

Between Reform, Authority, and Radicalism: A Systematic Review of Salafism in Contemporary Malaysia and Its Implications for Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT:

Salafism has become an increasingly visible component of contemporary Islamic discourse in Malaysia, influencing religious thought, institutional authority, political engagement, and debates surrounding radicalism and security. Despite growing scholarly attention, existing studies remain dispersed across historical, theological, socio-political, and security-oriented fields, resulting in limited systematic understanding of how Salafism has developed and operated within the Malaysian context. This study therefore systematically reviews the existing literature to map major scholarly trends, synthesise key findings, and identify the principal dimensions through which contemporary Salafism in Malaysia has been examined. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, with publications retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases through an advanced search strategy using the keywords “Salafi” and “Malaysia.” Following identification, screening, duplicate removal, and eligibility assessment, 20 primary studies (n = 20) were retained for qualitative synthesis. An integrative thematic analysis identified three major themes: (1) Historical Trajectories, Ideological Transformation, and Transnational Networks; (2) Religious Authority, State Regulation, and Political Contestation; and (3) Radical Salafism, Jihadism, and Security Challenges. The findings indicate that Salafism in Malaysia is neither historically linear nor ideologically homogeneous, but has evolved through interactions among local reform traditions, transnational religious networks, state institutions, and changing socio-political conditions. The literature further reveals that Salafi actors occupy contested positions within structures of religious authority and political competition, while a substantial strand of scholarship concentrates on Salafi-jihadist ideology, militant mobilisation, and security threats. The review concludes that contemporary Malaysian Salafism should be understood as a diverse and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a singular religious movement. Future research should more clearly differentiate non-violent reformist Salafi

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currents from Salafi-jihadist formations and further examine underexplored variations in local institutions, intellectual networks, and everyday religious practices across Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysia, Salafi

1. Introduction

The Salafism in contemporary Malaysia is best understood as a diverse and contested Islamic trend that seeks to restore Islam to the model of the Prophet and the earliest Muslim generations, but that has entered Malaysia through several historical waves, ideological channels, and social settings (Malik, 2017, 2022). The literature rejects any simple equation between Malaysian Salafism and a single imported doctrine, because the Malaysian field includes early reformist precedents such as Kaum Muda, later Saudi-influenced puritan currents, the Sunnah movement in Perlis, and newer tajdid-oriented figures who selectively combine Salafi themes with local religious sensibilities (Malik, 2017, 2022). This historical layering matters because Islamic revival in Malaysia has long been tied to broader social change, political legitimacy, ethnic identity, and the search for an authentic Muslim public life, especially from the 1970s onward when religion became a major symbol of rapid transformation among Malay-Muslims (Nagata, 1980). More recent work situates Salafism within a larger Islamization process in which state institutions, civil society actors, transnational networks, and digital media all participate in redefining what counts as authoritative Islam in Malaysia (Abdullah, 2022; A. Hamid, 2016; Shukri, 2023).

The historical literature shows that Salafism in Malaysia did not begin as a purely contemporary security issue, but emerged from reformist and anti-colonial currents that opened debates over tajdid, ijihad, and the renewal of Muslim society (Amir & Rahman, 2023). Early Malay reformist figures helped create an intellectual climate in which inherited authority, local custom, and Islamic authenticity could be publicly debated, laying foundations for later Salafi and non-Salafi revivalisms alike (Amir & Rahman, 2023). Malik argues that the pre-independence reformist stream represented by Kaum Muda shared roots with later Salafi orientations even if it differed from present-day global Salafism in style and context (Malik, 2017). The next major phase developed during the Islamic awakening of the 1970s and 1980s, when international revivalist currents, the return of students educated abroad, and expanding educational and missionary networks made puritan and scripturalist

ideas more visible in Malaysian religious discourse (Abdullah, 2022; Bakar & Aslam, 2019; Malik, 2017). This phase also needs to be read transnationally: Saudi missionary expansion after 1979, rivalry with Iran, and links with conservative centers of Islamic learning helped circulate literalist and Wahhabi-oriented theology into Southeast Asian institutions, including Malaysian bureaucratic and educational settings (Abdullah, 2022; L. Rahim, 2006).

A central theme in the literature is that Malaysian Salafism is not internally uniform. Malik's later synthesis identifies three major tendencies: Saudi-style Salafi individuals and groups, the Perlis-linked Sunnah movement, and the tajdid movement associated with Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, with the latter two appearing more inclusive in some theological dealings than stricter Saudi-style actors (Malik, 2022). This internal diversity complicates the common habit of using "Salafism" and "Wahhabism" as interchangeable labels, a problem intensified by scholarship showing that "Wahhabism" often functions as an externally imposed and polemical category rather than a neutral self-description (Abdurahman et al., 2026; Malik, 2017). At the doctrinal level, Salafi manhaj is usually framed around purification of creed and imitation of the pious ancestors, which tends to cast later accretions, mystical mediation, and established communal rites as bid'ah (Ellias et al., 2025; Tabroni & Idham, 2023). That orientation has generated sustained resistance from Malay scholars rooted in Shafi'i and Ash'ari traditions, who criticize Wahhabi literalism for rejecting taqlid, mysticism, tawassul, and talqin, and who defend inherited Sunni orthodoxy as both theologically grounded and socially stabilizing (Ellias et al., 2025). Comparative work from Indonesia sharpens this point by showing how Wahhabi expansion often advances a deculturalizing project that seeks to strip Islam from localized religious practices, a pattern that helps explain why similar tensions arise in Malaysia's own debates over custom, ritual, and legitimacy (Hamdi, 2019).

Another strong finding is that Salafism's growth in Malaysia is inseparable from the changing relationship between state, society, and political Islam. The Malaysian state has historically exercised unusual

authority over Islamic affairs through official departments, licensed teaching, and a state-defined Islam, which has made it more resilient than many other Muslim societies against fully autonomous radical expansion (Abdullah, 2022; Ebrahimi & Yusoff, 2020). Yet the same literature stresses that this resilience is uneven, because social grievances, politicization of Islam, foreign funding, and transnational Islamist networking have expanded the appeal of Salafi-Wahhabi ideas among some sectors of society (Abdullah, 2022). Political competition has intensified this dynamic. As parties attempt to out-Islamize one another in a Malay-majority polity where ethnicity and Islam are tightly fused, Islamic revivalism has fed broader forms of Islamist populism and civilizationist rhetoric that define Malay-Muslims as the authentic core of the nation (Shukri, 2023). Older scholarship had already shown that Islam functioned as both identity marker and legitimacy resource in Malaysia; newer studies suggest that Salafization has pushed mainstream discourse toward more Islamist and exclusivist norms across parties, institutions, and non-state actors (A. Hamid, 2016; Nagata, 1980). Regional studies of urban Salafism also indicate why such ideas travel well among educated youth: Salafi activism can present itself not as backward traditionalism but as a disciplined, modern, media-savvy identity aligned with professional aspiration, social media fluency, and urban piety (Aidulsyah, 2023; Chaplin, 2018).

The security literature, however, warns against collapsing all Malaysian Salafism into militancy. Several studies distinguish between broad reformist or quietist Salafization and narrower Salafi-jihadi currents linked to takfiri doctrine, false readings of jihad, globalization, and pressure from transnational extremist narratives (Bakar & Aslam, 2019; A. Hamid, 2016). Some authors argue that decades of Salafization have widened receptivity to harder doctrines and contributed to anxieties over extremism, youth

radicalization, and the post-9/11 reminting of older radical ideas through Daesh-style dogmatism (A. Hamid, 2016; Kifli et al., 2020). Others emphasize that Malaysia has still contained major threats through law enforcement, deradicalization, rehabilitation, prohibitive fatwas, and official moderation frameworks such as wasatiyyah (Abdurahman et al., 2026). The broader Southeast Asian literature adds nuance by showing that contemporary Islamic movements often emerge from urban marginality, moral uncertainty, and the search for identity, while some Salafi circles adapt toward anti-violence and moderated civic positions rather than revolutionary politics (Hasan, 2014; Tabroni & Idham, 2023). In conclusion, the literature portrays Salafism in contemporary Malaysia not as a singular extremist bloc but as a historically layered, transnationally connected, politically entangled, and internally differentiated current whose influence reaches theology, identity, public culture, and state-society relations. The key scholarly challenge is therefore to explain how Malaysian institutions and Muslim communities continue to negotiate between purification and pluralism, imported authority and local tradition, and reformist energy and the risks of exclusionary or radical interpretations.

2. Material and Methodology

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework is a widely recognized guideline used to improve the transparency, consistency, and quality of systematic literature reviews. PRISMA provides a structured process for identifying, screening, evaluating, and selecting relevant studies through several stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. This framework helps researchers conduct systematic and reproducible reviews by ensuring that article selection procedures, inclusion criteria, and data analysis processes are reported clearly and systematically.

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“Salafi” OR “Salafism” OR “Salafi movement”) AND (Malaysia OR “Malaysian”)) Date of Access: July 2026
WoS	((“Salafi” OR “Salafism” OR “Salafi movement”) AND (Malaysia OR “Malaysian”)) Date of Access: July 2026

Table 1: The Search String

Screening

The screening process constituted the second phase of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and aimed to refine the initially identified records into a focused and methodologically consistent dataset. During the identification stage, a total of 38 records were retrieved from the two selected academic databases, comprising 21 publications from Scopus and 17 publications from Web of Science (WoS). These records were subsequently screened according to the predetermined eligibility criteria, particularly the language requirement that publications be written in either English or Malay, reflecting the principal languages of scholarly discourse relevant to the study of Salafism in contemporary Malaysia. During this stage, no records were excluded on linguistic grounds ($n = 0$), as all 38 identified publications satisfied the specified language criterion. Consequently, the full set of records remained eligible for the subsequent duplicate-checking procedure. A systematic duplicate removal process was then conducted to eliminate overlapping publications indexed in both Scopus and WoS, resulting in the exclusion of 15 duplicate records ($n = 15$). Following this procedure, 23 unique publications remained for further eligibility assessment and subsequent analysis. Overall, the screening process enhanced the precision, transparency, and methodological integrity of the review by ensuring that the retained dataset consisted of non-redundant studies that complied with the predefined linguistic criteria and were suitable for further evaluation within the scope of the SLR on Salafism in contemporary Malaysia.

Eligibility

The eligibility phase represented a critical stage in the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) process, aimed at ensuring that only studies with substantial relevance to the objectives and thematic scope of the review were retained for qualitative analysis. Following the screening and duplicate-removal procedures, a total of 23 articles were subjected to a detailed eligibility assessment. During this stage, the titles, abstracts, and, where available, full-text contents of the retrieved publications were carefully examined to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study. A total of 3 articles were excluded following this assessment due to several considerations, including being outside the relevant field of research, titles that did not demonstrate significant relevance to the study focus, abstracts that were not aligned with the objectives of the review, and the unavailability of full-text access.

The eligibility assessment was specifically designed to ensure that the selected studies meaningfully addressed Salafism in contemporary Malaysia, including its historical development, ideological orientations, religious interpretations, political dynamics, Islamic movements, governance, reform trajectories, and broader social impacts. Articles categorised as out of field were excluded because they focused on topics that did not establish a substantive connection with Salafism or its development within the Malaysian context. Similarly, publications whose titles did not exhibit sufficient relevance to the thematic focus of the review were removed to maintain conceptual consistency and analytical coherence throughout the selection process. Abstracts were further evaluated to determine whether the studies contributed directly to the objectives of the review, particularly in relation to the historical trajectories, religious discourses, socio-political dynamics, and societal implications of Salafism in Malaysia. Studies whose abstracts lacked meaningful alignment with these dimensions were excluded from further consideration.

In addition, publications without accessible full texts were excluded because comprehensive evaluation, thematic assessment, and systematic data extraction could not be conducted reliably. Restricting the final dataset to fully accessible studies enhanced the transparency and analytical robustness of the review by ensuring that each included publication could be examined in sufficient detail. As a result of this eligibility assessment, 20 studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were subsequently retained for the final qualitative analysis. These studies provided the empirical and conceptual foundation for examining the multidimensional development of Salafism in contemporary Malaysia, particularly in relation to its historical context, religious interpretations, political dynamics, reform movements, and broader social impact.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analytical approach was employed as a core synthesis strategy to systematically examine and consolidate findings across the selected body of literature. The primary objective of this approach was to identify, organise, and interpret salient themes and subthemes pertaining to Salafism in Contemporary Malaysia. The thematic development process commenced with systematic data abstraction, during which the authors carefully reviewed and analysed 20 selected publications to extract relevant statements, arguments, conceptual insights, and

empirical findings aligned with the objectives of the study. As illustrated in Figure 2, the selected studies were subjected to comprehensive examination to capture the breadth and patterns of contemporary scholarly discourse on Salafism in the Malaysian context. Particular attention was devoted to the methodological approaches employed in prior research, alongside the principal findings, conceptual contributions, and broader scholarly significance of each study.

Subsequently, the research team engaged in a collaborative and iterative process of coding, comparison, and thematic categorisation, with themes developed inductively from patterns and evidence emerging across the selected studies. Throughout the analytical process, reflective notes and analytical logs were systematically maintained to document interpretive decisions, conceptual observations, emerging patterns, and other insights relevant to data interpretation. This audit trail strengthened the transparency, dependability, and methodological rigour of the thematic synthesis. The identified themes and subthemes were continuously compared, reviewed, and refined to ensure conceptual coherence, analytical consistency, and alignment with the study

objectives. Where divergent interpretations or inconsistencies arose during the coding and thematic development process, these were resolved through deliberative discussion among the authors until consensus was reached. This iterative procedure ultimately produced a coherent thematic framework capable of capturing the multidimensional character of contemporary scholarship on Salafism in Malaysia. Finally, the developed themes were further refined and adjusted to strengthen their consistency and alignment with the objectives of the study. The research questions guiding this review are presented below:

1. How has Salafism evolved through historical trajectories, ideological transformations, and transnational networks in contemporary Malaysia?
2. How does Salafism interact with religious authority, state regulation, and political contestation in contemporary Malaysia?
3. How is radical Salafism associated with jihadist ideologies, militant movements, and security challenges in contemporary Malaysia?

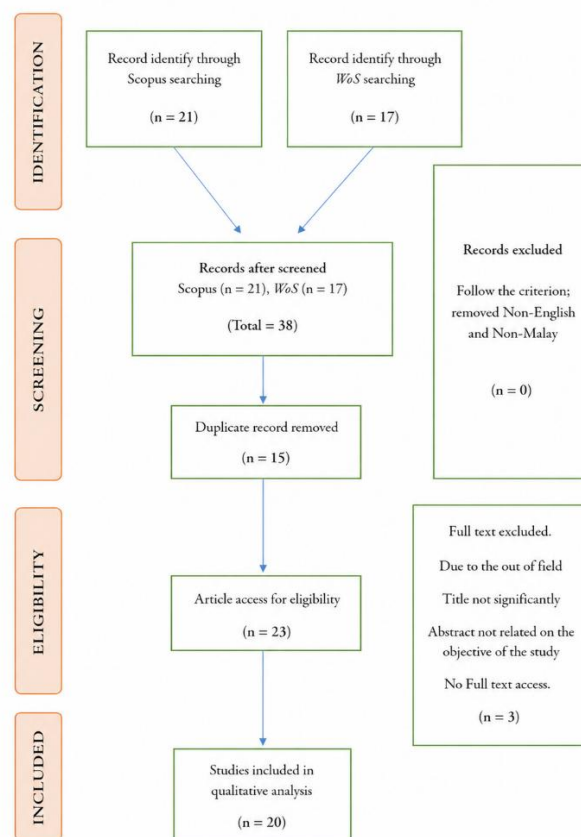


FIGURE 2. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Grimshaw et al., 2021)

3. Results and Finding

The systematic analysis of the selected literature revealed three interrelated thematic domains that structure contemporary scholarly discussions on Salafism in Malaysia. These themes were derived through an iterative process of data abstraction, comparison, and thematic synthesis, reflecting recurring conceptual patterns, analytical concerns, and empirical emphases across the included studies. The first theme, Historical Trajectories, Ideological Transformation, and Transnational Networks, examines the historical emergence and development of Salafi-oriented thought, its ideological adaptations, and the role of cross-border intellectual and institutional networks in shaping its evolution within Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian context. The second theme, Religious Authority, State Regulation, and Political Contestation, explores the complex interactions between Salafi actors and discourses, state religious institutions, regulatory mechanisms, political organisations, and competing claims to Islamic legitimacy and authority. The third theme, Radical Salafism, Jihadism, and Security Challenges, addresses the body of scholarship concerned with radical ideological currents, jihadist interpretations, militant networks, extremist propaganda, and the broader security implications associated with radical Salafi-jihadist movements. Taken together, these three themes demonstrate that Salafism in contemporary Malaysia is represented in the literature not as a singular or homogeneous phenomenon, but as a multidimensional and contested field shaped by historical continuities, ideological transformations, transnational exchanges, institutional negotiations, political dynamics, and divergent trajectories ranging from religious reformism to radical militancy.

Historical Trajectories, Ideological Transformation, and Transnational Networks

The reviewed literature indicates that Salafism and related reformist currents in Malaysia and neighbouring Southeast Asian societies developed through historically layered processes rather than through a single ideological transmission from the Middle East. Malik and Mat (2017) trace an early reform trajectory in Perlis to Middle Eastern-educated Kaum Muda scholars who challenged the wider dominance of traditionalist religious establishments and gradually consolidated the “Sunnah Perlis” orientation with support from state rulers. This historical pattern is consistent with Rahim’s broader observation that Malaysian Islamic thought has long been characterised by interaction and polemics among

traditionalist, reformist, modernist, Salafi, and rationalist tendencies (R. A. A. Rahim, 2008). Malik (2022) further demonstrates that contemporary Malaysian Salafism contains several distinguishable trends, including Saudi-oriented Salafi groups, the Perlis Sunnah movement and its successors, and the Tajdid current associated with Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin. Read together with the regional findings of Aree and Joll (2020), Pall and Pereiro (2020), and Pall (2026), these studies challenge linear explanations that reduce Southeast Asian Salafism to a direct extension of Gulf religious influence. The available evidence instead points to a historical process shaped by local reform traditions, political patronage, educational mobility, competing centres of Islamic learning, and selective adaptation of transnational ideas. Such findings are particularly relevant to contemporary Malaysia because the historical development of Salafism appears embedded within older debates over reform, scriptural authority, legal adherence, and the institutional definition of legitimate Islam.

A second major pattern concerns the role of transnational networks in transmitting religious ideas while simultaneously exposing those ideas to local reinterpretation. Pall and Pereiro (2020) show that Cambodian Salafism acquired influence through Gulf connections, especially through symbolic associations with the Arab world and material support that enabled the establishment of boarding-school networks combining religious instruction with the national curriculum. Nevertheless, the same study identifies resistance from Shafi’i traditionalists and Tablighi circles, some of whom regarded Malaysia as a culturally closer model than Gulf Arab societies. Aree and Joll (2020) similarly question an excessive emphasis on Middle Eastern influence by demonstrating the importance of South Asian movements and the role of Kelantan in reshaping the religious landscape of southern Thailand. Pall (2026) adds another dimension by identifying post-Salafi influences circulating from southern Thailand and Malaysia among younger Cambodian Muslims, contributing to greater accommodation with Shafi’i and Tablighi competitors. These regional findings, when considered alongside Malik’s (2022) account of diverse Malaysian Salafi spectrums, suggest that transnational influence is multidirectional rather than operating through a simple Middle East-to-Southeast Asia route. Malaysia functions not only as a recipient of external religious currents but also as a regional reference point from which reformist models, educational orientations, and more accommodative forms of Salafi engagement may circulate. This pattern

complicates the conventional assumption that Salafism necessarily reproduces a uniform Gulf-centred religious model across different national settings.

The literature also identifies ideological transformation and localisation as central features of Salafi development. Malik (2022) argues that Malaysian Salafism is internally diverse, with several currents displaying greater inclusiveness than Saudi-style Salafism and, in some theological matters, accepting methods associated with traditionalist scholarship. Malik and Mat (2017) provide historical depth to this diversity by showing that the Perlis Sunnah reform orientation became institutionally rooted through a distinctive relationship between reformist scholars and state authority, producing a locally established trajectory rather than a temporary imported movement. Rahim (2008), from a comparative perspective, situates Salafi thought within a broader Malaysian environment marked by controlled management of competing Islamic orientations, in contrast with the relatively more open Indonesian setting. Comparable processes of adaptation are visible in Pall's (2026) account of Cambodia, where a movement initially characterised by exclusivist claims and rejection of established practices later moved towards accommodation, cooperation, and stronger identification with national belonging. Pall and Pereiro (2020) and Aree and Joll (2020) likewise demonstrate that local social aspirations, educational opportunities, ethnic affinities, established madhhab traditions, and regional networks can modify the reception of transnational reform movements. Taken collectively, the reviewed studies suggest that ideological change is not adequately explained through a rigid opposition between "traditionalism" and "Salafism," or between *kaum tua* and *kaum muda*. A more comprehensive interpretation views Salafism as a changing field in which doctrinal commitments interact with local institutions, state structures, social mobility, generational aspirations, and established religious cultures. Within the Malaysian context, this perspective provides a stronger basis for understanding why Salafi-related currents may range from relatively purist orientations to locally embedded Sunnah and Tajdid formations.

Overall, the synthesis reveals that historical trajectory, ideological transformation, and transnational networking are mutually connected dimensions of contemporary Salafism rather than separate developments. Malik (2022), Malik and Mat (2017), and Rahim (2008) collectively show that

Malaysian Salafism emerged within a pre-existing landscape of reformist contestation, institutional regulation, and differentiated Islamic thought. At the regional level, Pall and Pereiro (2020), Aree and Joll (2020), and Pall (2026) demonstrate that transnational networks can strengthen religious movements through education, funding, scholarly mobility, and cross-border connections, while local resistance and sociopolitical conditions can simultaneously redirect ideological development towards adaptation or accommodation. A significant conclusion from this body of scholarship is that contemporary Malaysian Salafism cannot be treated as a homogeneous movement or merely as an imported Gulf ideology. Its development reflects an interaction between indigenous reform histories, state patronage, regional Muslim connections, Middle Eastern and South Asian influences, local Shafi'i traditions, and changing forms of religious identity. The literature therefore supports a relational understanding of Salafism in which doctrinal transmission is continuously negotiated through historical circumstances and local social structures. At the same time, an important research gap remains visible: although regional studies provide substantial evidence of cross-border influence, the precise mechanisms through which Malaysian Salafi, Sunnah, and Tajdid networks influence neighbouring societies, and how external post-Salafi developments subsequently reshape Malaysian discourse, remain insufficiently clarified in the reviewed abstracts.

Religious Authority, State Regulation, and Political Contestation

The reviewed studies indicate that religious authority in Malaysia has developed through a close interaction between doctrinal competition, state institutions, and changing political interests. Shiozaki (2015) demonstrates that official fatwa mechanisms had already become instruments for regulating contested Islamic interpretations from the 1930s, with Malay muftis taking an active role in defining acceptable religious boundaries amid the emergence of Salafi-oriented *Kaum Muda* and other new currents. Hamid (2018) extends this institutional picture by showing that the relationship between Islam and politics increasingly hardened distinctions between what was regarded as Islamic and un-Islamic, while political interests contributed to more rigid positions among religious stakeholders. Osman (2017) similarly associates Malaysia's conservative turn since the 1980s with important social and political changes, including the rise of neo-Sufi and neo-Salafi formations. Hamid (2025), meanwhile, interprets the growing influence of Wahhabi-Salafi thought within state-linked Islamic

institutions as part of a broader decline in religious moderation. Considered together, these findings suggest that Salafi expansion cannot be separated from the historical structures through which Islamic legitimacy has been administered. The state appears not merely as an external regulator of religious competition, but as an important arena in which competing interpretations seek recognition, institutional access, and normative authority. This creates a complex pattern: Salafi currents may face official restriction in certain contexts while, in other circumstances, Salafi-oriented actors and ideas may gain influence within political or religious structures.

A related pattern concerns the capacity of the Malaysian state to define, supervise, and defend an authorised religious order. Shiozaki (2015) locates the historical foundation of this regulatory capacity in the development of official fatwa practices, particularly efforts by religious authorities to protect established Shafi'i orientations and control emerging interpretations. Abdullah (2022) identifies a more contemporary form of state resilience, arguing that Malaysia possesses several institutional advantages in responding to Salafi-Wahhabi expansion and radical ideological pressures, including accumulated experience with security threats, an officially defined conception of Islam, extensive control over religious affairs, and established legal enforcement mechanisms. Hamid (2018), however, presents a critical dimension of this same regulatory structure by observing that state-controlled political conditions may marginalise progressive Muslim voices and intensify both intra-Muslim and interreligious tensions. Hamid (2025) further complicates the picture by arguing that state-linked Islamic institutions themselves may become channels for Salafization, particularly where Middle Eastern influences intersect with authoritarian governance and ethnocentric politics. The combined evidence therefore reveals an institutional paradox. Strong religious administration may provide the state with substantial capacity to resist ideological currents considered threatening, yet the same institutional concentration may also facilitate selected conservative orientations when such orientations become connected with dominant political interests. Religious regulation, in this sense, is not adequately understood as a neutral process of controlling deviance; it also participates in determining which interpretations receive legitimacy, access, and public authority.

Political contestation constitutes another major dimension of the literature, particularly where Salafi actors enter formal political structures despite

apparent tensions between doctrinal positions and existing democratic arrangements. Osman (2014) provides the clearest example through the involvement of Salafi ulama in ILMU and the ulama structures associated with UMNO, where religious scholars supplied Islamic legitimacy to the governing party and strengthened its position against PAS. The study interprets this relationship as a convergence of interests: Salafi scholars obtained opportunities to expand influence at state and societal levels, while UMNO gained religious credibility and an additional resource for countering Islamist opposition. Hamid (2018) places such developments within a longer history of political Islam in which politicians, bureaucrats, scholars, commentators, and civil society actors continuously contested the meaning of religion and secularism in public life. Osman (2017) likewise shows that the conservative transformation of Malaysian Islam has consequences extending beyond theology into social and political arrangements. Abdullah (2022) adds that politicisation of Islam forms one of the conditions contributing to the expansion of Salafi-Wahhabi influence. In combination, these findings indicate that Salafi political engagement should not be reduced to simple ideological consistency. Participation within established institutions may function as a pragmatic strategy for acquiring legitimacy, extending networks, influencing religious policy, or repositioning actors within competition among Muslim political constituencies. The Malaysian case consequently displays a form of negotiated political participation in which doctrinal reservations towards prevailing structures can coexist with strategic involvement inside those same structures.

The literature further suggests that the changing configuration of religious authority has wider consequences for moderation, pluralism, and relations among competing social groups. Hamid (2025) argues that Middle Eastern-influenced Salafization, when combined with ethnocentric political tendencies, contributed to a socio-political setting less compatible with Malaysia's pluralist inheritance. Hamid (2018) reaches a related conclusion from a broader historical analysis, associating the essentialisation of Islam for political purposes with hardened boundaries of religious belonging, deteriorating interreligious and intra-Muslim relations, and the marginalisation of progressive positions. Osman (2017) similarly treats the conservative turn as a development with enduring implications for Malaysian society and politics, especially through the emergence of neo-Sufi and neo-Salafi movements.

Abdullah (2022), however, shows that societal and state responses are not uniform, since social resilience may be weakened by accumulated grievances, transnational networks, foreign religious funding, and politicisation, whereas state resilience remains comparatively stronger. These studies collectively indicate that contestation over Salafism is embedded within a larger struggle concerning the character of Malaysian Islam. Questions of moderation and conservatism are therefore linked to institutional power, ethnic politics, public definitions of orthodoxy, and unequal opportunities for competing Muslim voices. A major implication is that shifts in religious discourse become socially consequential when particular interpretations acquire durable access to political authority or state-connected institutions.

Taken as a whole, the evidence portrays religious authority, state regulation, and political contestation as mutually reinforcing dimensions of contemporary Salafism in Malaysia. Shiozaki (2015), Abdullah (2022), and Hamid (2018) show that the Malaysian religious order rests on historically developed regulatory instruments capable of classifying interpretations, controlling religious affairs, and responding to movements regarded as problematic. At the same time, Osman (2014, 2017), and Hamid (2025) demonstrate that Salafi and neo-Salafi currents may also expand through political alliances, institutional penetration, conservative social change, and strategic engagement with centres of power. The synthesis therefore reveals no simple opposition between a regulatory state and an external Salafi movement. A more convincing interpretation is that Salafism operates within a contested institutional field where restriction, accommodation, political utility, and ideological influence may occur simultaneously. This tension represents a central finding of the reviewed literature: state capacity can restrain selected radical or unauthorised tendencies while political and institutional conditions may still enable other Salafi-oriented actors to obtain legitimacy and influence. Nevertheless, the abstracts provide less detailed evidence on how such processes vary across Malaysia's different states, religious bureaucracies, political periods, and Salafi orientations. Further research is therefore needed to distinguish more carefully between doctrinal Salafism, politically engaged Salafi actors, neo-Salafi formations, and radical ideological currents, particularly when assessing relationships with state authority and political contestation.

Radical Salafism, Jihadism, and Security Challenges

The reviewed literature identifies ideological continuity and transformation as central to understanding radical Salafism and jihadist mobilisation in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian region. Abdullah and Salleh (2015) show that the conception of jihad promoted by radical Salafi movements departed from earlier Salafi orientations through a stronger acceptance of force for religious-political objectives, with ideas associated with al-Qaeda and Taliban-style militancy spreading through regional movements such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Jama'ah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), and Hizbut Tahrir (HT). Abu Bakar, Kifli, and Yusoff (Abu Bakar et al., 2017) similarly identify ideological continuity linking JI, Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), and Daesh, while also noting a significant evolution towards the more extreme violence associated with Daesh. Kifli et al. (2020) place this development within a longer Malaysian history of religious radicalism, arguing that post-9/11 militancy reformulated earlier radical tendencies through the influence of Daesh ideology and Salafi-Takfiri orientations. Ramakrishna (Ramakrishna, 2016) reinforces this interpretation through the experience of former JI figure Wan Min Wan Mat, indicating that the broad Salafi-jihadist worldview associated with JI retained relevance for understanding the later ISIS threat despite differences in historical and organisational circumstances. Taken together, these findings suggest that contemporary jihadism in Malaysia is neither an entirely new phenomenon nor a straightforward continuation of older militancy. A more accurate interpretation points to ideological adaptation, in which inherited narratives of jihad, political grievance, takfir, and religious struggle are reconfigured through changing organisations and transnational militant environments.

A second major pattern concerns the transformation of radical ideology through doctrinal framing and claims to authentic Islam. Osman and Arosoaie (2020) associate Malaysian support for ISIS with a strong sense of Islamic righteousness, the presence of Salafi-jihadi discourse, and ISIS narratives presenting a particular vision of religious authenticity. Wahab et al. (2022) provide a more specific account of this ideological construction through analysis of Dabiq, identifying five elements within ISIS discourse on tawhid: a Salafi-Wahhabi ideological strand, the tripartite classification of tawhid, al-wala' wa al-bara', al-hakimiyyah, and takfirism. Abdullah and Salleh (2015) similarly demonstrate that radical Salafi conceptions of jihad acquired substantial political

content and expanded regionally beyond earlier Salafi formulations. Abu Bakar, Kifli, and Yusoff (2017) further locate ideological similarities across JI, KMM, and Daesh, suggesting continuity in the doctrinal architecture of radical movements even where organisational forms and levels of violence differ. Kifli et al. (2020) likewise connect contemporary Malaysian radicalism with the remaking of earlier ideas through Daesh dogmatism. The combined evidence indicates that radicalisation cannot be explained only through organisational membership or exposure to violence. Ideological mobilisation also depends on the reinterpretation of core religious concepts, particularly where theological vocabulary is connected to political sovereignty, exclusive loyalty, excommunication, and legitimisation of coercive action. At the same time, Wahab et al. (2022) conclude that the ISIS construction of tawhid diverges from the mainstream framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, highlighting the importance of distinguishing militant ideological appropriation from broader Sunni or Salafi religious traditions.

The literature also demonstrates that Malaysian jihadist mobilisation has become socially more heterogeneous and cannot be adequately explained by conventional assumptions concerning religious education or a single socioeconomic profile. Osman and Arosoaie (2020) find that Malaysians associated with ISIS differed from an older jihadist generation through diverse occupational backgrounds, limited formal or informal religious training, and a growing connection between criminality and radicalisation. Yaacob, Abdullah, and Fauzee (2019), based on a large mixed-method study involving 5,232 respondents and focus-group participants, identify family background, educational experience, personal difficulties, and access to alternative media as factors associated with acceptance or rejection of Daesh. Ramakrishna (2016), from the perspective of JI recruitment and indoctrination, emphasises the continuing relevance of ideological socialisation and rehabilitation knowledge for confronting evolving jihadist threats. Kifli et al. (2020) add a historical dimension by connecting contemporary radicalism with earlier homegrown organisations and changing social patterns, while Abu Bakar, Kifli, and Yusoff (2017) demonstrate that ideological continuity across militant organisations remains a persistent security concern. These findings collectively suggest that radicalisation arises through intersecting pathways rather than a single causal sequence. Religious narratives, personal vulnerabilities, social environments, political contexts, criminal trajectories,

and recruitment mechanisms may combine differently across individuals and groups. Consequently, an exclusive focus on formal religious institutions or theological literacy would provide an incomplete explanation of Malaysian involvement in jihadist movements.

Digital communication and propaganda constitute another significant dimension of the contemporary threat environment. Yaacob, Abdullah, and Fauzee (2019) identify social media as an important channel for the cross-border diffusion of Daesh ideology and report that, although 90.8% of surveyed Malaysians rejected Daesh, 9.2% expressed acceptance, with the presence of sympathetic attitudes in strategically important education and security sectors regarded as a matter of concern. Wahab et al. (2022) demonstrate how Dabiq functioned as an ideological vehicle through which ISIS articulated a structured discourse of tawhid and circulated concepts related to loyalty, governance, and takfir. Osman and Arosoaie (2020) similarly stress the importance of ISIS's discursive construction of authentic Islam in attracting Malaysian support, while Ramakrishna (2016) shows that earlier knowledge concerning JI recruitment and indoctrination remains useful for interpreting newer forms of jihadist mobilisation. Abdullah and Salleh (2015) further place such dissemination within a broader history of regional ideological expansion, showing how radical understandings of jihad moved from Indonesian centres into other parts of Southeast Asia. The synthesis therefore indicates a shift from predominantly organisation-based mobilisation towards a more fluid ideological environment in which propaganda can circulate across borders and reach audiences without requiring conventional membership structures. Such development complicates security responses because ideological exposure may occur through dispersed media ecosystems and can interact with pre-existing grievances or personal circumstances.

The relationship between radicalisation and Malaysia's political environment forms a further recurring concern. Osman and Arosoaie (2020) contextualise support for ISIS partly through the historical competition over Islamisation between major political parties, alongside the presence of Salafi-jihadi discourse and claims concerning authentic Islam. Kifli et al. (2020) situate contemporary radicalism within a longer post-independence history in which certain religious groups regarded state institutions and political parties as insufficiently Islamic, before later radical currents absorbed stronger

Daesh-oriented elements. Gkoutzioulis (2024), however, warns that broad classifications separating “moderate” from “extremist” Muslims may distort security analysis when detached from historical and socio-political contexts. This caution is particularly important when read alongside Abdullah and Salleh (2015), whose analysis distinguishes radical Salafi movements advocating force from earlier or traditional Salafi orientations, and Wahab et al. (2022), whose findings locate specific extremist elements within ISIS doctrinal discourse rather than treating Muslim theological identity as inherently radical. The combined literature therefore supports a contextual approach to security analysis. Political competition, historical categories, institutional narratives, and ideological developments must be examined together, while umbrella labels such as “Salafism,” “Islamism,” or “extremism” require careful qualification. Otherwise, analytical categories intended to identify threats may obscure distinctions between non-violent reformist currents, politically active movements, and organisations committed to violent jihad.

A broader synthesis of the studies reveals that Malaysia’s security challenge is characterised by both ideological persistence and organisational change. Ramakrishna (2016), Abu Bakar, Kifli, and Yusoff (), and Kifli et al. (2020) collectively indicate that earlier militant experiences involving JI and KMM remain relevant because important ideological elements continue within later jihadist formations. Abdullah and Salleh (2015) demonstrate that such continuity belongs to a wider Southeast Asian circulation of radical concepts of jihad, while Osman and Arosoaie (2020) show that ISIS support in Malaysia nevertheless developed distinctive contemporary features, including heterogeneous occupational profiles, weak formal religious training, and a stronger criminality-radicalisation nexus. Yaacob, Abdullah, and Fauzee (2019) further reveal that broad public rejection of Daesh does not eliminate smaller pockets of acceptance, whereas Wahab et al. (2022) illustrate the doctrinal sophistication of propaganda used to legitimise extremist positions. Gkoutzioulis (2024) adds an essential analytical qualification by showing that security assessment can become contradictory when complex identities are compressed into decontextualised binaries. Accordingly, the reviewed evidence suggests that counter-radicalisation requires more than organisational suppression. Relevant responses need to address ideological narratives, recruitment and indoctrination processes, digital dissemination, personal and social vulnerabilities, and

the political contexts within which claims of Islamic authenticity acquire persuasive force.

Overall, the literature portrays radical Salafism and jihadism in Malaysia as a multidimensional security issue shaped by transnational ideological transmission, local political history, evolving militant organisations, doctrinal reinterpretation, social vulnerabilities, and changing communication technologies. Osman and Arosoaie (2020), Abdullah and Salleh (2015), and Ramakrishna (2016) establish strong connections between regional Salafi-jihadist discourse, earlier JI experiences, and the later ISIS challenge. Wahab et al. (2022), Yaacob, Abdullah, and Fauzee (2019), and Abu Bakar, Kifli, and Yusoff (2017) further demonstrate that extremist mobilisation operates through doctrinal propaganda, public reception, and ideological continuity across militant formations. Kifli et al. (2020) and Gkoutzioulis (2024) add important contextual perspectives by locating radicalism within longer historical developments and questioning broad security categories that may blur distinctions among different Islamic orientations. A central conclusion emerging from the synthesis is that radical Salafism should not be treated as synonymous with Salafism in general. The reviewed abstracts support a clearer analytical distinction between broader Salafi reform currents and Salafi-jihadist formations that legitimise force for religious-political ends. This distinction is particularly important for research on contemporary Malaysia, since imprecise categorisation may overstate the relationship between non-violent Salafi identity and terrorism while simultaneously weakening accurate assessment of genuinely violent ideological networks.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This systematic review examined the development and contemporary manifestations of Salafism in Malaysia, with particular attention to three questions concerning its historical and ideological evolution through transnational networks, its interaction with religious authority and political regulation, and the relationship between radical Salafism, jihadist ideology, militant mobilisation, and security challenges. Following the PRISMA-guided selection process reported in the study, 38 records were initially identified from Scopus and Web of Science, comprising 21 records from Scopus and 17 from Web of Science. No publications were excluded under the English–Malay language criterion, 15 duplicate records were removed, and three further records were excluded during eligibility assessment,

leaving 20 primary studies for qualitative synthesis. The review therefore covered studies meeting the predefined requirements of linguistic accessibility, thematic relevance, alignment with the research objectives, and sufficient full-text availability for assessment.

The synthesis produced three interconnected findings. First, the literature demonstrates that Salafism in contemporary Malaysia is historically layered and ideologically diverse rather than a uniform extension of Gulf religious influence. Its development reflects interaction among earlier reformist traditions, the Perlis Sunnah orientation, Saudi-linked currents, Tajdid tendencies, educational mobility, and multidirectional networks connecting Malaysia with the wider Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern environments. Second, Salafism operates within a contested institutional field in which religious authority, state regulation, official fatwa mechanisms, political competition, and claims to Islamic legitimacy intersect. State institutions may restrict selected currents regarded as unauthorised or threatening while other Salafi-oriented actors may acquire influence through political alliances, institutional access, or broader conservative shifts. Third, the security literature identifies ideological continuities between selected Salafi-jihadist formations and changing militant environments, particularly through reinterpretations of jihad, takfir-oriented doctrines, extremist propaganda, digital dissemination, and transnational mobilisation. At the same time, the evidence strongly indicates that radical Salafism cannot be treated as equivalent to Salafism in general, since non-violent reformist, locally embedded, politically engaged, and militant currents represent analytically different trajectories. These three domains correspond directly to the thematic structure developed from the 20 included studies.

The principal contribution of this review lies in bringing together a fragmented body of scholarship previously distributed across historical studies, Islamic thought, political analysis, religious governance, transnational networks, radicalisation, and security research. The resulting synthesis proposes a three-dimensional interpretive framework organised around reform, authority, and radicalism. Reform captures historical continuity, ideological adaptation, localisation, and transnational exchange; authority explains contestation over religious legitimacy, institutional regulation, and political access; radicalism isolates the narrower field of Salafi-jihadist ideology and militant mobilisation without extending this classification to Salafism as a whole. This framework

advances current knowledge by showing that these dimensions are interconnected but not interchangeable. Historical reform does not necessarily progress towards political contestation, and political Salafi engagement does not inherently develop into violent militancy. The review consequently provides a more differentiated conceptual basis for interpreting Malaysian Salafism and addresses a major weakness in scholarship that may rely on broad categories such as “Salafi,” “Wahhabi,” “moderate,” or “extremist” without sufficient attention to context, internal variation, and changing institutional settings.

Several practical implications emerge from this synthesis. For religious authorities and policymakers, regulatory responses would benefit from distinguishing among doctrinal reformism, non-violent Salafi activism, politically engaged Salafi actors, and Salafi-jihadist formations, since undifferentiated classification may weaken both religious governance and security assessment. For educational institutions and religious agencies, greater attention is required to the historical diversity of Salafi thought, the local development of Sunnah and Tajdid orientations, and the ways in which theological concepts may be selectively reframed within extremist narratives. For security and counter-radicalisation practice, the evidence supports approaches that move beyond organisational prohibition alone by considering digital propaganda, ideological socialisation, recruitment processes, personal vulnerabilities, transnational circulation, and the political contexts surrounding claims of religious authenticity. The synthesis also indicates the value of contextualised rehabilitation and prevention strategies that separate legitimate theological disagreement from advocacy of coercion and militant violence.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The review relied exclusively on Scopus and Web of Science, which may have excluded relevant scholarship indexed in regional databases, specialised Islamic studies repositories, Malay-language platforms, theses, books, policy reports, and other grey literature. Although the inclusion criteria permitted both English and Malay publications and no records were removed on linguistic grounds, the search strategy remained dependent on the terms “Salafi,” “Salafism,” “Salafi movement,” “Malaysia,” and “Malaysian,” which may not retrieve studies framed through related labels such as Sunnah, Tajdid, Kaum Muda, Wahhabism, reformism, or other locally specific terminology. The final corpus of 20 studies also limits the extent to which broad conclusions can

represent all Malaysian states, institutions, communities, and Salafi orientations. Future research should therefore examine subnational differences across state religious administrations, local scholarly networks, educational institutions, gender and generational patterns, digital religious authority, everyday Salafi practice, and the movement of ideas between Malaysia and neighbouring societies. Greater methodological diversity is also needed, particularly longitudinal studies, multi-sited ethnography, network analysis, comparative state-level research, and empirically grounded studies capable of tracing the boundaries between non-violent reformist Salafism and Salafi-jihadist mobilisation.

In conclusion, this systematic review demonstrates that Salafism in contemporary Malaysia is best understood as a heterogeneous and context-dependent field situated between reform, authority,

and radicalism. Its trajectories have been shaped by historical reform traditions, local institutional arrangements, transnational exchanges, political competition, and divergent responses to questions of religious authenticity and social order. The broader significance of the review lies in replacing a singular representation of Salafism with a differentiated framework that recognises overlap without collapsing distinct currents into one category. Systematic evidence synthesis is particularly important in this field because fragmented terminology and security-centred assumptions can obscure historical complexity and internal diversity. A more cumulative and conceptually precise research agenda can strengthen theoretical understanding of contemporary Islamic movements while providing a sounder empirical basis for religious governance, educational development, political analysis, and security policy in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian context.

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7. Author Declaration

The authors confirm that this manuscript is an original work. It has not been published previously, is not under consideration by any other journal, and does not contain plagiarized material. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged and cited. The authors also declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study