 fine, 100 strokes of the cane, or any combination of these.

⁴⁰In Malaysia, a *mufti* is a Muslim legal expert who is empowered by the Sultan and State Religious Council to issue rulings relating to Islam.

⁴¹This *fatwa* was replaced with an upgraded *Fatwa Sighah Berkaitan Ajaran Syiah di Negeri Selangor* (Sel. P.U. 146/2013) in October 2013. See <http://www.muftiselangor.gov.my/2016-06-27-08-57-00/fatwa/fatwa-terkini/315-fatwa-sighah-berkaitan-ajaran-syiah-di-negeri-selangor>, accessed February 5, 2016.

⁴²*Utusan Malaysia*, December 17, 2010; Kamarulzaman Ali 2013.

⁴³ABNA, May 26, 2011.

⁴⁴NST, September 27, 2013.

⁴⁵OHCHR 2014.

an Ashura ceremony in the Gombak community center were arrested. They were released on bail two days later but only after JAIS had interrogated them.⁴⁶ A year later, thirty Pakistani nationals, including fifteen women and children, were detained for allegedly participating in an Ashura event in a rented space at a factory building in Selayang. Twenty-two were told that they would be charged at a Syariah Court at a later date but under what offense was unclear since JAIS had previously issued a statement exempting foreigners from this *fatwa*.⁴⁷

Since the state's actions against Shias are part of a larger project to determine what is understood as Islam in Malaysia, from time to time, they are also targeted together with other groups viewed as threats to Sunni Islam. For example, in April 2016, JAIS announced that it was actively monitoring four additional "deviationist groups," those who adhered to the teachings of Millah Abraham, Qadiani, Hizbut Tahrir, as well as liberalism.⁴⁸

The 1996 fatwa in other states

Unlike Selangor which gazetted the Federal *fatwa* fairly quickly after the NFC introduced it, Perak, Pahang, Johor, and Perlis did not do so for more than a decade. When these state governments did so, the relevant provisions in their Syariah legislation were almost identical to what was outlawed in Selangor. For instance, in Perak, disobeying the *fatwa* was equated to challenging the authority of the Sultan, the head of Islamic affairs in the state.

Despite only endorsing the NFC's decision in March 2012, Perak showed itself to be more zealous in enforcing this centrally derived *fatwa* to harass and persecute its Shia community. In August 2013, for example, the chief of the enforcement division of JAIP (*Jabatan Agama Islam Perak*, the state's Religious Department) led a team that arrested two Muslims. One was a female homeopathic practitioner whose clinic in the town of Taiping was stormed by eight officers. They seized her books and jailed her for a night because she was deemed to have contravened the *fatwa*.⁴⁹

The following month, JAIP arrested another three Shia followers. These men were charged with disobeying the State Mufti under section 16 of the Perak Syariah Criminal Enactment of 1992. They were charged with possession of Shia-related materials – a banner, multiple copies of a book titled *Sunni-Shia Dialogue*, and a *turbah* (praying tablet). They were jailed overnight and only released after they each paid RM 3000 (USD 697.00) bail. They were later released on technical grounds in February 2014.⁵⁰

These arrests were a precursor to a much larger operation in the town of Selama in March 2014. In that incident, 28 JAIP officers together with 100 policemen descended on a Shia family day outing in Ijok to celebrate the birth anniversary of Zaynab al Kubra (a granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad). One hundred and fourteen people were jailed for the night. No charges were pressed and they were released the next day.⁵¹

⁴⁶ABNA, October 24, 2015.

⁴⁷FMT, October 12, 2016.

⁴⁸Utusan Online, April 22, 2016.

⁴⁹NST, August 7, 2013.

⁵⁰WSJ, February 15, 2014.

⁵¹TMI, March 9, 2014.

State religious officials in Pahang copied the Selangor and Perak examples by detaining an *imam* of a local mosque in October 2013 on suspicion that he was practicing Shi'ism. He was eventually charged with possession of Shia material. After his trial was repeatedly postponed, he received a letter saying that the court would not pursue his case “at the moment” leaving him in a vulnerable state of uncertainty over his future.⁵²

In January 2013, thirteen men who belonged to the Hussainiah Darul Mustafa community center in Johor Bahru made a Statutory Declaration professing to be Shia adherents. At the same time, they denounced violence and stated that they were not terrorists but loyal citizens. A few months after submitting their declarations to the Prime Minister's office, they were summoned to the *Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri Johor* (JAINJ, the Johor State Religious Department) and questioned under Sections 9 (contempt or defiance of religious authorities) and 12 (opinion contrary to a *fatwa*) of the Johor Syariah Criminal Offences Act of 1997. Like many other Shias who have previously been detained, they have been made to wait indefinitely for the outcome of this investigation.

In October 2016, JAINJ officials and police raided an alleged *kumayl* event at a shop in the city of Johor Bahru. They detained the thirty-three persons present, including seven children, and confiscated several boxes of reading material. Of the twenty-six adults, five were interrogated under the state's Syariah Criminal Offense legislation and jailed overnight. All were told that they would be charged if found directly involved in the event.⁵³

More disturbing was an incident that happened a few months earlier, in January 2016, when the judge presiding over a case involving four Shia Muslims charged under the Johor Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment 1997 with practising and propagating Shia teachings, ruled that no public or media could be present during the trial.⁵⁴ This not only raises questions about the legal rights of defendants but also about the transparency and accountability of the Syariah legal process.

Before concluding this section on the potency of the law – Syariah in particular – in denouncing Shi'ism as deviant, and banning its practice since the late 1990s, it is worth pointing out that there have been demands to produce another *fatwa*, one that will reinforce the reach of the 1996 ruling against Shias. For example, arguing that Sunni-Shia marriages are another avenue to spread “deviant” Islam, proponents have called on the NFC to issue a *fatwa* that prohibits such unions.⁵⁵ In August 2016, the Sabah *Fatwa* Committee responded by passing a decision at its meeting to render Sunni-Shia marriages unlawful.⁵⁶ This meant that any such marriages had to be revoked.⁵⁷

Extending controls: *Khutbah*, the media and censorship

The preceding account has demonstrated the role of religious authorities in regulating Shia practices in Malaysia. The power of the state to dictate how members of this Muslim

⁵²*Malaysiakini*, January 7, 2014.

⁵³*FMT*, October 23, 2016.

⁵⁴*Shia Rights Watch*, March 15, 2016.

⁵⁵*Utusan Online*, September 9, 2016.

⁵⁶Earlier in August 2013 the then-Mufti of Perlis, Juanda Jaya, cautioned Muslims against marrying Shias. This, however, was officially only declared as *makruh* (discouraged) – i.e. not *haram* (prohibited) – in the State. See *MMOL*, August 17, 2013, *Utusan Online*, September 9, 2016.

⁵⁷Circular from the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Negeri Sabah (JHEAINS), “Keputusan Muzakarah Fatwa Negeri Sabah: Hukum pernikahan dan pendaftaran pasangan Syiah di negeri Sabah” [Decision of the Fatwa Conference of Sabah: Penalties for married and registered Shia couples in the state of Sabah], BPWS100-8/1 KLT.4, January 11, 2017.

community lead their lives, however, extends beyond the law and its enforcement apparatuses as illustrated below.

Friday sermons

One important influence is sermons (*khutbah*) delivered at Friday prayers in mosques and *surau* (prayer rooms). As a state-regulated activity which all Muslim men are obligated by law to attend, Friday prayers have become a nationwide avenue to deliver messages of hatred towards Shias and rejection of Shi'ism. The Malaysian states that have produced sermons for this purpose include Terengganu, Pahang, Selangor, and the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.

In September 2011, Terengganu showed itself to be a frontrunner in using the *khutbah* to invoke fear of Shias when mosques there shared the following message: “[A]void these dangerous Shiite teachings before the misfortunes of fighting, killings, and civil war befall upon us.”⁵⁸ A few years later, the Pahang Mufti’s office released a sermon titled “*Kesesatan ajaran Syiah*” (“Deviancy of Shia Beliefs”). This accused Jews – whom Malaysians are encouraged to hate – of being behind Shi’ism and using it to create chaos among Muslims. This sermon also sowed seeds of further discord by claiming that Shias considered the majority of Sunnis *kafir* (heathens) and *kufur* (infidels).⁵⁹

In Selangor, anti-Shia sermons have been delivered at least twice in the last five years: the first time in April 2012, and the second in October 2016. The former, titled “*Penyelewengan Syiah di Malaysia*” (“Shia Deviationists in Malaysia”), accused Shias of rejecting the Holy Qur’an for an alternative version of the Holy Scriptures.⁶⁰ The latter served to remind Muslims of Shia “transgressions” and the fact that there was a *fatwa* banning their teachings in Selangor. This was deemed necessary after the leader of an influential Islamic political party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS), Hadi Awang, made a plea for Sunnis and Shias to unite.⁶¹

A similar sermon titled “*Virus Syiah*” (“Shia Virus”) was disseminated during Friday prayers in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya at the end of November 2013. Accusing Shi’ism of encouraging sodomy, the sermon claimed that as part of *jihad* (holy war) Sunni Muslims were obligated to stop Shia teachings from being propagated.⁶² The sermon also branded Shia teachings “poisonous” and instructed Muslims to report the presence of Shias to authorities. Its message was ultimately about “eradicating” (*menghapuskan*) this religious minority.

Significantly the “*Virus Syiah*” sermon was prepared by JAKIM’s *Jawatankuasa Penyediaan Teks Khutbah* (Sermon Text Preparation Committee). The actions of state-level religious institutions are expected since under the Malaysian Constitution, religion falls under the jurisdiction of states.⁶³ JAKIM’s issuing of Friday sermons is a clear example of going

⁵⁸JAIT 2011.

⁵⁹Pahang Mufti’s Office 2014.

⁶⁰Mohd Faizal Musa has debunked this, arguing how one of the most famous Iranian editions of the Holy Qur’an is commonly held in parallel regard to the Holy Quran of the Sunnis. Like the Sunni version, it has been “referred, arranged and translated according to the [‘*Uthmani*’] edition.” Musa 2013, 439.

⁶¹FMT, October 14, 2016.

⁶²JAKIM 2013.

⁶³The Malaysian Constitution limits the role of the Federal Government in religious affairs to the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan.

beyond its portfolio of coordinating Islamic affairs at the national level and usurping the powers of states. Suffice to say, this raises questions as to why federal authorities go to such lengths to influence the lives of Malaysian Muslims.

The media

Besides legislation, the Malaysian Government has utilized the media as a propaganda tool to shape particular and narrow views about what constitutes deviant Islam. It has also been able to mainstream its position on Shias and normalize the violations of their rights. As the following examples show, negative and biased media reporting which deliberately emphasizes the enigmatic dimensions of Shias and Shi'ism or relies on baseless and fictitious claims, promotes misconceptions and confusion among the public.

In June 2012, during a program entitled "*Rancangan Bicara: Bahaya Shia*" ("In Conversation: The Shia Danger") broadcast on a JAKIM-linked television station, Shias were labeled "dangerous Jews." The show drew the ire of a longtime consumer movement advocate, S.M. Idris, who criticized it for being intentionally provocative by accusing Shias of conspiring with Jews, calling them habitual fraudsters, and falsely claiming that they regarded Sunni Muslims as dogs. All this propaganda, Idris maintained, caused hatred between the two groups of Muslims, and undermined initiatives to strengthen Muslim solidarity as taught by the Qur'an.⁶⁴

Earlier in the year, Radio dan Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), a state-owned media station, aired a show called "*Mazhab atau Agama*" ("Sect or Religion") that also contained damaging allegations about the Shia community. The two-part program claimed Shi'ism condoned sex outside of marriage (regarded as sinful in Islam), reinforced the myth of the untrustworthy Shias, falsely linked the origins of Shi'ism with Judaism, and labeled the sect an enemy of Sunni Islam. It even accused Shias of harboring a hidden agenda to wipe out Sunnis.

The Malaysian Government has also employed print media to "other" Shias. For instance, the December 17, 2010 front-page headlines of UMNO-owned *Utusan Malaysia* sensationally proclaimed: "*Markas Syiah Diserbu*" ("Shia Center Raided"). The accompanying article cited the views of Muhammed Khusrin Munawi, the director of JAIS who led the raid, but without verifying his statements. Readers were thus fed a dose of assertions disguised as fact. He was quoted as saying,

For Shias, the blood of the followers of other faiths is lawful, which means that it is okay to kill [Sunnis] ... Shiite doctrine is more dangerous than other deviant teachings [as] ... Shiite followers in Iran and India are fighting against other Muslims merely because of different faiths.⁶⁵

To complete their stigmatization, photos of those arrested were shown.

Commenting on the 2010 Gombak Shia center raid, Haris Zalkapli, a *Harakah*⁶⁶ journalist, criticized the level of preconceived ideas and generalizations about Shi'ism within the media. He criticized their hastiness to report how Shi'ism condones the killing of Sunnis without seeking clarification from those accused. They also hurried to label

⁶⁴FMT, July 18, 2012.

⁶⁵*Utusan Malaysia*, December 17, 2010, 1.

⁶⁶This is a newspaper affiliated with the Pan-Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS.

Shias as heretics instead of explaining the differences between Sunnis and Shias, or point out that Shias are not a homogenous group.⁶⁷

Censorship

Regulating what Muslims read has also become an important state mechanism to shape acceptable Islamic norms and obtain greater buy-in for the official version of Islam. Apart from confiscating publications, religious authorities have imposed bans on materials they deem un-Islamic.⁶⁸ Such actions in the past were usually reserved for materials that were either ideologically objectionable (e.g. on communism), or considered sexually obscene. A focus on Islamic content is relatively new, and JAKIM, again, has been an important initiator of such actions in partnership with its secular counterpart, the Home Ministry.

In a well-publicized case, the Home Ministry banned a novel by Faisal Tehrani⁶⁹ in 2014, on grounds that it sought to spread “Shi’a propaganda” and threatened the “safety and social” aspects of Muslims in the country.⁷⁰ In April the following year, under Section 7 of the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984, the Ministry prohibited four other novels by Tehrani. Ironically, these books had been in circulation for several years prior this, making the claim that they could spark public disorder suspect.⁷¹ Those who print, distribute, or own these books face a maximum jail term of three years and/or a fine of RM 20,000 (USD 4646). In short, this inter-government agency collaboration has enabled JAKIM to enforce even stricter penalties for those it deems as challenging Sunni Islam.

The religious right and immoderate Islam⁷²

For keen observers of Malaysia, it is difficult not to notice the increasingly prominent role federal religious authorities have assumed in setting the tone and standards of acceptable Islam nationwide. Another well-utilized mechanism has been the Syariah lobbyists appointed by the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional Government. For example, one of the loudest voices against Shi’ism has been its *de facto*⁷³ Minister of Islamic Affairs, Jamil Khir Baharom, openly anti-Shia, who has said, “We have rules, we practice the teachings of *Ahl Sunnah Wal Jamaah*⁷⁴ under the Shafie School, so we do not allow proselytizing of Muslims. So, there is no issue of human rights violation here.”⁷⁵

⁶⁷Haris Zalkapli 2011, 97.

⁶⁸Among the more (in)famous books JAKIM has tried to ban are *Allah, Kebebasan dan Cinta* [*Allah, Liberty and Love*] by Irshad Manji and *Muslim Women and Challenges of Islamic Extremism*, edited by Norani Othman; the first on grounds of containing “elements that can confuse the public and ... words that insult Islam” as well as “deviate Muslims from their faith” (*The Star Online*, May 24, 2012); and the second for its ability to “confuse Muslims” and “disrupt public order” (*The Star Online*, January 25, 2010).

⁶⁹This is the pen name of Mohd Faizal Musa.

⁷⁰OHCHR 2014.

⁷¹MMOL, December 23, 2015.

⁷²Current Prime Minister Najib Razak promotes Malaysia as a country that practices “moderate” Islam (*wassatiyah Islam*). As our analysis shows, this is better termed, “immoderate.”

⁷³There is no official position called “Minister of Islamic Affairs” or “Minister of Religious Affairs.” Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes, Jamil Khir Baharom functions as the Minister in charge of Islam.

⁷⁴See footnote 35.

⁷⁵NST, July 20, 2013.

No doubt, the Malaysian Government has had a long history of disdain towards human rights, in particular, human rights which are attributed to the West. Its treatment of Shias thus needs to be understood in the broader context of this contempt.⁷⁶

Jamil Khir Bahrom has been backed by his Deputy, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, in his efforts to fortify JAKIM and other national Islamic bodies. Since being appointed in 2015, Dusuki has defended Syariah and argued for its augmentation. For example, when the Deputy Mufti of Kedah suggested that the Security Measures (Special Measures) Act be tightened to help curb Shia activities in the country, the Deputy Minister was quick to reject this suggestion, saying that the enforcement of Syariah laws only needed to be streamlined and strengthened to achieve this objective.⁷⁷

The Deputy Minister was, in fact, echoing the sentiments of another important player in the Syariah lobby, Mahamad Naser Desa, head of the *Institut Kajian Strategik Islam Malaysia* (IKSIM).⁷⁸ Prior to his appointment, Mahamad Naser worked in the Syariah Section of the Attorney General's Chambers, where he actively promoted the state-sponsored version of Islam, *Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah*, and advocated for this to be the supreme religion of the land. He spoke out against alleged threats to official Islam from liberal Muslims, LGBTs, and those who believe in pluralism and human rights.

Taking their cue to discriminate against Shias from such state religious functionaries and bodies, a group of right-wing Islamists and some Malay NGOs have become emboldened to join in the verbal assault against Shi'ism and its followers. *Ikatan Muslimim Malaysia* (ISMA), an NGO known for its opposition to liberalism, pluralism, and human rights, has accused Shias of being a threat to the Muslim *ummah* (community). The group established a research unit to study Shia teachings so that it could "expose" these dangers to society. At a symposium ISMA jointly organized with another Muslim NGO, Pembina, it accused Shia adherents of "sowing discord among political leaders and Islamic religious scholars, or *ulama*, by trying to brand and discredit those who are anti-Syiah as followers of the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement." This was possible, they claimed, because Shias had infiltrated religious departments and were able to influence policies.⁷⁹ At another of its events in November 2013, *Seminar ancaman serangan akidah: Bahaya Syiah dan liberalisme* (Seminar on the Threat to the Islamic Creed: Dangers of Shi'ism and Liberalism), ISMA accused students from Iran of spreading Shi'ism.⁸⁰

Even *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM), an independent, mass-based NGO known for being progressive on certain issues, has approved and applauded the state

⁷⁶For instance, despite being a former member of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, Malaysia has managed to evade being accountable, even when directly questioned at the global level. See, for instance, the communications of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, in 2014 in which he raised three questions relating to the situation of Shias here (United Nations Human Rights Council 2014). His query was greeted with silence by the Malaysian Government. See also Case 2001; Loh and Khoo 2002; Norani, Zainah and Zaitun 2005; Mauzy 2006.

⁷⁷MMOL, August 21, 2016.

⁷⁸*Utusan Online*, August 20, 2016. IKSIM was officially launched on August 12, 2015. It was established out of a decision at the 225th Meeting of the Council of Rulers in 2011 but took another three years, i.e. in December 2014, before it was finally formed. It is believed that its role is to serve as a think tank for JAKIM.

⁷⁹MMOL, September 28, 2013. Apart from Shias, the other threats named at the symposium were Chinese, free trade agreements and the Trans Pacific Partnership, Americanization, and Christianization.

⁸⁰See <http://twisma.net/category/kempen-selamatkan-ummah/syiah-agama-baru/?orderby=views>, accessed December 14, 2014. This argument, that students and traders from Iran and Iraq cause the spread of Shi'ism in Malaysia, is not new. Others have repeated this, including those in academia. See *SH*, July 28, 2013.

decision to take stern action to curb the propagation of Shi'ism. ABIM claims to be actively conducting seminars and talks to help society better understand Shia teachings. Its branch blog, for example, proudly reported that one of its awareness-raising programs in Shah Alam, *Pemantapan aqidah: Syiah itu Islam?* (Strengthening Faith: Is Shi'ism Islam?), attracted a huge crowd.⁸¹

In addition to seminars and talks, some civil society actors have organized protests to intimidate Shia adherents. For example, in October 2016, around seventy people mobilized by three Muslim NGOs, including two local mosque organizations, demonstrated outside a shop in Selangor, alleging it was being used to spread Shia teachings. Holding a banner that read "*Hapuskan Syiah di bumi Malaysia*" (Eradicate Syiahs from Malaysian Soil), the protestors claimed that the shop's proximity to their homes adversely affected them, particularly because of the "foreign" elements involved, i.e. students from a nearby university. Interestingly, they also said that despite their requests to JAIS to investigate and shut down the shop, the authorities had not done so.⁸²

It is not uncommon for such anti-Shia groups to receive the support of the Malaysian Government.⁸³ Among these is *Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia* (Muafakat) which has organized public seminars on the risks of Shia teachings. Among its many initiatives was the "*Seminar mendepani virus Syiah*" ("Facing the Shia Virus in Society"), a free public event held in September 2013 at a Federal Government-owned facility in Kuala Lumpur, Pusat Islam. Muafakat believes that it is "the real defender of Islam" and that the "real" teachings of Shi'ism should be exposed. Among the experts invited to speak at this seminar was an Assistant Secretary from the Home Ministry, in charge of matters relating to security and public order.⁸⁴

A month later, the same official appeared at another seminar in Penang held on the campus of the University of Science, Malaysia organized by an NGO called *Yayasan Mutiara* and the State Mufti's office. At this event, he claimed that there was an urgent need to restrict the circulation of Shia teachings because politicians and corporate leaders had become involved. In his presentation, "*Modus operandi gerakan Syiah dan ancamannya kepada kestabilan negara*" ("Modus Operandi of the Shia Movement and its Threat to National Security"), he argued that this was disconcerting as they had a wider influence in society, including through the sale of consumer products.⁸⁵

Another NGO that has joined the anti-Shia bandwagon is the Islamic Da'wah Foundation of Malaysia (*Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia*, YADIM). Founded in 1974, YADIM has direct links with the Prime Minister's office. At an event it organized in Perlis, the head of the State Religious Department boasted that they had successfully identified a student who was a Shia. At the same function, the Department announced that it was working with JAKIM and YADIM to hold a faith consolidation program to bring awareness to Muslims about the threats posed by Shi'ism.⁸⁶

Like the religious authorities, these anti-Shia non-state actors vary in their modes of regulation. In general, how vocal and active they are in curbing Shi'ism corresponds to

⁸¹ABIM, October 19, 2013.

⁸²*Harian Metro*, October 18, 2016.

⁸³MMOL, February 13, 2016.

⁸⁴Muafakat 2013.

⁸⁵SH, "Perkasa undang-undang pencegahan ajaran Syiah," October 13, 2013.

⁸⁶SH, "Pelajar sekolah disyaki berfahaman Syiah," October 13, 2013.

the depth and seriousness of state campaigns against Shi'ism. More importantly, although presently their attacks on Shias have not been violent, the fact that are inciting hatred and calling for the elimination of this community in Malaysia is worrying.

Before concluding, it is necessary to remember that despite the concerted efforts at demonizing the Shia community, the Malaysian authorities themselves do not always share a common stand. In the case of the Gombak Shia center raid in 2010, the religious functionaries first tried to justify their actions by claiming that Shias were a threat to the nation. They later replaced this with a milder accusation, that Shias were "unsuitable" due to their potential to divide the *ummah*. The vacillating positions are understandable given the difficulties in promoting a monolithic view of Islam, particularly in a context of an unwieldy bureaucracy and its inner contradictions.

This inconsistency is also attributed to the multiple actors in the Syariah lobby. For example, when the Deputy Mufti of Kedah proposed that the SOSMA law be tightened to be more effective against dealing with Shias, it was promptly rebutted by the IKSIM head and the *de facto* Deputy Minister of Islam. Likewise, when the PAS chief called on Sunnis and Shias to unite, and the Penang Mufti stated that Shi'ism was indeed a variant of Islam, Selangor rebutted this with a Friday sermon about the dangers Shias posed to Sunni Islam.⁸⁷ Clearly, depending on how well the state is able to manage the different competing voices within the Syariah lobby, efforts to regulate Shias in Malaysia can produce different results.

Conclusion

In this article we have mapped the emergence of state-supported hostility, ill treatment, and discrimination against Shias in Malaysia. We have shown how law, initially secular and now increasingly Syariah, has become a pernicious tool used to punish Shia followers and demonize them as a threat to Islam. Through apparatuses such as Friday sermons, censorship, and the media, federal authorities have played an important role in normalizing and institutionalizing discrimination against and circumventing the rights of Shias.

State religious functionaries have been encouraged to persecute Shias with impunity, in the name of defending Islam. In addition, private actors have also been given license to harass and spread hate against Shias. Like many other attempts at regulation, however, these actions and outcomes are not always consistent, as differences in opinion among those in the Syariah lobby have resulted in uneven repercussions for Shia followers. Nevertheless, what matters is the overall impact of the message that anti-Shi'ism efforts are warranted and that all pious Muslims should be a part of this. Indeed, most have kept quiet over the persecution of Shias.

Alarmingly, the Shia community has witnessed an increase in harassment and human rights abuses under the present regime of Prime Minister Najib, who is directly responsible for the policies and actions of all component bodies under his office. This includes JAKIM, which has led the campaign to persecute Shias, and the NFC, which issued the 1996 *fatwa*. However, it appears that Najib has little control over what state religious functionaries say

⁸⁷FMT, October 14, 2016.

or do. One reason is that, compared to his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Najib does not have strong credentials as an Islamic leader. This appears to have obligated him to JAKIM and the Syariah lobby.

These developments are taking place at the same time that the Prime Minister has made many speeches abroad, exalting the virtues of *wasatiyyah* (moderate) Islam⁸⁸ and promoting Malaysia as a model Muslim country. In one such speech in September 2013, at the 68th United Nations General Conference in New York, Najib highlighted the Sunni–Shia conflict and called upon both parties to commit to peace. Speaking about the overall problems plaguing Muslims across the world, he said: “We can reclaim our religion, choosing harmony and acceptance over division and conflict.”⁸⁹ Yet the reality for Shias in Malaysia has been vastly different.

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⁸⁸In 2010, Najib introduced the concept of a “Global Movement of Moderates” to the UN General Assembly. He went on to set up this body in Malaysia, but it has very little to show for its efforts.

⁸⁹“Statement by the Honourable Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the general debate of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.” New York, September 28, 2013. Accessed: July 10, 2014: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/MY_en.pdf.

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Appendix

Glossary

ABIM	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i> (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
Ashura	A day Shias observe to commemorate the death of Hussain, a grandson of the Prophet
fatwa	legal opinion
haram	unlawful
IKSIM	<i>Institut Kajian Strategik Islam Malaysia</i> (Institute of Strategic Islamic Studies Malaysia)
ILMU	<i>Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia</i> (Association of Malaysian Scholars)
imam	leader of congregational prayers
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISMA	<i>Ikatan Muslimim Malaysia</i> (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity)
JAKIM	<i>Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia</i> (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JAINJ	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri Johor</i> (Johor State Religious Department)
JAIP	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Perak</i> (Perak State Religious Department)
JAIS	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor</i> (Selangor State Religious Department)
JAIT	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Terengganu</i> (Terengganu State Religious Department)
JAWI	<i>Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan</i> (Wilayah Persekutuan State Religious Department)
JHEINS	<i>Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Negeri Sabah</i> (Sabah Department of Islamic Affairs)
jihād	holy war
kafir	heathen
khutbah	Friday sermon
kufur	infidel
kumayl	A ritual observed by Twelver Shias
MAIS	<i>Majlis Agama Islam Selangor</i> (Selangor Islamic Religious Council)
Muafakat	Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia
mufti	Muslim legal expert
muzakarah	conference
NFC	National Fatwa Committee
PAS	<i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i> (Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia)
RTM	<i>Radio dan Televisyen Malaysia</i> (Radio and Television Malaysia)
SOSMA	Security Measures (Special Measures) Act
surau	prayer room
ulama	Islamic religious scholar
ummah	community
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
YADIM	<i>Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia</i> (Islamic Da'wah Foundation Malaysia)