

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**INTERPRETING PSYCHOLOGICAL
WARFARE: UNDERSTANDING
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM FROM A
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH**

AHMAD SAUFFIYAN ABU HASAN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the meaning of "psychology" in psychological warfare by explaining the factors that permit the existence of religious extremist behavior. Such attention are been given because the problem is relatively understudied in Malaysia and that has resulted in the inability to develop an ideal psychological warfare model to deal with the problem. Since 2001, Malaysia has been labeled as a breeding ground for religious extremist leaders. The recurring number of religious extremist cases magnifies our limited understanding on the psychological context of the problem and if left unattained, can prolong the situation. To propose a theoretical solution to the problem, three research objectives were formulated and they are: (1) how existential psychology can be used to explain religious extremism, (2) how behavioral psychology can be used to explain religious extremism and (3) how psychoanalytical psychology can be used to explain religious extremism. Conclusively, discourse analysis on 37 psychological constructs extracted from three psychological paradigms of Frankl, Pavlov & Skinner, and Freud have enabled this study to theorize a multi-factor stand to look at the problem, hence confirming the root cause of it. Some "Enabling Factors" emerged to authenticate the conceptual model in terms of framing the roots and types of religious extremist behavior. These "Enabling Factors" are divided into three categories consist of Single-Psychological Factor, Double-Psychological Factor, and Triple-Psychological Factor. The results show, religious extremist behavior falls in the Triple-Psychological Factor category. This means, in order for religious extremist behavior to emerge, there must be simultaneous psychological problem of (1) severe inability to develop meaning to life, (2) prolonged environmental stimulation toward aggressiveness and violent, and (3) inability to adopt mature defense mechanisms due to the development of fixation, blind obsession in ritual practice and condoning a destructive worldview towards life. In summary, overcoming these enabling factors is a highly recommended psychological warfare skill in an attempt to understand religious extremism and to halt the problem before it begins. This is a small but significant breakthrough in psychological warfare research as this conceptual model offers a new approach to the prevention of extremist behavior by providing in-depth psychological knowledge on the root causes of the problem and subsequently weaponized psychological warfare initiative for peace purposes.

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CHAPTER ONE¹

INTRODUCTION

1.1 A PRELUDE TO THE PROBLEM² AND ITS CONTEXT³

“The battlefield of the mind is a neglected battlefield. A strategic investment, fighting the battlefield of the mind is less costly, albeit a larger commitment. Extricating the negative thoughts and replacing them with realistic thoughts are also a more humanitarian approach” (Angell & Gunaratna, 2012, p. 351). Scholars agree that psychological warfare approach could be the best solution to combat extremism. However, such idea is nothing new and it has long been thought about for example, in addressing the importance of psychological warfare, according to Zaharna (2004):

“The need to deliberately manipulate information is what makes propaganda and psychological operations such invaluable tools of warfare” (p. 223).

Although Zaharna (2004) did not specified how psychological warfare can be a tool to combat extremism, but she suggested in term of using "manipulation" in psychological warfare, behavior changing can be program. In the Malaysian context, this manipulation refers to peacetime psychological warfare to manipulate religious extremist

¹ A title for this study is "*Interpreting Psychological Warfare: Understanding Religious Extremism from a Discourse Analysis Approach*". The word '*Interpreting*' represent the effort made in this study to localize and customize the concept of psychological warfare that is practical to be used in Malaysia. The word also signifies the orientation and focus of the psychological warfare concept redirected to attend to a recurring problem of religious extremism. Next, the sentence '*Understanding Religious Extremism from a Discourse Analysis Approach*' represents the limitation and scope of the research. Although the sentence may sound similar to some previous research, the chosen psychological traditions uses to explain religious extremism are unique and cover three aspects of human psychological dimensions such as the subconscious, noetic dimension and environment stimulation. In summary, the scope that this study is probing are new and original. Although it has a limited focus, completion of the objectives of this study required years of effort. This study is a revelation for psychological warfare scholars to look at psychological warfare differently. In particular, to avoid looking at psychological warfare from a militaristic perspective and equipping the psychological warfare concept with specific psychological knowledge to address a problem; in this case, religious extremism in Malaysia.

² This study discusses a sensitive, unpopular but important recurring issue pertaining to religious extremism in Malaysia. The idea is to point out and explain the problem. Such issue on Muslim extremism should not be hidden and buried just because it is sensitive and unpopular; instead it should be continuously addressed, discussed and explained so in the future such problem will not deter the peace and harmony that exist in Malaysia. The researcher has no intention to demonize any religion as an extremist religion. This is a positive initiative to help eradicate negative perceptions towards Islam and Muslims in Malaysia and at the same time joining the effort laid by the government of Malaysia to eradicate the threat emerging from religious extremism.

³ Carolina (2007) highlighted that, "in the aftermath of September 11, the Malaysian government came out strongly in support of global efforts to counter "terrorism" and "extremism". Malaysia and the US signed an anti-terror pact during a visit by Mahathir to the White House in May 2002". Carolina (2007), further added, "US military presence in the Straits of Melaka on the west coast of the peninsula, purportedly due to the concern with piracy and extremism in the region".