Rethinking the causes of Islamisation: Ontological (in)security, postcoloniality, and Islam in Malaysia

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Theories about state-led Islamisation tend to attribute the phenomenon to domestic dynamics, such as political competition, institutional co-optation, and changing social norms. When exogenous factors are considered, they usually refer to imported ideologies. Moreover, Islamisation is often depicted as a firm rejection of the West. This article seeks to complicate those explanations. Using insights from the ontological security literature in International Relations, I argue that Malaysia's state-led Islamisation cannot be understood comprehensively without looking at macro-historical factors, particularly Malaysia's postcoloniality and its elites' perception of the global order. Instead of being a manifestation of anti-West sentiments, I argue that the initial receptivity towards Islamisation by Malaysia's largely secular ethnonationalist elites constitutes a quest for recognition within an international order within which the Muslim identity is racialised and stigmatised. This is most obvious in Mahathir Mohamad's ideas on Islam, in that his calling for a developmentalist Islam has as its (imagined) respondent the stigmatising 'West'. I argue that the forms of Islamisation undertaken during the Mahathir administration reflected this drive to catch up with the West while simultaneously securing recognition for Islam; and that such a leitmotif persisted even into the post-September 11, post-Barisan Nasional world.

The question of Islamisation's causes has many treatments in the literature. Recent discussions conflate it with the phenomenon of identity politics, arguing that, as in the cases of many non-Muslim majority countries, Muslim identity is politicised as a nativist, conservative front locked in a cultural clash with perceived 'liberal' stances on issues of gender, sexuality, culture, and civil rights.[1] If this understanding of Islamisation gives the impression that its manifestations represent a *resistance* towards change, previous discussions about Islamisation highlight its *propensity* for change,

1   Bridget Welsh, 'Malaysia's political polarization: Race, religion, and reform', in *Political polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old divisions, new dangers*, ed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), pp. 41–52; Salwa Ismail, 'Being Muslim: Islam, Islamism and identity politics', *Government & Opposition* 39, 4 (2004): 614–31; Francis Fukyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018); Pankaj Mishra, *Age of anger: A history of the present* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017).

showing as proof the 'greater visibility of Islamic norms, values, and symbols in the public arena, and anchoring of law and policymaking in its values' since the 1970s.[2] In the case of Malaysia, this dialectical relationship to change informs the scholarship about Islamisation's driving factors. Islamisation is attributed to *institutional changes*—a result of the co-optation of Islamist activists, such as the once-rising star Anwar Ibrahim; and to the transformational expansion of an Islamic bureaucracy as the ruling Malay nationalist party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), embarked on an 'Islamisation race' with its Islamist opponent, the Pan-Malaysian Islamist Party (PAS) from the 1970s onwards.[3]

Alternatively, Islamisation is attributed to *social change*. Profound and often disruptive changes introduced by urbanisation, modernisation, and secularisation fostered the appeal of Islam as a symbolic and communal signifier to mobilise and even militate against the encroachment of perceived Western norms and culture. In this reading, Islam is a form of social capital to challenge the neoliberal developmental model opted for by the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN);[4] and to articulate a separate developmental route and ethics for state, society, and economy, on the other.[5] Lastly, Islamisation is associated with *global changes*. International developments, such as the Iranian Revolution; the Saudi state's exportation of Wahhabism; and the transfusion of networks and ideas from groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi networks, had instigated movements of Islamist revivalism that called for religious purification as well as the institution of some form of Islamic state.[6]

Without denying the importance of such factors and dynamics, they cannot convincingly explain the source, trajectory, and form of Islamisation in Malaysia. By

2 Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic leviathan: Islam and the making of state power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.
3 Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and politics: Islamism in contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kikue Hamayotsu, 'Demobilizing Islam: Institutionalized religion and the politics of co-optation in Malaysia' (PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 2005); Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy and disenchantment of social life: A study of bureaucratic Islam in Malaysia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'Political Islam in Malaysia: Problematising discourse and practice in the UMNO-PAS "Islamisation race"', *Commonweath and Comparative Politics* 42, 2 (2004): 184–205.
4 BN refers to a multiethnic coalition that governed Malaysia from its inception in 1957, first under the name of the Alliance Party and later BN in 1973, until its electoral defeat by Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) in 2018. BN was part of a ruling coalition with its splinter party, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu) and PAS from 2020 to 2022 but joined PH in government after Malaysia's 15th General Election in 2022.
5 Judith Nagata, *The reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern religious radicals and their roots* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984); Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987); Zainah Anwar, *Islamic revivalism in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987); Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and ethnicity in Malay politics* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).
6 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The trail of political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'The extensive salafization of Malaysian Islam', *Trends in Southeast Asia* 9 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak, 2016); Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, 'Transnational Islamism and its impact in Malaysia and Indonesia', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 15, 2 (2011): 42–52; Zulkifly Abdul Malik, 'From Cairo to Kuala Lumpur: The influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood on the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) (MA diss., Georgetown University, Washington DC, 2011).

source and trajectory, I mean the statist nature of Islamisation in Malaysia that saw a proliferation of formal rules, agencies, and institutional norms aimed at increasing Islam's public presence and actualising certain understandings of Islamic aesthetics and morality. By form, I refer to three sets of processes—bureaucratisation, corporatisation, and the Islamisation of the sciences—which have undergirded Malaysia's modernist Islamisation project. To be sure, scholars such as Veli Nasr, Joseph Liow, and Maznah Mohamad have correctly traced the source of Malaysia's Islamisation to within the state itself, but they do not address one peculiarity.[7] How did Islamisation develop most actively during Mahathir Mohamad's administration given his known antipathy towards Islamist fundamentalist thinking?[8] What explains Mahathir's reputation as a nationalist strongman yet his different approach in dealing with a challenging Islamist opposition, which was unlike that of other authoritarian Muslim state leaders, such as Indonesia's Suharto and Egypt's Mubarak, who opted for brutal suppression? Moreover, one may ask, in hindsight, given Mahathir's penchant for authoritarian and personalised rule, how did he preside over the state's institutionalisation of a brand of Islam that he not only had personal misgivings about,[9] but which also resulted in a significant narrowing of the ideological distance between UMNO and PAS, ultimately threatening UMNO's political survival?[10]

Viewed in this light, to say that state-led Islamisation in Malaysia was a product of Mahathir's efforts to institute hegemonic control over society appears to be an overestimation of his role.[11] As Sven Schottmann convincingly argues, Islamisation during (and, if I may add, after) the Mahathir years must be understood beyond

7 Nasr, *Islamic leviathan*; Liow, *Piety and politics*; Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*.
8 In this article I use the terms 'fundamentalism' and 'Islamism' to denote both the ideological and social bases of Muslim movements, while being mindful of how these terms themselves have been used to stigmatise Muslim actors. Here, Islamist fundamentalism 'implies an outlook that idealises the "golden age" of Islam and offers a return to this golden age through the restoration of primary values and rules of social and personal behavior on the basis of timeless precepts' (Liow, *Piety and politics*, p. 6). Islamism refers to a political phenomenon that witnessed the establishment of Muslim Brotherhood-linked or -inspired (though not exclusively so) parties and movements that seek to establish an Islamic state of some sort through overt political activism and electoral participation. Being a fundamentalist may overlap with being an Islamist, but need not always be so. In short, a fundamentalist is generally distinguished by a literalist approach to religion, but an Islamist is one who strives to integrate Islamic symbols, precepts, and visions into politics.
9 This can be seen from the fact that Mahathir, after he came back into power briefly as prime minister of the PH government, had opted to reform the education system, claiming that too much time was dedicated to Islamic subjects. See 'PM Mahathir to overhaul Malaysia's schools, saying too much focus on Islamic studies now', *Straits Times*, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/pm-mahathir-to-overhaul-malaysias-schools-saying-too-much-focus-on-islam-studies-now (last accessed 25 June 2022).
10 On the closing of UMNO and PAS' ideological distance, see Liow, *Piety and politics*; Liow, 'Political Islam in Malaysia'. On Mahathir's personalised rule, see Dan Slater. 'Iron cage in an iron fist: Authoritarian institutions and the personalization of power in Malaysia', *Comparative Politics* 36, 1 (2003): 80–101; In-Won Hwang, *Personalized politics: The Malaysian state under Mahathir* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).
11 Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'The Mahathir administration's war against Islamic militancy: Operational and ideological challenges', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58, 2 (2004): 253; Andrew Humphreys, 'A total approach: The Malaysian security model and political development' (PhD diss., University of Wollonggong, 2009).

the terms of 'mere instrumentalism'.[12] Framing Islamisation within the exigencies of political competition underestimates the role of the ostensibly secular-leaning Malaysian Muslim elite such as Mahathir, and their ideas about Islam. Schottmann's critical engagement with Mahathir's ideas about Islam as a 'theology of progress' and the *leitkultur* (leading culture) he represented is pivotal as he illustrates how Mahathir was a proactive player as much as he was a shrewd strategist; and that Islam's salience in Muslim politics is not the preserve of actors conveniently typified as the 'Islamists'.

This study builds on Schottmann's findings but introduces a wider theoretical dimension. Instead of making Mahathir the central protagonist, it recontextualises Mahathir's thinking about Islam and Malaysia's state-led Islamisation within the historical and epistemological foundations of the postcolonial international order. In doing so, it reinterprets Islamisation as a product of ontological security-seeking by Muslim state elites. Borrowing the sociological concept of stigma from the International Relations (IR) literature, I argue that elite thinking about Islam in Malaysia is shaped by the experience of colonisation and their positionality within a Eurocentric international order that had its norms, values, and hierarchies constructed through the historical racialisation and stigmatisation of the Muslim identity. As I will elaborate, the effects of such stigmatisation have created an identity dilemma. Early Westernised indigenous elites relied on their Muslim identity to underpin their legitimacy to rule, but, having internalised the culturalist idea of 'Muslimness' as a label of inherent difference (and inferiority), they also maintained a sense of indifference towards Islam. Thus, far from being an exhibition of anti-Westernism or fundamentalist revivalism, I argue that state-led Islamisation in Malaysia was directly influenced by Mahathir's attempt to escape this dilemma. The Mahathir administration had embraced Islam as a marker, but also tried to reverse its stigmatisation through Malaysia's example. This motive underlined Mahathir's greater receptivity towards incorporating Islam within Malaysia's governance. More importantly, it accounts for the statist trajectory and the specific forms of Islamisation encouraged and implemented by the Malaysian state: namely bureaucratisation, corporatisation, and the Islamisation of the sciences.

While acknowledging that political exigencies were present every step of the way, with cascading effects and unintended consequences, my focus here is on showing that state-led Islamisation in Malaysia cannot be separated from elite motives of recognition-seeking through the reversal of Islam's stigmatisation. Theoretically, this article adds another analytical dimension to the phenomenon of statist Islamisation by highlighting the 'international' not as a realm of transfer and exchange where Muslim actors and ideas travel, but rather as the historical sociological canvas influencing the choices and considerations of postcolonial Muslim elites as they grapple with Islam's position in their nation and state-building projects. Apart from the rich literature on Islamisation outlined earlier, my analysis also draws from a sociological analysis of Malaysia's early elites; a discursive analysis of Mahathir's thoughts; and an institutional tracing of Malaysia's Islamisation from the 1980s onwards in the

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12 Sven Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on religion and modernity in Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), p. 10.

political science and anthropology literature. This combination of textual, institutional, and anthropological analysis shows that Islamisation, more than being just a search for religious purity and the bubbling of anti-Western sentiments, was underlined by a persistent, if conflicted, need for recognition amongst modernising Muslim elites navigating a postcolonial yet resolutely Eurocentric international order.

This article will proceed as follows. First, I introduce the concepts of stigma and ontological security and discuss them vis-à-vis Malaysia's postcoloniality and the question of Islam's position in its nascent statehood. I argue that the question of Islam had become a source of ontological insecurity for Malaysia's early postcolonial Muslim elites due to their social positionality as self-perceived modernisers as well as representatives of 'non-Western' indigeneity. Second, I illustrate the pivotal change marked by Mahathir's ascendancy as the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, as he spearheaded a different kind of elite thinking about Islam. Mahathir is approached as the analytical window here because his writings display both signs of stigmatisation as well as an ambition to correct Islam's stigmatisation. Far from maintaining Islam's marginality within Malaysia's broader modernisation goals like his predecessors, the Mahathir administration embraced Islamisation as central to the modernisation project in order to correct the perception that Islam was incompatible with industrial modernity. Third, I discuss how the pathways of Islamisation during Mahathir's tenure reflected the aforementioned status-seeking ethos. This can be seen in their statist trajectory and in how they were driven to project an 'Islamic' image for Malaysia that anchors itself in the various totems of industrial modernity: bureaucracy, corporations, and the sciences. Lastly, I highlight how the Global War on Terror (GWOT) created a discursive economy where the label of 'moderate' Islam became the vessel of ontological security-seeking for Muslim elites seeking to contest Islam's stereotyping as fanatical and violent, although efforts to project Islam's compatibility with technological modernity lingers on.

Ontological security, postcoloniality, and Islam

The lens of ontological security has increasingly been employed in IR scholarship to analyse postcolonial subjectivities of non-Western states, which, according to IR theorist Marco Vieira, is defined by an 'anxiety-driven lack generated by the ever-present desire to emulate but also resist the "ego-ideal" represented by the Western other'.[13] The concept was introduced by psychoanalyst R.D. Laing, who described an ontologically secure person as someone confident of her 'integral selfhood and personal identity'.[14] Sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that in the modern condition, 'feelings of self-identity are both robust and fragile', which explains its anxiety-ridden nature.[15] He noted the duality of self-identity as being

> [f]ragile, because the biography the individual reflexively holds in mind is only one 'story' among many other potential stories that could be told about her development

13 Marco A. Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, 2 (2018): 143.
14 R.D. Laing, *The divided self*, reprint (London: Penguin, 1990[1965]), p. 39.
15 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 55.

as a self; robust, because a sense of self-identity is often securely enough held to weather major tensions or transitions in the social environments within which the person moves.[16]

Caterina Kinnvall brought this insight into her study of 'religious nationalism', claiming that the destabilising effects of globalisation have given rise to a 'politics of resistance and the growth of local identities' which interlocked religion and the nation as 'identity-signifiers' of homeliness from which individuals and communities can reclaim their ontological security.[17] Whereas certainly useful in thinking about the various social movements associated with nativist identity politics, Kinnvall's employment of the concept is still insufficient to account for Malaysia's experience of Islamisation as a state-led phenomenon. This is because her theorisation of ontological insecurity is based on a concept of marginality that operates on a global/local divide. That divide, however, does not account for the experiences of state elites who have an interest in maintaining the coherence of the state's self-identity, and, therefore, perceive their marginality through the ontology of the state.[18] In other words, perceptions of marginality by postcolonial non-Western state elites are linked to *biographical* narratives that underwrite state identity, which is anchored spatiotemporally within socialised understandings of the society of states.[19] Understood this way, Islamisation unfolds not just on a canvas whereby Muslims are confronted with global and local contingencies. Rather, it also transpires as a result of state elites responding to a global topography *qua* states. In the latter scenario, the axis of perceived marginality is linked to the stratified nature of the international order, and how the trappings of 'Muslimness' are historically ranked within that order.[20]

It is here that Ayşe Zarakol's theory of stigmatisation in international politics is the most instructive. Proposed in her book *After Defeat*, Zarakol argues that, by virtue of its historically contingent emergence from a Eurocentric imperial order, the current international order is socially defined by an 'established insider-outsider' divide that segmented the international order into its Western and non-Western hemispheres.[21] This configuration implies not only a cognition of differences but also a 'relationship of unequals' based on an internalised hierarchy delineated by a set of standards that are as rigid as they are socioculturally specific.[22] Zarakol illustrates this experience of stigmatisation in the cases of Japan, Turkey, and Russia, whereby the experience of *defeat* at the hands of the Anglo-European powers (the 'West') that preceded their

16 Ibid., p. 55.
17 Caterina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology* 25, 5 (2004): 747.
18 Brent J. Steele, *Ontological security in international relations: Self identity and the IR state* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 151.
19 On the importance of biographical narratives to state identity, see Steele, *Ontological security*, pp. 10–12; Jelena Subotic, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, 4 (2016): 610–27.
20 Nicholas Lees, 'The dimensions of the divide: Vertical differentiation, international inequality and North–South stratification in international relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25, 2 (2012): 209–30.
21 Ayşe Zarakol, *After defeat: How the East learned to live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 57–108.
22 Ibid., p. 15.

induction into the global order exacted an emotional price on the national psyche. In other words, these states have committed themselves to an order,

> the rules of which they did not create, the norms of which were unfamiliar at best, the major players of which judged and explicitly labeled them as inferior, and the ontology of which convinced them that they indeed were lacking in some way.[23]

As a result, just as these nations settled into their modern statehood, a sense of inferiority was imprinted on their national psyches. This sense of inferiority is a product of *stigmatisation*, as it arose not just from 'a label of difference' imposed externally, but also because the stigmatised actor has internalised a 'particular normative standard that defines one's own attributes as *discreditable*'.[24] Stigmatisation, thus, fostered a sense of ontological insecurity within the non-West as perceptions of material and identity differences were internalised as assumptions of social, moral, and cultural deficits. This gap between difference and deficit is difficult to bridge as the non-West often seeks to catch up with the West based on 'standards' that excluded the former on historical, social, and cultural grounds in the first place. In other words, non-Western states care about being recognised as modern, successful, and civilised. Yet, in this act of caring, these states also reinforce their own association with an hierarchy that judges them as 'lesser' in those respects.

In the case of most postcolonial Muslim states, the problem of stigmatisation is even more acute. If the examples of Turkey, Russia, and Japan discussed by Zarakol are about former imperial powers reeling from their own defeat by the West, for most Muslim states their encounter with the West were marked by a concrete process of occupation and colonisation. Additionally, by the nineteenth century, an active process of discursive othering and racialisation was directed at Muslims, a great majority of whom were colonial subjects faced with the colonial enterprise's disproportionate economic, political, and military power.[25] Edward Said noted the extent of such power astutely in his study of Orientalism, wherein depictions of the 'Islamic Orient' were denoted by 'the Orientalists' power and not the Islamic people as humans nor their history as history'.[26] Put bluntly, colonial domination was paralleled by a systematic project of epistemic violence in its propagation, reproduction, and reinforcement of Orientalist discourses that racialised 'Muslimness' as the marker of backwardness and incivility. The power/knowledge implications of this process not only contributed to the formulation of 'secular' identities of states such as France or the United States, it also undergirded the epistemologies of the international order that relied on measures of 'secularity' as the de facto standards of modernity.[27] Imaginations of the unmodern, however, remained entwined with Orientalist representations of Islam. As Elizabeth Hurd notes, the 'Western ideals of order, domesticity, and democratic governance were consolidated in part through opposition to an Islamic

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23 Ibid., p. 6.
24 Ibid., p. 4.
25 Cemil Aydin, *The idea of the Muslim world: A global intellectual history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
26 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 87.
27 Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The politics of secularism in international relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

other'.[28] Mustapha Kamal Pasha problematises this epistemological issue as 'the ontological persistence of Islam as the generalised Other of Western modernity *and its socialised and materialised form*'.[29]

The combination of discursive racialisation and material subjugation also augmented the 'Muslim' aspect of the identities of the colonised people as 'Muslimness' became a discursive frame through which Muslim interlocutors articulated a sense of common suffering and destiny as part of the colonised.[30] Cemil Aydin, for example, argues that 'the idea of the Muslim world is inseparable from the claim that Muslims constitute a race', noting that racialisation of Muslims in Orientalist discourses also gave rise to imaginations of a common Islamic civilisation by Muslims seeking to contest assertations of their racial inferiority.[31] Indeed, this dual process of external imposition and internal validation underscores the resilience of the Muslim state (or Muslim world) label. Such resilience is the only reason why, despite gaping differences, Indonesia, Iran, and Yemen can all be placed within the same cognitive map in academic, political, and media discourses. It explains why the US State Department could feature the Islamic world as this fictive space where the 'struggle of ideas' had to happen without needing to supply any spatial or temporal context to the statement.[32] It accounts for how works of academia could frame authoritarianism and socioeconomic underdevelopment of multiple Muslim states within one single narrative.[33] It also features in the fact that the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) is the only religiously-denominated international organisation with a cross-continental membership spanning Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe.

If stigmatisation underpinned the construction of the category of the postcolonial Muslim state, it is also exacerbated by the fact that national elites had opted to join a Eurocentric society of states of their own volition. These elites' push to attain Westphalian sovereign equality through national independence coincided with their induction into an international order that saw their ethnoreligious histories and attributes as 'inferior', leading to a cognitive gap between received nominal equality and perceived social inferiority. In the case of Turkey, Ataturk attempted to bridge this gap by viewing 'Islam as the biggest obstacle in joining "Civilisation"', culminating in a hard secularist nation and state-building project that sought frantically to replace 'Islamic' institutions and cultural markers with European ones.[34] Syed Hussein Alatas made the same observation of Malaysian elites who continued to see the

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28   Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'Appropriating Islam: The Islamic other in the consolidation of Western modernity', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 12, 1 (2003): 40.
29   Mustapha Kamal Pasha, 'Fractured worlds: Islam, identity, and international relations', *Global Society* 17, 2 (2003): 113; emphasis in the original.
30   These political expressions of pan-Islam, however, tend to be confined to local political agitations. See Anthony Reid, 'Nineteenth century pan-Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, 2 (1967): 267–83; Chiara Formichi, 'Pan-Islam and religious nationalism: The case of Kartosuwiryo and Negara Islam Indonesia', *Indonesia* 90 (2010): 124–46.
31   Aydin, *The idea of the Muslim world*, p. 5.
32   US Department of State, 'Chapter 5', *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*, https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/ crt/2007/104114.htm (last accessed 20 June 2022).
33   Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment: A global and historical comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
34   Zarakol, *After defeat*, p. 146.

'natives' through the colonial gaze as subjects needing guidance to transition from their 'unpredictable, fun-loving, superstitious and imitative' nature into modern subjects.[35] In other words, ontologically insecure elites have themselves become the enablers of the stigmatising order.

Nevertheless, other than those governed by communist regimes, most post-colonial Muslim states did not push Islam forcefully out of the public sphere like Turkey. For many postcolonial Muslim elites, this was not an option either, as their 'Muslimness' underwrote their right to rule as 'natives', notwithstanding that many of them, including in Malaysia, were considerably 'Westernised' in their out-looks, comportment, lifestyle, and education.[36] However, their Muslim identity also marked their status as 'outsiders' in the global order, exposing them to the stigma while fuelling their desire for recognition. It was not just the Westernised elites who experienced this sense of inadequacy. The fact that Muslim reformists in the early twentieth century such as Rashid Rida (1865–1935), Mohammad Abduh (1849–1905), Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin (1869–1956) and Syed Shaykh Al-Hadi (1867–1934) were generally known as 'modernists' for their emphasis that Islam was a 'modern' and 'rational' religion also reflected a widespread sense of modernity 'deficit' Muslims had to live with during, and even long after colonisation.[37] Whether their development and nation-building model was based on secular-nationalist or Islamist ideals, most postcolonial Muslim elites, nation-builders, thinkers, or admin-istrators alike, grappled with a motive of status-seeking that saw catching up with the West as an absolute imperative for the future.

Islam, ontological insecurity, and the early postcolonial elites in Malaysia

I will now bring these insights into the Malaysian case study. While occupying an important symbolic and constitutional position, Islam was largely relegated to the sidelines in the first two decades of Malaysia's history by the Westernised elites of UMNO, who headed the multiethnic governing coalition, the Alliance Party, and later BN.[38] Scholars have attributed this reluctance to consider Islam as a resource of governance and nation-building to UMNO's secular-leaning ethnonationalist ideology and BN's model of multiracial consociationalism.[39] The strategic calculation involved is perhaps most aptly and macabrely captured by the Tunku's demograph-ically pragmatic statement of 'unless we are prepared to drown every non-Malay, we

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35 Syed Hussein Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 218.
36 Harry J. Benda, 'Political elites in colonial southeast Asia: An historical analysis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7, 3 (1965): 234–35.
37 Muhamad Ali, *Islam and colonialism: Becoming modern in Indonesia and Malaya* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 59–64, 182–4; Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, pp. 119–22.
38 The formation of Malaysia is basically a three-part story that witnessed: first, the independence of the Federation of Malaya covering the Malay Peninsula in 1957; second, the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 when Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore joined the federation; and third, the separation of Singapore in 1965.
39 N.J. Funston, *Malay politics in Malaysia: A study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational, 1980), pp. 145–50.

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can never think of an Islamic Administration'.[40] Nevertheless, I argue that BN's coalitional model and national demographics were insufficient to account for the entire scenario, given that those variables remained constant during the critical turn of Mahathir's administration. Thus, it is vital to unpack the mentality of the political and administrative elites who were self-fashioned modernisers tasked with catching up with the West.

James Scott's study of the early administrative elites in West Malaysia that was published in 1968 provides much insight into the psyche of these early elites.[41] Despite calling them the 'most significant group of Western cultural agents' in Malaysia, Scott noted that these elites did not display signs of internalising all 'Western' values.[42] For example, he observed in them only a 'formalistic' belief in democratic norms and values.[43] I argue that what they had internalised, rather, was the colonial judgement, one that placed Malaysia at a lower stage of development, something Alatas also alluded to in his observation of the elites' culturalist condemnation of the 'natives'.[44] There was also a greater appreciation for the industrial side of Western modernity instead of their democratic values, which is unsurprising, considering the latter was hardly the experience of those colonised. Scott observed this of the early administrative elites:

> they feel modernization will make their nation more like the West; the civic culture of a stable democracy is perceived to be every bit as *modern* as the steel mills or armies of technicians and engineers that characterise industrial states.[45]

In their rush for modernisation (which, in their minds were 'irrevocably linked' to Westernisation) these elites saw no room for Islam. As products of socialisation within a colonial administration, these elites saw religion as inimical to industrial, modernised progress.[46] For example, Anthony Milner wrote about how Malaysia's first head of state Tunku Abdul Rahman was known to be an admirer of the Turkish Revolution to the extent that he was called a 'Kemal-Ataturk type' by his detractors.[47] Scott's observations about the administrative elites, such as their paternalistic attitudes, indifference towards ideology, disdain for politics (due to their perception that politicians lack both finesse and education), and fear of the 'retrograde masses', all suggested that behind this obsession in attaining secular, material progress was a worry that the project could be up-ended by 'primordial hostilities'—something

40 Quoted in Fred R. von der Mehden, 'Religion and politics in Malaysia', *Asian Survey* 3, 12 (1963): 611.
41 James C. Scott, *Political ideology in Malaysia: Reality and beliefs of an elite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
42 Ibid., p. 153.
43 Ibid., p. 173.
44 Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native.*
45 Scott, *Political ideology in Malaysia*, p. 203; emphasis mine.
46 Ibid., p. 203. On the colonial construction of the category of religion as the domain that was most unamenable to the market economy for its personal, even irrational and incendiary nature, see Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, empire, and secularism in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Iza Hussin, 'The new global politics of religion: Religious harmony, public order, and securitisation in the post-colony', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, 1 (2018): 93–106.
47 A.C. Milner, 'The impact of the Turkish Revolution on Malaya', *Archipel* 31 (1986): 127.

religion was deemed more than capable of inflaming.[48] Even during the mid-1970s, the Malaysian government was still afraid that the Islamist revivalist movements (the *dakwah* movements) would 'set back governmental development efforts designed to uplift the economic position of the Malays'.[49]

However, even if Islam was deemed marginal to their modernisation project, the Muslim political elites could not afford to sideline Islam's 'symbolic centrality'.[50] As political scientist Iza Hussin has shown, due to the peculiarities of colonial state-building in Malaya, Islam was, and remains, a 'central component of local elite power'.[51] As archetypes of Harry Benda's typology of 'modernizing traditional elites', where elites were recruited on an 'ascriptive' basis from dominant social groups and classes, the Malay-Muslim elites in Malaya had to embrace Islam as an identity marker to secure their legitimacy as representatives of the indigenous Malays in a plural society with a sizeable immigrant population whom the Malays regarded with unease.[52] Thus, it is more accurate to say that for these elites who felt that 'the West is watching', Islam had become a source of their ontological insecurity.[53] This is because, on the one hand, Islam was central to their claim of Malay indigeneity (which made them *primus inter pares* within a multiethnic ruling coalition); but, on the other hand, their internalisation of the global cultural hierarchy also meant they saw Islam as a potential obstacle to their quest for international stature as dignified modernisers.

The Mahathirian 'turn': Embracing stigma, reversing stigma

There is broad consensus that Malaysia's Islamisation occurred most pervasively during Mahathir Mohamad's 22-year rule in Malaysia (1981–2003), leading to profound changes in social mores, institutional culture, and political discourse and praxis.[54] Instrumentalist takes of the phenomenon have attributed it either to Mahathir's 'cynical manipulation of popular sentiments' to out-Islamise UMNO's opponent PAS; or to a political ambition to cultivate ideological hegemony for the imperatives of economic growth.[55] I argue that these interpretations that understood Mahathir's Islamisation as strategic improvisations omit the fact that Mahathir's ideas about Islam were developed well before he became prime minister. By this, I do not claim that Mahathir's ideas bear sole responsibility in terms of how Islamisation turned out in Malaysia. However, like many scholars who see the value of engaging with Mahathir's thinking, I stress that Malaysia's Islamisation cannot be understood

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48 Scott, *Political ideology in Malaysia*, p. 232.

49 Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, 'The Mahathir administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam', *Pacific Affairs* 56, 4 (1983): 633.

50 Iza Hussin, *The politics of Islamic law: Local elites, colonial authority, and the making of the Muslim state* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 263.

51 Ibid., p. 263.

52 Benda, 'Political elites in colonial southeast Asia', p. 234.

53 Scott, *Political ideology in Malaysia*, p. 208.

54 See Liow, *Piety and politics*; Kikue Hamayotsu, 'Politics of syariah reform: The making of the state religio-legal apparatus', in *Malaysia: Islam, society, and politics*, ed. Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 55–79; Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian foreign policy* (London: Routledge, 1997); Nasr, *Islamic leviathan*.

55 Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 10.

without engaging his intellectual footprint.[56] The statist trajectory that Malaysia's Islamisation followed; the kind of intellectuals it drew from; and the forms it manifested were very much due to Mahathir's own *receptivity* to integrating Islam into Malaysia's governance; a mindset linked to a larger motive of status-seeking.

As we will see below, despite Mahathir's exposure to and personal connections with prominent intellectuals behind Malaysia's Islamisation of knowledge project, such as Ismail Rajhi al-Faruqi and Syed Naquib al-Attas,[57] he had articulated a reformist project for Malaysia grounded in Islamic teachings in a book as early as 1976. This signifies that Mahathir's views, even if not entirely original, were very much well-formulated on his own terms.[58] Schottmann is thus correct in saying that Mahathir's representations of Islam as a '"theology of progress" predated the emergence of PAS as a real competitor for the Malay vote at the federal level'.[59] More importantly, Mahathir's Islamisation project represented a critical turn in elite strategy to address Islam's stigmatisation. Far from keeping the stigmatised marker at arm's length, Mahathir articulated a developmentalist vision that involved both the active embrace of an Islamic identity and the transformation of Islam's role and practice in Malaysian state, society, and Muslim lives.

Mahathir's background is worth exploring here to characterise the rupture he represented. The youngest son of a headmaster of a government English school who trained as a medical doctor, Mahathir was not roped into politics by social connections or wealth like many of the traditional BN elites. Instead, he crafted his fortune as a 'self-made man': an image that percolated deeply into his anti-aristocratic, modernist nationalist political philosophy.[60] Mahathir's ascendancy—a strange mix of fortune and fortitude—characterised UMNO's internal changes and marked a radical break from the lineage of blue-blooded aristocrats who had headed the party thus far.[61] Mahathir was notably

> the first prime minister not to have been educated in Britain, the first not of aristocratic birth, the first not trained as a lawyer, and the first who does not play golf.[62]

56   On studies about Mahathir's intellectual biography and more pertinently, his thinking about Islam, see Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An intellectual biography of Mahathir Mohamad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*; Sven Alexander Schottmann, 'God helps those who help themselves: Islam according to Mahathir Mohamad', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, 1 (2013): 57–69; Sven Alexander Schottmann, 'The pillars of "Mahathir's Islam": Mahathir Mohamad on being-Muslim in the modern world', *Asian Studies Review* 35, 3: 355–72.
57   On the 'Islamisation of knowledge' movement in Malaysia led by Al-Attas and how it transpired amidst a broader environment of state bureaucratisation and intra-Muslim political competition, see Mona Abaza, 'Intellectuals, power and Islam in Malaysia: S.N. al-Attas or the beacon on the crest of a hill', *Archipel* 58 (1999): 189–217; Mona Abaza, *Debates on Islam and knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).
58   Schottman, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 118.
59   Schottmann, 'Pillars of Mahathir's Islam', p. 368.
60   Khoo, *The paradoxes of Mahathirism*, pp. 181–6.
61   Barry Wain's documentation of Mahathir's political journey charts a process that was far from determinate, with his predecessor Hussein Onn doubting his choice almost every step of the way. See Barry Wain, *Malaysian maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in turbulent times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 33–40.
62   Mauzy and Milne, 'The Mahathir administration', p. 627.

He embodied

> [t]he ethos of the nonaristocratic, English-educated, but culturally rooted middle class that was comfortable in the simple luxuries of its urban milieu but preferred a simple dinner with the wife and children over gin and tonic or a match of tennis at the club.[63]

Nonetheless, such differences in social background and attitude should not be interpreted as an increase in personal piety that automatically led to an openness to Islamisation. I argue that Mahathir's receptivity to Islamisation was less grounded in his religiosity than the coherent worldview he developed, even if not always based on coherent ideas. Mahathir's thinking about Islam was laid out most concretely in his third book, *The Challenge*, a book written in the 1970s with the Malay edition published in 1976 (and the English translation in 1986).[64] It should be noted that the book was published earlier than some of the most cited works of the aforementioned intellectual architects of Malaysia's Islamisation of knowledge project, namely al-Faruqi and al-Attas, which came out mainly from the early 1980s onwards. For example, Al-Attas' highly influential work, *Islam and Secularism*, which spelled out his agenda of de-westernising and de-secularising knowledge for Islam's epistemological and ethical recentring, was published in 1978, two years after *The Challenge*.[65]

It is no surprise then to see how Mahathir never shared the ideological zeal of his more academic counterparts, such as Al-Attas' romanticised view of (Islamised) Malay culture, which led him to regard the Malay language as 'an important vehicle for modernity' crucial for his 'de-westernising' agenda.[66] In fact, Mahathir introduced the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics in English in 2003 as a tacit acknowledgement of the centrality of English in the domain of science and technology, which drew strong opposition from both the Malay nationalists and Islamists, including former allies such as al-Attas and Anwar, who were themselves very much part of the erudite English-speaking class.[67] In short, Mahathir's deep desire for Muslim societies to 'catch up' with the West *no matter what it takes* marks a divide from his Islamist peers' greater focus on crafting an 'Islamised' society that is ontologically different from the West. Thus, to understand Mahathir's receptivity to the Islamisation project despite such differences, a serious study of *The Challenge* is due.

The challenge, according to Dr Mahathir

Typical of Mahathir, *The Challenge* adopts a paternalistic, unsentimental, and prescriptive tone. Astonishingly, as a career politician climbing the ranks of

63 Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 79.
64 For this article, the English version is used as a primary reference. See Mahathir Mohamad, *The Challenge* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1986).
65 Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Islam and secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978).
66 Abaza, *Debates on Islam*, p. 99.
67 Anwar's opposition to the policy also occurred after his fallout with Mahathir in the late 1990s. So, his position on the policy could also just be a matter of politics. But Anwar also enjoyed a disciple–teacher relationship with al-Attas and the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM—an Islamist social movement he co-founded)—who were strongly against the policy too. See 'ABIM opposes proposed PPSMI plan', *New Straits Times*, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/563296/abim-opposes-proposed-ppsmi-plan (last accessed 4 July 2022).

UMNO when the book was written, Mahathir only spent five pages on PAS and UMNO.[68] The rest of the book was devoted to its namesake: the challenge of over-coming the 'misinterpretation of Islam' amongst the Malays.[69] In *The Challenge*, Mahathir's call for Islam's reinterpretation stemmed from his concerns about the relative backwardness of the Muslim world. He attributed the decline to a false binary between the sacred and the profane in the minds of many Muslims, which led to an overemphasis on spiritual gains instead of worldly ones. He found such preoccupations in religion to be rigid and dogmatic, not to mention impractical and unpracticable. He saw no utility in differentiating between 'Islamic' knowledge and 'secular' ones at all.[70] Largely self-taught in his understanding of Islam, Mahathir had little patience for abstract, academic debates, not to mention the traditionalist religious authorities he deemed to have failed the Muslims.[71] In Mahathir's almost Darwinian processing of the situation, the stakes of not catching up with modernity were to risk 'survival itself'.[72] This can be seen in the way he articulated this existential urgency:

> If a Muslim society, because of its wish to be known as a staunchly Islamic one, became weak in the so-called 'worldly' knowledge necessary for its survival, and was finally destroyed by enemies, leaving not a single person alive, then as far as that society was concerned, Islam would no longer exist.[73]

It is difficult to pinpoint why Mahathir pivoted to a more Islamically-inflected message in *The Challenge*, as his writings in *The Malay Dilemma* published six years before (see below) generally hewed to a more ethnocentric line. There were a few surmisable reasons, such as his prior exposure to Islamist modernist thought of the early twentieth century, or his broadened worldview as a result of his rising political fortunes that would have propelled the man's thinking about the issue of 'Malay

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68 Mahathir's reentry into UMNO in 1972 was followed by a meteoric rise. He was one of the party's vice presidents by 1975, and following Tunku Abdul Razak's death in 1976, was made deputy president to Hussein Onn. In government, he was made the minister of education in 1974, deputy prime minister in 1976, and was prime minister by 1981.
69 Mahathir Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. viii.
70 Ibid., pp. 17–43.
71 The 'modernist vs traditionalist' break in Malaysia's landscape of Islam dates back to the *kaum muda/ kaum tua* (young and old faction) contestations in the early 20th century, which encompassed both theological and political differences. The *kaum muda* were then mainly led by cosmopolitan intellectuals of Hadrami descent urging for socio-religious reforms, whereas the *kaum tua* were mainly the *ulamas* (Islamic scholars) heading the palace-linked religious establishment. It is important, though, not to read this divide into the contemporary era as an unbroken lineage from the past or see the successors of the struggle today on the normative grounds of 'liberalism vs conservatism'. See William R. Roff, *The origins of Malay nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malay Press, 1967), pp. 56–90; William R. Roff, 'Kaum Muda–Kaum Tua: Innovation and reaction amongst the Malays, 1900–41', *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique and Yasmin Hussain (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), pp. 123–9. On writings about the contemporary religio-political divide between Malaysia's so-called salafi and traditionalist camps, see Maszlee Malik, 'Theology in Malaysia: Between mainstream and periphery', *Hikma*: *Journal of Islamic Theology and Religious Education* 6 (2013): 61–4; Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'The extensive salafization of Malaysian Islam'.
72 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. viii.
73 Ibid., p. 36.

backwardness' from a more localised perspective (Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese) to one that was more 'civilisational' in scale (Muslims vis-à-vis the West).[74] As we shall see, the shift is not as dramatic as one would think, as Mahathir's emphasis was still grounded in the need for character and values reform of the Malays; something he championed in *The Malay Dilemma* and has since relentlessly exhorted. In addition, by the 1970s, with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP),[75] a discourse of 'Melayu Baru' (New Malays) had emerged that promoted a rationalist and science-compatible view of religion. The zeitgeist is best noted in an UMNO publication entitled *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution), which devoted an entire chapter to the discussion of 'religion, science and modernity'. The authors stressed Islam's compatibility with science, claiming that, if it seemed otherwise, it was because Malay society was filled with 'local myths that contradict scientific findings'.[76]

Mahathir's own writings demonstrated signs of a stigmatised actor. Mahathir was addressing the perception of Islam as a religion that was unworldly, impractical, irrational, and unamenable to material scientific progress as primarily an internal problem instead of being a product of outsider prejudice or misapprehension. In this he differed markedly from figures such as al-Attas, whose writings lamented Orientalist distortion with little diagnosis of the contemporary situation.[77] In *The Challenge,* Mahathir took seriously the issue of how Muslim states seemingly could not rise to the challenge of modernity. He chastised the Gulf States for their lack of 'worldly ability and efficiency (as a result of the insufficient pursuit of 'worldly' knowledge)' despite enjoying abundant oil wealth.[78]

In any case, Mahathir's criticisms of the Malays that often lacked a structural angle, such as unpacking the negative effects of colonialism, also exposed him to critiques of having internalised the colonial judgement, with al-Attas' brother, the sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas, being the prominent critic.[79] Indeed, Mahathir's opinion

74 Mahathir was minister of education when the book was published, which coincided, according to Schottmann, with an itinerary that exposed him to 'the ideas of iconic figures of the nascent *sahwa al-islamiyya*, such as Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ali Shariati, and Malaysia's own Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Muhammad Kamal Hassan'. See Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 118; on Mahathir's upbringing and his exposure to Islamic modernist ideas, see ibid., pp. 119–26.
75 The NEP was a poverty eradication and social engineering project implemented after the May 13 ethnic riots in 1969. Premised on the idea that reducing poverty and especially inequalities between the Chinese and the Malays was key to preserving Malaysia's social harmony, the NEP entailed both welfarist programmes and affirmative action favouring the *Bumiputeras* (Malaysia's indigenous population consisting of largely but not exclusively Malay Muslims) in, among many other areas, education, scholarships, government contracts, employment. The policy remains in place today, muddled by mixed results, spotty implementation, and polarised policy discourses that have impeded any meaningful reform. See Terence Gomez and Johan Saravanamuttu, eds, *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative action, ethnic inequalities, and social justic*e (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013); Lee Hwok-Aun, 'Malaysia's New Economic Policy: Fifty years of polarization and impasse', *Southeast Asian Studies* 11, 2 (2022): 299–329.
76 Senu Abdul Rahman et al., eds, *Revolusi mental* [Mental revolution] (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu), p. 204.
77 On critiques of al-Attas' views as an 'anti-orientalist orientalist', see Abaza, 'Intellectuals, power and Islam in Malaysia', pp. 199–217; Ahmad Fuad Rahmat, 'The professor and the secular', *Critical Muslim* 7 (2013): 81–100.
78 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 114.
79 Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native*, p. 143.

of the Malay community was at best uncharitable in his magnum opus, *The Malay Dilemma*, published in 1970. In the book, Mahathir's diagnosis of Malay 'inferiority'—which he attributed to 'environmental', 'intrinsic', and 'hereditary' factors—bordered on epigenetics grounds, replicating the language of scientific racism developed by the British colonisers themselves.[80] He found Malay religiosity to be backward and superstition-laden because their understanding of Islam had merged 'with Malay *adat* and its animist beliefs'.[81] This dismissive attitude to the traditional Malay worldview would be carried into *The Challenge* when Mahathir expressed his concerns about how obscurantist understandings of religion would obstruct the learning of the sciences and the building of a modern economy. However, if in *The Malay Dilemma* Mahathir was grappling with how to uplift the Malays to be on par with the local Chinese community, in *The Challenge* he had set his sights wider through the lens of a Muslim reformist who was trying to reclaim Islam's place in the global hierarchy.

Thus, unlike his predecessors who were content to keep Islam at a safe distance while they pursued the social objectives of economic uplifting and inequality reduction via the NEP, Mahathir was determined to demonstrate that Islam had a role in Malaysia's governance and future successes. In other words, even as Mahathir internalised the judgement of inferiority of the 'Malay character', he could not accept Islam's stigmatisation. Rather, his narrative split race from religion, shifting the stigma to the Malay character that he claimed needed 'rehabilitation' while positing Islam as the moral, social, and intellectual resource for such reform.[82] This line of thinking marked a significant departure from the earlier UMNO elites who were at best ambivalent about Islam's position in the modernisation project, which partly explained why Mahathir found confidants and advisers instead in figures like Anwar, al-Faruqi, and al-Attas who were more sympathetic towards Islam's enlightening capacity. However, unlike many of his Islamist counterparts who decried the West's imposition of their values and systems over colonised societies (many of whom he brought into government), Mahathir saw no reason why the East 'should reject the values and norms developed during their colonisation by the West'.[83] He barely concealed his admiration for what he called 'old' Western values, in particular 'good discipline', which gave the former imperial powers their competitive edge over the colonised.[84] Unlike the revivalist intellectuals who wanted to Islamise (and desecularise) epistemology, Mahathir's attitude towards secularism was generally pragmatic; his only concern was about the moral relativism it would

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80 Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay dilemma*, reprint with a new preface (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008[1970]), p. 9. On the British empire and scientific racism, see Henrika Kuklick, *The savage within: The social history of British anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Nancy Stepan, *The idea of race in science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

81 Mohamad, *The Malay dilemma*, p. 41.

82 'If the Malays are to be rehabilitated, all the attitudes and values that have contributed to their present dilemma must be studied, assessed and where necessary, discarded or modified.' See Mohamad, *The Malay dilemma*, p. 146.

83 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 47.

84 In Mahathir's words, 'If we study the histories of the peoples conquered and colonized by the West, one salient fact we will note is their lack of discipline.' Ibid., p. 46.

produce.[85] Mahathir's receptivity towards Islam never ventured into political Islam territory where instituting an Islamic state was the central objective; nor did he indulge in the kind of utopian thinking Shaharuddin Maaruf attributed to the writings of al-Attas, in which there was an assumption of theology as 'final, complete, and stationary'.[86]

Thus, Mahathir's writings about Islam should be read more productively as ontological security-seeking narratives, as they outlined his desire to find ways to reverse the stigmatisation of 'Muslimness', and, in so doing, secure a dignified position for Islam within the international order so that the Malay-Muslim identity could be rid of the stigma. In *The Challenge*, Mahathir attempted to do so in two steps. First, he tried to redeem Islam by claiming that Muslims have grossly misunderstood it. In fact, in a lecture he gave in Oxford, Mahathir claimed that Islam was 'the most misunderstood religion in the world'.[87] Mahathir argued that when properly understood, Islam was a 'theology of progress' that was industrious, rational, and did not confuse accumulating material gains with materialism.[88] Known for his disdain of the ascetic, he stressed that renouncing the worldly would only lead to weaknesses in the faith. Mahathir's Islam necessitated worldly success because, for him, reality must 'strengthen' faith instead of testing the limits of its adherents.[89] For Mahathir, the reality was that Muslims were victimised, marginalised, and superseded by others in the global order. The only way for them to regain their place and dignity was to *work hard* for it. In fact, he made it explicit that 'there is no reason why Muslims should not work hard'.[90] Both Schottmann and Khoo have noted in Mahathir's interpretation of 'true' Islam a certain Protestant ethic in his emphasis on 'industriousness, honesty, self-denial, discipline, thrift, diligence, and individual piety'.[91] Underlying Mahathir's determination was the 'goal of catching up, competing, and standing equal with the core powers of the modern states system', something Zarakol also observed in the 'ontologically insecure' elites of Turkey, Japan, and Russia.[92]

Second, Mahathir argued extensively for Islam's (re)incorporation into the international order. To do so, he turned his gaze back on the West. He did so not in the interest of proclaiming a different set of standards for the world but simply to measure the West against its own indicators of success and progress. He regretted the West's decline and disillusionment which, for him, was the product of 'a radical change in the Western psyche' after losing its colonies.[93] He lamented that old values such as 'orderliness, discipline and firm social organisation' had given way to the moral relativism of postmodernism as well as the unfettered greed and hedonism

85 Abaza, *Debates on Islam*, pp. 89–100.
86 Shaharuddin Maaruf, 'Religion and utopian thinking among the Muslims of Southeast Asia', Seminar paper, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2001, p. 10.
87 Mahathir Mohamad, 'Islam: The misunderstood religion', *Islamic Studies* 36, 4 (1997): 691. This is the text of a lecture Mahathir delivered at the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, Oxford, 16 Apr. 1996.
88 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 73; Schottmann, 'God helps those who help themselves', pp. 57–69.
89 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 72.
90 Ibid., p. 74.
91 Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 108; Khoo, *The paradoxes of Mahathirism*, pp. 172–3.
92 Zarakol, *After defeat*, p. 29.
93 Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 46.

of secular materialism.[94] He even criticised the United Kingdom's Labour government for its compromises with striking workers because, in his mind, they represented the 'unrest and oppression' that originated from the insatiable desires of a materialistic society.[95] Arguing that neither capitalism nor communism could provide the ethical foundation and the human need for spiritual fulfilment to stave off the moral decadence of materialism, Mahathir emphasised the indispensability of religious teachings and principles. However, he did so without calling for the disruption of the modern, capitalist order but, rather, its re-conditioning: 'Clearly, if capitalists can be controlled or brought back to the right path, their activities can benefit society.'[96]

Put differently, Mahathir found utility in Islam to mediate the perceived excesses of Western materialism as well as the ascetic retreatism he observed in Muslim societies. Refusing to resort to either Western apologia or anti-West rejectionism to secure Malaysia's status within a postcolonial world order, Mahathir subverted the dilemma by arguing explicitly that capitalist economic development, in its endless accumulation of material wealth and almost nihilistic ethos, would be a lost cause without the spiritual guidance of religion. These ideas convinced him that having more 'Islam' would benefit Malaysia's development. That being said, Mahathir had no intentions to follow the rejectionist route of the Taliban or Revolutionary Iran, as that would make Malaysia a pariah in the eyes of the West.[97] Mahathir's emphasis that Islam was compatible and even conducive to industrial modernity was fundamentally about securing recognition for Malaysia under the pre-existing norms of the international order, without Malay Muslims having to see their religious identity as anachronistic to the enterprise. However, in claiming the challenge was about harnessing the 'true' teaching of Islam so that Muslims could gain control of 'material wealth and modern knowledge' while preserving their spirituality, the actual challenge for Mahathir was to show that Islam *works*.[98] This need to showcase Islam's compatibility with modernity would form the crux of Mahathir's Islamisation project.

Bureaucratisation, corporatisation, and 'Islamising' the sciences

My contention that state-led Islamisation in Malaysia is a direct product of the Mahathir administration's effort to secure ontological security is based not only on Mahathir's thoughts, but also on the trajectories and forms of Islamisation during his tenure. Whereas the term 'Islamisation' is often referred to as a process with a definite end (that is, the establishment of some form of Islamic state or society) guided by a set of moral-ethical concerns about gender, sexuality, and social behaviour, it is also important to note that there exists no widely agreed-upon blueprint as to how Islamisation should happen. Thus, Mahathir was in a unique position to chart the process, even as he had to contend with disagreements and diversions from within

94   Ibid., p. 46. 'The West in decline' was a key theme in Mahathir's thoughts. See Khoo, *The paradoxes of Mahathirism*, pp. 42–6.
95   Mohamad, *The challenge*, pp. 60–61.
96   Ibid., p. 57.
97   On an account of Islam (or Islamism) as the master signifier of a discursive project to decentre the West, most prominently seen in Khomeini's brand of revolutionary Islam, see Bobby S. Sayyid, *A fundamental fear: Eurocentrism and the emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed, 1997).
98   Mohamad, *The challenge*, p. 72.

and without the government. This lack of a point of reference also explains why, as many Islamist revivalists, Mahathir's narratives about Islam's compatibility with modernity relied on both the normative claim that 'Islam is for all times' and the historical reference to Islam's 'golden age' between the eighth and thirteenth centuries where philosophical and scientific achievements flourished in the Muslim world.[99]

However, there are limits to this narrative strategy in pushing back Islam's stigmatisation given the *temporal distance* between the 'golden age' and the contemporary era; not to mention that the postcolonial global order was preceded by the experience of colonisation of large swathes of Muslim land and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. There is also a case of *normative distance*, in that Muslims in many colonised territories, including Malaya, gained a pan-Muslim political consciousness at the same time as they began to think of themselves as subjects of modern nation-states.[100] Despite all the modernist leanings in his thinking about Islam, Mahathir remained a bona fide nationalist, as was the case for many strongman leaders known for their Islamist sympathies, from Zia-ul Huq of Pakistan to Erdogan in Turkey today.[101]

Thus, it is not surprising that Mahathir's Islamisation, notwithstanding its discursive reference to a universalist Islam, was primarily grounded in the ontology of the postcolonial Muslim state—the primary referent to his quest for recognition. That entailed a nationalisation of the enterprise. For Mahathir and many like-minded Muslim reformists, the goal was not just a case of arguing that Islam was compatible and facilitative of industrial modernity but to show that was the case through the state's example. Scholars have long written about the internal state-building and external projections aspects of Mahathir's Islamisation. Nasr calls the state-building process the making of the 'Islamic leviathan', which he defines as a 'conscious strategic choice' to expand 'state power, capacity and reach' while repackaging the postcolonial state as 'Islamic'.[102] David Delfolie highlighted Malaysia's 'Islamic extraversion', referring to 'Malaysian pretensions to impose the country's prosperous Islamic social model as an inspiration for the Muslim world', which doubled as a rewarding 'self-image' for the Malay community to strengthen the state's ethnocratic ideological position.[103]

I agree with Nasr's and Delfolies' terminologies but not with their instrumentalist reading of the process. Rather, I argue that the basis upon which the Islamic leviathan was built, namely the specific trajectories and forms of Islamisation that occurred, reflected the paternalistic concerns of elites such as Mahathir (as elaborated in the previous section), who believed that the masses had interpreted Islam 'wrongly' and there was a need to guide Islam in the 'right' direction through assertive state

99 Speech by Mahathir Mohamad at 'The Meeting and Dialogue Session with Moroccan Islamic Intellectuals, Think Tanks and Parliamentarians', Rabat, 16 Apr. 2002. On the gap between the historical reality of the 'golden age' of Islam and its employment in contemporary discourses, see Ira M. Lapidus, 'The golden age: The political concepts of Islam', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 524 (1992): 13–25.
100 Roff, *The origins of Malay nationalism*; Anthony Milner, *The invention of politics in colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
101 Khoo, *The paradoxes of Mahathirism*, pp. 17–102.
102 Nasr, *Islamic leviathan*, pp. 16–17.
103 David Delfolie, 'Malaysian extraversion towards the Muslim world: Ideological positioning for a "mirror effect"', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, 4 (2012): 30.

intervention. This need to reverse Islam's stigmatisation also explains the 'extroverted' nature of Mahathir's foreign policy that saw its pan-Muslim overtones grow as Malaysia achieved greater socioeconomic success in the 1990s. Nevertheless, this assertiveness was conjoined with a sense of insecurity that always had the imagined 'superior' West as its audience, which proved to be an affliction that impacted the trajectory and forms of Islamisation in Malaysia. I argue that the statist trajectory reflected the sense of urgency (and elite agency) that underlined Islamisation in Malaysia as an ontological security-seeking enterprise, while its forms denoted the image-building aspect of it.

Statist trajectory

Islamisation during the Mahathir administration unfolded with significant centralisation and institutionalisation.[104] To be sure, the statist dimension of the project did not mean it conformed fully with Mahathir's designs. Instead, the project unleashed a wave of cascading effects that drove Islamisation in Malaysia towards a conservative direction that Mahathir himself would call 'cruel and inconsiderate' years later.[105] His later regrets notwithstanding, Mahathir's ideas and initiatives of 'top-down' reforms very much influenced the trajectory of Malaysia's Islamisation. For example, following his claims in *The Challenge* that Islamic values were necessary to anchor the people's ethical foundations and spiritual well-being within capitalist modernity, Mahathir launched the *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam Dalam Pentadbiran Negara* (The Assimilation of Islamic Values in the Country's Administration) in 1985. Arguably Mahathir's first 'Islamisation' policy, it is technically still ongoing today. The values the policy sought to inculcate, such as accountability, responsibility, honesty, dedication, toleration, diligence, and cleanliness, were evidently based on Mahathir's reading of Islam as a religion that is supportive of a good work ethic.[106] The stated rationale in the policy document also reflects Mahathir's idea that the strength of one's values is tied directly to one's dignity and survival:

> In this context, the most important element in the shaping of the Malaysian identity are values. Values enable the formation of a *respected* society. A people who do not have certain life values will always become the *victims* of those who pursued said values. As an extension, those who developed good values will come to control those who did not cultivate good command of said values.[107]

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104 Liow, *Piety and politics*; Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*; Nasr, *Islamic leviathan*.
105 'PM: New committee to review Jakim's role', *Malay Mail Online*, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/05/30/pm-new-committee-to-review-jakims-role/1636462 (last accessed 29 June 2022); Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*, pp. 135–40. On the conservative slide of Malaysian Islam, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, 'The Islamic conservative turn in Malaysia: Impact and future trajectories', *Contemporary Islam* 11, 1 (2017): 1–20.
106 Schottmann, 'God helps those who help themselves', pp. 57–69.
107 Kementerian Pembangunan Kerajaan Tempatan, 'Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam dalam Pentadbiran Negara' [The assimilation of Islamic values in the administration of the country], https://www.kpkt.gov.my/resources/index/user_1/pengurusan_kualiti/Dasar_Penerapan_Nilai_Islam.pdf, pp. 1–2 (last accessed 28 June 2022); emphasis mine.

To enable the state's (and his personal) curation of Islam, Mahathir also established and expanded the two agencies within the Prime Minister's Department that were highly instrumental to Malaysia's statist Islamisation. The first is the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM, Department of Islamic Development in Malaysia), which Mahathir upgraded twice, first from a unit to a section in 1984, and later into a ministerial department in 1996. Maznah Mohamad's characterisation of the department as the 'face of statist Islam' best describes JAKIM's importance in Muslim governance in Malaysia.[108] Although the administration of Islam is constitutionally a matter decentralised to the (subnational) states, JAKIM emerged as the key authority in establishing the orthodoxy of Islamic doctrine and practices due to its proximity to the federal state and the resources it commanded.[109] The centralisation of Islamic affairs under JAKIM occurred predominantly in two ways. First, JAKIM serves as the secretariat of the National Fatwa Council, which is the highest Islamic authority in the country. Second, it also functions as the major body regulating many aspects of Muslim life in Malaysia through its management of the halal industry, the hajj, Syariah reforms, Islamic education in national schools, and the monitoring and inspection of films and publications.[110]

The second institution is a think-tank type agency established in 1992 called the Institute Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute of Islamic Understanding, IKIM). If JAKIM provided the institutional muscle to guide Malaysia's Islamisation, IKIM supplied the intellectual grounding to Mahathir's attempt to situate Islam within a broader neoliberal developmental framework managed by a corporatist regime aimed at cultivating a Malay capitalist and professional class.[111] As Nasr argues, the role of

> IKIM was to portray capitalist development as compatible with Islamic values, and in so doing provide an ideological response to PAS's attacks on government development policy as un-Islamic. IKIM seeks to justify the pursuit of wealth, the administrative values and practices that are needed for managing it, and to rationalise globalisation, consumerism, foreign investment, limited labor rights, income inequality, and the like in terms of Islam. It seeks to develop Islamic values of capitalism and articulate the notion of an 'Islamic developmental state.'[112]

These developments signify a form of paternalism characteristic of the ontological security-seeking elites described by Zarakol in her study of Thailand and Turkey. However, in Malaysia's case, the UMNO elites perceived their mandate to modernise

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108 Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*, p. 78.
109 On the federated nature of Malaysia's Islamic bureaucracy, see ibid., pp. 71–5.
110 On JAKIM, see ibid., pp. 79–90; Liow, *Piety and politics*, pp. 48–52; Norshahril Saat, *The state, ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p. 55. The hajj pilgrimage and Syariah reforms are currently handled by two other departments under the Prime Minister's Department: the Jabatan Wakaf, Zakat dan Haji (Department of Wakaf, Zakat, and Hajj, JAWHAR) and Jabatan Kehakiman Syariah Malaysia (Syariah Judicial Department of Malaysia, JKSM). But JAKIM, which was instituted earlier, played a leading role in these matters until JKSM and JAWHAR were established in 1998 and 2004, respectively.
111 Jomo Kwame Sundaram, '"Malaysia incorporated": Corporatism a la Mahathir', *Institutions and Economics* 6, 1 (2014): 73–94.
112 Nasr, *Islamic leviathan*, p. 128.

as extending to religion as well.[113] In other words, Islamisation was not just about projecting Malaysia's 'Islamic' identity. It was also about ensuring that a particular image of Islam would prevail in Malaysia, although in actively seeking to add an Islamic veneer to its modernisation projects, the administration had inadvertently 'facilitated and enhanced the role of a conservative religious establishment in state affairs'.[114] This effort of image-building can be seen in the three forms of Islamisation discussed next.

Three forms of Islam 'modernised'

If state-led Islamisation in Malaysia was to serve elite goals of demonstrating Islam's compatibility with a vision of civil, capitalist, and industrial modernity, the term 'Islamisation' would have little analytical value by itself without us examining the forms it took. What I will relay here is not new to anthropologists who have astutely observed how visions of 'Islamic' modernity and civil society were (re)nego-tiated, structured, and performed in 'strategic loci' such as courts, bureaucracies, markets, and schools.[115] Indeed, Malaysia often stood out as a shining example for those seeking to integrate Islam within the lifeworlds of industrial modernity and cap-italist consumerism for its stringent standards of Islamic compliance; its successful cultivation of a professional Syariah elite class; and its seamless marrying of Muslim professional and religious lives.

This study's major contribution, however, is to link these observations to the dis-cursive economies constructed by ontologically insecure Muslim leaders such as Mahathir. In doing so, it aims to foster a better understanding as to how the 'inter-national' factored into localised manifestations of Islamisation as the imaginative the-atre upon which governing elites approached the reversing of Islam's stigmatisation. Although it is unlikely that any unity of purpose existed in terms of how different state actors conceived of the Islamisation project, Kikue Hamayotsu's documentation of how Syariah court officials found it important to 'show to the Western world that Islam—and Syariah—works in Malaysia' is telling of this dual process of pursuing internal reform and external recognition.[116] In other words, far from being an object-ive in itself, Islamisation was intertwined with a broader quest for modernisation, suc-cess recognition, and stigma reversal. This quest underscored the three persistent

113 Ayşe Zarakol, 'Revisiting second image reversed: Lessons from Turkey and Thailand', *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 1 (2013): 150–62.
114 Liow, *Piety and politics*, p. 181.
115 Michael G. Peletz, *Islamic modern: Religious courts and cultural politics in Malaysia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 21. Also see Dominik M. Müller, 'Bureaucratic Islam compared: Classificatory power and state-ifed religious meaning-making in Brunei and Singapore', *Journal of Law and Religion* 33, 2 (2018): 212–47; Hew Wai Weng, 'Consumer space as political space: Liquid Islamism in Malaysia and Indonesia', in *Political participation in Asia: Defining and deploying political space*, ed. Eva Hansson and Meredith L. Weiss (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), pp. 112–29; Johan Fischer, *The halal frontier: Muslim consumers in a globalized market* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
116 Kikue Hamayotsu, 'The political origins of Islamic courts in divided societies: The case of Malaysia', *Journal of Law and Religion* 33, 2 (2018): 269. To be sure, as Aihwa Ong observed, on the mass level, there remains 'an ethical skepticism about linking the fate of the Muslim society to a wider ecology of Western expertise and enterprise'. See Aihwa Ong, 'Ecologies of expertise: Assembling flows, managing citizenship', in *Global assemblages: Technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), p. 349.

forms of Islamisation undertaken in Malaysia: bureaucratisation, corporatisation, and the Islamisation of the sciences, all of which fit comfortably within the modernisation schema. It also explains why these programmes have an image-building aspect, which I will demonstrate by highlighting how they increase the public visibility and accessibility of 'modernised' Islam.

The first form is Islam's bureaucratisation, which entailed the absorption of Islam within what Maznah Mohamad calls the 'divine bureaucracy', resulting in the rationalisation, routinisation, and professionalisation of Islamic affairs in the public and private lives of Muslims.[117] Whereas Islam's bureaucratisation began in the colonial period, it intensified during the Mahathir administration, during which the staff count was expanded to the thousands following the influx of an army of technocrats such as accountants, managers, and technicians, many of whom were not even trained in Islamic studies.[118] Like any other modern bureaucracy with its business suit aesthetics and efficiency-culture, Malaysia's 'divine' bureaucracy increased the visibility and accessibility of a professionalised, 'modern' Islam as it was the face of 'Islam' that interacted with Muslims and non-Muslims in their daily lives.

Take, for example, the halal business industry, for which Malaysia is regarded as a global pioneer.[119] The bureaucracy operationalised halal certification through 'evidence-based standardisation, certification and auditing procedure', transforming an activity that is historically based on the individual and social ethical judgement of Muslims into an array of rules and procedural-based mechanisms that mimic many other aspects of modern living.[120] Yet, bureaucratic insertions into Muslim lives increased the *visibility* of a 'modernised' Islam in the forms of halal logos, bureaucratic inspections, and professional certificates. The process of rationalisation, regulation, and routinisation of the halal certification process also created a structure for legibility for 'outsiders', such as non-Muslim entrepreneurs who intend to cater to the Muslim market, inadvertently increasing the *accessibility* of 'modernised' Islam.[121] The fact that Malaysia's halal standard has been widely used by multinational companies such as Nestlé, Colgate, and Unilever also conferred a status dimension to a profitable enterprise centred around JAKIM's regulatory control over a proclaimed 'Islamic' ethical universe.[122] The bureaucratisation of Islam may have disenchanted Islam through procedural operationalisation. Still, in the minds of its purveyors, it also shows that Islam can meet the needs of modernity in both accessible and visible ways.

The second form is that of corporatisation. By corporatisation, I mean both the integration of Islam within corporate life as well as efforts to portray Islam as conducive and complementary to commerce and corporate life.[123] For reasons of space, I

117 Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*.
118 On the administration of Islam during the colonial period, see Moshe Yegar, *Islam and Islamic institutions in British Malaya: Policies and implementation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979).
119 Fischer, *The halal frontier*.
120 Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*, p. 109.
121 Johan Fischer, 'Manufacturing halal in Malaysia', *Contemporary Islam* 10, 1 (2016): 35–52.
122 'Malaysia–The world's leading halal hub', *itc.gov.my*, https://itc.gov.my/tourists/discover-the-muslim-friendly-malaysia/malaysia-the-worlds-leading-halal-hub/ (last accessed 4 July 2022).
123 Sloane-White's work remains the best resource on this topic, especially on the lifeworld of an ascendant, self-confident 'Islamic' capitalist class that is a direct result of, and in many ways remains,

will only elaborate the latter here through the example of Malaysia's Islamic finance industry, which was a signature area in Mahathir's effort to corporatise Islam. Corporatising Islam through banking fits the criteria of visibility and accessibility as banking is a highly 'visible' domain of modern living, and Islamic banking has always facilitated access to the global financial market.[124] Mahathir's personal investment in the project can be seen from the fact that, since the 1980s, he had argued that non-usurious forms of *riba* (interest) were halal and objected to a 'form over substance' interpretation of Islam that prevented Muslims from becoming 'strong through a financial system that enables commerce and social life to sustain a fair and just society'.[125] The effort bore fruit. Since the establishment of its first Islamic bank in 1983, Malaysia's Islamic finance industry had grown dramatically. By 2019, it accounted for 'over 20% of global Islamic finance assets'.[126]

Given its success and banking's prominence in modern capitalist economies, Mahathir's ontological security-seeking imprint is arguably left the deepest in the political economy of Islamic finance. See, for example, anthropologist Patricia Sloane-White's account of meeting one of Malaysia's 'most luminary and successful' syariah-adviser elites, who proclaimed, 'we are the future of Malaysia … young Muslims in the business of changing its development, rehabilitating its culture and its people'.[127] There are similarities and divergences in terms of how these young professional syariah elites thought about *rehabilitating* Malay society vis-à-vis Mahathir's ideas: the former opting to infuse an Islamic ethical framework to transform a secular corporate setting; the latter championing a 'return' to Islamic teachings to cultivate a progressive work ethic in service of a prosperous and high-skilled economy. Their differences aside, it is not difficult to see how Mahathir's vision of an ascendant Muslim entrepreneurial class was encapsulated in the resume of this group of confident self-described 'hybrid Muslims', whom Sloane-White described as 'sharia scholars of the highest ability, but with professional, technical, and global experience that also ranked them as experts in such modern fields as finance, information technology, management, economics, and accountancy'.[128] Their self-anointed mandate to reform Malay culture from obsolescence and their sense of superiority—derived from worldly success, no less—that the Malay Muslims could give the Arabs 'a run for its money' were conceivably part of a worldview that saw Islam as both having an image problem, as well as being the cure for it.[129]

an important vehicle to Islamisation programmes that began in the Mahathir years. See Patricia Sloane-White, *Islam, modernity and entrepreneurship among the Malays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Patricia Sloane-White, *Corporate Islam: Sharia and the modern workplace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
124 Daromir Rudnyckyj, *Beyond debt: Islamic experiments in global finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
125 Mahathir Mohamad, 'Opening address to the Seminar on Developing Islamic Financial Instruments', Kuala Lumpur, 28 Apr. 1986.
126 Abayomi A. Alawode et al., 'Malaysia: Islamic finance & financial inclusion', Malaysia Development Series (Kuala Lumpur: World Bank, 2020), p. 19.
127 Sloane-White, *Corporate Islam*, pp. 32–3.
128 Ibid., p. 39.
129 Ibid., p. 40.

The third form of Islamisation transpired as the 'Islamisation of the sciences' project. The venture was part of the 'Islamisation of knowledge' project championed by Mahathir's then-protégé Anwar Ibrahim and the philosopher Syed Naquib al-Attas we discussed above. Here I am less interested in the intellectual content of the project but will only highlight one of its key initiatives: the Islamisation of the study of the sciences in tertiary education. By integrating Islam within the study of science, the Islamisation of the sciences project renders the image of Islam as compatible with the sciences both visible and accessible as its graduates enter and serve a modern and professional workforce. The project is best emblematised by the establishment of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983, which, in turn, housed the International Institute of Islamic Civilization and Malay World (ISTAC), which became the intellectual home of Al-Attas' Islamisation of knowledge project. Despite being an 'Islamic' university, most of the subjects taught at IIUM are in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. English and Arabic are used as the medium of instruction to fulfil its 'international' character.

In 2007, the Malaysian government expanded the Islamisation of the sciences project through a second Islamic university, the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM),[130] which has a stated aim of uniting the 'revelational sciences (Naqli knowledge) and the rational sciences (Aqli knowledge)'.[131] Like IIUM, the university offers Islamic studies alongside medicine, dentistry, accounting, tourism, and many other STEM subjects. Its highest management were chosen for their STEM instead of theological expertise.[132] Whatever the critiques of such amalgamation were,[133] one cannot deny that having STEM subjects 'harmonised' with Islamic teachings is, at least in appearance, the ideal solution to Mahathir's concern about Muslims falsely thinking that they had to choose between 'secular' and 'religious' knowledge, which led to the oversubscription of the latter at the expense of the former. Echoes of those concerns can also be found in the writings of Muhammad Kamal Hassan, a Columbia-trained Islamic scholar who became the first Malaysian rector of IIUM in 1999. In a paper entitled 'The Implications of Science and Technology: Education and Development of Islamic Values' presented in 1980, Kamal Hassan argued that

> [t]he Malay community, in particular, needs to appreciate the role of science and technology education for its members if it were to secure a respectable position in a highly competitive urbanising society with its emphasis on industry, efficiency, and skill.[134]

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130   USIM was upgraded to university status from the Islamic University College of Malaysia (KUIM) that was established in 1998.

131   'Overview', https://www.usim.edu.my/introduction/ (last accessed 4 July 2022).

132   The three most recent vice-chancellors are a molecular biologist, a chemist, and a theoretical physicist, respectively, all trained in Western universities. The current vice-chancellor, Sharifudin Md Shaarani, is a Cambridge-trained food scientist.

133   See Farish A. Noor. 'Re-orienting the "West"? The transnational debate on the status of the "West" in the debates among Islamist intellectuals and students from the 1970s to the present', *Majalah Al-jamiah* 47, 1 (2009): 1–47; Wiebke Keim, '"Islamization of knowledge: Symptom of the failed internationalization of the social sciences?', *Method(e)s: African Review of Social Science Methodology* 2, 1–2 (2017): 127–54.

134   Muhammad Kamal Hassan, 'The implications of science and technology: Education and development of Islamic values', paper presented at DSE-RIHED Conference on 'Cultural Heritage versus Technological Development: Challenges to Education', Singapore, 23–27 Sept. 1980, p. 3.

Whereas he was gravely concerned about the threat posed by the 'culture of liberal cap-italistic development' on the 'Islamic image of the dignity of man', Kamal Hassan also asserted that the Islamic worldview would help assuage 'the cynical rejection of "west-ern" science and technology' as it encouraged the 'objective study' of the universe.[135]

The status-seeking motive of the Islamisation of sciences project continues well after Mahathir left the scene. For example, when Malaysia had its first astronaut sent into outer space in 2007, the government published a Guideline about practising Islam in outer space to demonstrate that the government 'has successfully brought sci-ence and development to Malaysia without compromising the integrity of Islam or of the state itself'.[136] Published in Malay, Arabic, English, and Russian, the Guideline was in many ways an embodiment of Mahathir's stigma-reversal strategy that sought to re-centre Malaysia as the exemplary Muslim (Islamic) state. As Darren Zook noted,

> the idea here is that for any Muslims who travel to space in the future, they will look not to the heartland of the Islamic world or to the traditional learned centers such as Al-Azhar for guidance on how to practice Islam in space, but rather to the *Guidelines* offered to the world by Malaysia.[137]

Ontological security-seeking after the War on Terror

At this point, it is worth asking whether Mahathir's Islamisation project provided the ontological security he sought: that Malaysia be recognised as a model of 'true' Islam as a modern, rational, and progressive religion. There are no objective measures to answer this question, but we may return to what the protagonist thought of his efforts. Mahathir's lament about Malaysia's non-recognition is perhaps best seen in this speech he gave in Oxford in 1996:

> One would have thought that Muslims and non-Muslims would look to Malaysia as an example of the practice of Islam. But the West and their media refuse to recognise that the Muslims of Malaysia *actually exemplify the teachings of Islam*. They prefer to regard Malaysian Muslims and their behaviour as aberrations. They keep on asking about fun-damentalism in Malaysia and, when told that there are really no Islamic fundamentalists of the kind they describe, they reject the claim. The prejudice against Islam and Muslims remains even with Malaysia.[138]

Nonetheless, after the September 11 attacks, the calculus of reversing Islam's stigma-tisation changed dramatically. If the efforts by the Mahathir administration in the 1980s and '90s were about projecting Malaysia as a beacon of modernised Islam to counter Islam's stigmatisation, the post-Global War on Terror (GWOT) era saw those discourses moving increasingly into the security domain with greater attention paid to the idea of 'moderate' Islam that was seen as the antidote to 'radical' Islam.[139] As Washington was looking for Muslim allies to support its GWOT efforts and to

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135 Ibid., p. 5.
136 Darren Zook, 'Making space for Islam: Religion, science, and politics in contemporary Malaysia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, 4 (2010): 1151.
137 Ibid., p. 1154.
138 Mohamad, 'Islam: The misunderstood religion', p. 699; emphasis mine.
139 Saba Mahmood, 'Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation', *Public Culture* 18, 6 (2006): 323–47.

counter accusations of Islamophobia, Malaysia suddenly emerged as a stellar example of 'moderate' Islam: a relatively modernised Muslim state with a plural society that contrasted sharply with the image of the Taliban as a repressive and regressive theocratic regime. Tarnished significantly by his high-profile sacking of Anwar, Mahathir also capitalised on the GWOT to rehabilitate Malaysia's relationship with the United States, while justifying long-standing human rights concerns in the name of countering 'terror'.[140]

However, it was also during the GWOT that Mahathir made the controversial move of announcing that Malaysia was 'already an Islamic state' on 29 September 2001, barely two weeks after the attack.[141] Critics have pointed to undercutting the appeal of PAS as the reason for this pronouncement. Still, I argue that his long-running conviction to gain recognition for Malaysia as an exemplary model of 'Islamic' governance meant that the declaration was nothing surprising.[142] The announcement's timing, that is, at a time when Al-Qaeda had seized the global discourses about Islam, probably reflected Mahathir's wishes to counter Islam's stigmatisation through Malaysia's example. This wish to paint Malaysia as a model of 'true' Islam also explains why, when asked to clarify his statement later, Mahathir doubled down on his rhetoric by claiming that Malaysia was not 'moderate', but a 'fundamentalist Islamic country' because it practised the 'fundamentals of Islam'.[143] The point I am making here is that, if Muslim elite thinking about Islam and Islamisation were not purely driven by endogenous factors but also by concerns of status, then it is simply unthinkable that the GWOT's discursive stigmatisation of Islam would not have any effect on Muslim actors. For example, even PAS, which was vocal in its support for the Taliban during the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, had gradually dissociated itself from the group over the years and is now keen to stress that they were 'nothing like the Taliban'.[144]

The administrations that followed Mahathir's resignation, namely Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's (2003–09) and Najib Razak's (2009–18), had all foregrounded their governing philosophy on some concept of Islamic moderation. Badawi selected *Islam Hadhari* as his governing philosophy, which took as its official translation 'civilisational Islam', fitting itself comfortably (or perhaps uncomfortably) within the prevailing 'clash of civilisations' undertones that framed debates about Islam's position in the post-GWOT global order.[145] In a speech, he even claimed that the campaign for Islam Hadhari was about making '*Muslims understand that progress is enjoined by*

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140 Pamela Sodhy, 'U.S.–Malaysian relations during the Bush administration: The political, economic, and security aspects', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25, 3 (2003): 363–86.

141 Liow, *Piety and politics*, p. 82.

142 For an example of an analysis that attributed the pronouncement to the UMNO–PAS Islamising race, see Liow, 'Political Islam in Malaysia', pp. 197–8.

143 'Malaysia a fundamentalist Islamic country, says PM', *Malaysiakini*, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/11804 (last accessed 4 July 2022).

144 '*Bukti PAS tidak sama Taliban, bukan pengganas*' [Evidence that PAS is not the same as Taliban and terrorists], *Harakah Daily*, https://harakahdaily.net/index.php/2019/03/24/bukti-pas-tidak-sama-taliban-bukan-pengganas/ (last accessed 4 July 2022).

145 On the domestic reception of Islam Hadhari, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Muhamad Takiyudin Ismail, 'Islamist conservatism and the demise of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 25, 2 (2014): 159–80.

Islam', unwittingly reproducing Islam's stigmatisation by implying that Muslims still struggled with the demands of 'progress'.[146]

Najib, on the other hand, coupled his promotion of *wasatiyyah* (Islamic moderation) as a governing philosophy with a high-profile launching of the Global Movement of Moderates Foundation (GMMF) in 2012. The latter functioned largely as a branding exercise that vaunted 'moderate' Islam as the key to 'address all forms of extremism', profiting from a resurgence in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies as states grappled with the Islamic State (IS) phenomenon that peaked in the mid-2010s.[147] It is unlikely that these initiatives yielded any concrete policy outcomes. Still, some, such as Najib's GMMF, caught the attention of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barak Obama, securing for the elites their much-needed recognition that Malaysia was, in fact, the model 'moderate' Muslim state.[148] The examples of Najib and Badawi had shown that widespread scepticism of Islam post-GWOT had ironically created the conditions whereby Muslim governments increasingly opted to identify themselves with an Islamic slogan, something Mahathir never did.[149]

By the late 2010s, even as the US-led liberal international order was widely challenged and contested from within and without,[150] the short-lived Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) government that ousted BN in 2018 also demonstrated a similar desire for recognition through 'moderate' Islam branding exercises.[151] For example, before a coup that toppled the government in 2020, Mujahid Yusuf, the Minister in Charge of Islamic Affairs, championed the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* (loosely translates as compassionate Islam) and *maqasid Syariah* (principles of Syariah) as a framework to reform the previous administrations' practice of Islam that was accused of being 'cruel, harsh, and unreasonable'.[152] However, much of the documentation used to promote the agenda revolved around showing how the

146 Speech by Abdullah Badawi, 'Islam Hadhari in a multi-racial society', Sydney, 8 Apr. 2005.
147 'Malaysia at the UNSC-Global Movement of Moderates', *kln.gov*, http://malaysiaunsc.kln.gov.my/index.php/malaysia-at-the-unsc/malaysia-s-commitment/global-movement-of-moderates-gmm (last accessed 4 July 2022). On the IS phenomenon, see Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
148 'Malaysian Prime Minister's speech on moderation', *wikileaks*, https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/27882 (last accessed 4 July 2022). 'Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Najib of Malaysia', *Obama White House Archive*, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/27/joint-statement-president-obama-and-prime-minister-najib-malaysia-0 ((last accessed 4 July 2022).
149 Despite Mahathir's overseeing of an extensive array of Islamisation programmes, he never once picked an Islamic motto to outline his governing philosophy. The slogans of his government were generally more inclusive, most famous being the ideas of Vision 2020 and *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race, or People) introduced in 1991, none of which incorporated much Islamic concepts in their blueprint and discourses.
150 Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Struggles for recognition: The liberal international order and the merger of its discontents', *International Organization* 25, 2 (2021): 611–34.
151 For perspectives on Malaysia's political transition and the coup that reversed it, see Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis, *Towards a new Malaysia? The 2018 election and its aftermath* (Singapore: NUS Press); Chin-Huat Wong, 'Parliament as prime minister's electoral college: The defection game in Malaysia's democratic backsliding', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 109, 5 (2020): 586–607.
152 'Malaysia's most powerful Islamic body faces scrutiny', *Straits Times*, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-most-powerful-islamic-body-faces-scrutiny (last accessed 4 July 2022).

five principles of *maqasid Syariah* (the preservation of religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property) were compatible with the 17 goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[153] Despite developing a conservative streak of its own now after decades of institutionalisation, Malaysia's statist Islam appeared entrapped in a broader sense of ontological insecurity.[154] Calls for 'more Islam' often had to be justified with references to external (and often Eurocentric) standards of development, only that the previous emphasis on heavy industrial modernity during the late twentieth century has now transitioned to the green, cyber-technological modernity of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the dynamics of ontological security-seeking cannot be neglected in understanding Malaysia's state-led Islamisation, particularly the trajectory and forms it took during the Mahathir administration. I argue that the conditions of Malaysia's postcoloniality, in that it is a Muslim state that emerged within an international order structured by a colonial hierarchy that racialises and stigmatises 'Muslimness' as an attribute of inferiority, inflicted a significant impact on how Muslim state elites think about Islam in both its symbolic role as a marker of state identity and functional role in governance. I made my case with specific emphasis on Mahathir, who is arguably one of the most crucial architects behind Malaysia's many statist Islamisation programmes. I argued that Mahathir's writings revealed attributes of a stigmatised actor who took the Orientalist judgement that Islam was a religion not conducive to scientific thinking and industrial modernity seriously. However, even as Mahathir internalised the judgement of inferiority (as seen in his essentialised description of the 'Malay character'), he also tried to subvert the stigmatisation by claiming that most Malays had misinterpreted Islam. Thus, unlike his predecessors, who prescribed only a marginal role for Islam in Malaysia's governance, Mahathir actively incorporated Islam within Malaysia's developmentalist projects. The three key features of Mahathir's Islamisation—bureaucratisation, corporatisation, and Islamisation of the sciences—also indicated how the effort was geared towards increasing Islam's visibility and accessibility vis-à-vis totems of (Western) industrial modernity to challenge the notion that Islam was incompatible to the needs and standards of modernity.

Given the scale and scope of my argument, two caveats must be made here. First, as mentioned above, I am not in any way suggesting that Mahathir was solely responsible for Malaysia's state-led Islamisation, given that complex societal dynamics, historical factors, and transnational influences were at play.[155] Even as he was instrumental in their creation, cascading effects had resulted in the 'Islamic leviathan' and its 'little Napoleons' escaping and even outgrowing Mahathir's penchant for

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153 JAKIM, *The profile of Maqasid Shariah in state governance* (Putrajaya: JAKIM, 2018), pp. 86–9.
154 For an account of how the *ulamas* took advantage of the state's institutionalisation and centralisation of Islam for state capture, see Saat, *The state, ulama and Islam.*
155 See explorations of these factors at Nagata, *The reflowering of Malaysian Islam*; Muzaffar, *Islam resurgence*; Mohamad Abu Bakar, 'External influences on contemporary Islamic resurgence in Malaysia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 13, 2 (1991): 220–28.

micromanagement.[156] In fact, his displeasure with the religious establishment was such that he reportedly countenanced JAKIM's abolition when he became prime minister for the second time in 2018.[157] Nonetheless, the motive of ontological security-seeking is still important in the larger picture as it furnishes an understanding of Mahathir's *receptivity* towards Islamisation (and his expansive co-optation of Islamic scholars and revivalists into his government) despite not being an Islamist himself. It also helps explain how seeking recognition for Malaysia as a model of 'moderate' Islam remains the obsession of Muslim state elites that came after Mahathir.

Second, arguing that Islamisation resulted from Muslim state actors responding to colonial epistemologies embedded in a hierarchical postcolonial order is not about pitting two sets of 'values' against one other. It is not my intention to depict or compare 'Islam' and the 'West' as two timeless, hermeneutically sealed sets of worldviews, nor make any normative claims about what either ought to be, which is an impossible task. My intention is simply to sketch out the uneven global topography in which Islamisation as state-led projects occurred: a 'habitus' whereby being 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' comes with the baggage of internalised and externally imposed judgements of modernity deficit and aberration. I also showed, albeit cursorily, that Malaysia's reputation as a bastion of moderate Islam also emerged from a long-standing image-building enterprise that sought to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with modernity in its bureaucratic, scientific, and corporate forms. This reputation later complemented the deployment of moderate Islam as a rhetorical device in Malaysian domestic and foreign policy discourses, turning this idea of moderate Islam into a form of soft power to secure strategic interest within the broader climate of the GWOT.[158]

Lastly, why is opting for a historical sociological explanation of Islamisation necessary? This article offers three reasons for such a rethinking. First, discussions of the 'international' in the Islamisation literature are generally confined to transnational actors, ideas, and networks, such as Saudi funding, madrassah networks, and circuits of online preaching. Important as these factors are, elite perceptions of the 'international' (in terms of cultural hierarchies, historical memory, and East–West inequities) are also central to Muslim states grappling with their postcoloniality, something that remains understudied. Thus, relocating discussions of the 'international' to that of the international order helps recontextualise our understanding of Islamisation not as a phenomenon bounded by the borders of nations, but as responses that are statist in nature by virtue of the ontology of the modern international order and its colonial foundations.[159] Second, it invites a conceptual

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156 The stark difference between the number of national *fatwas* issued during Mahathir's tenure of 22 years (131) and Badawi's 6 years (104) shows that the Islamic bureaucracy has taken a life of its own and that Mahathir was more of a tempering factor towards its influence instead of being able to command its institutional and ideological trajectories. See Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy*, p. 126.

157 'People should be allowed to get rid of Jakim, says Dr Mahathir', *The Edge,* https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/people-should-be-allowed-get-rid-jakim-says-dr-mahathir (last accessed 4 July 2022).

158 Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, *Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution).

159 On writings about the statist ontology and racialised foundations of the international order, see Ayşe Zarakol, 'States and ontological security: A historical rethinking', *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, 1

departure from the territory of fundamentalism, which presupposes that theological commitments and anti-Western sentiments are the major ideological drivers behind state-sponsored Islamisation. In the case of Malaysia, I illustrate how neither a close adherence to literalist understandings of Islam nor a bitter hatred of the West fuelled Malaysia's statist Islamisation programme, even if its later manifestations have appeared as such. In fact, one can even argue that anti-Western sentiments only intensified after Malaysia's Islamisation instead of preceding it, as Muslim elites felt their efforts to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with the West were spurned by the intended audience. This perception hardened when discourses emanating from the GWOT only furthered culturalist stereotyping and moralist condemnation of Muslims.

Third, the ontological-security framework employed here enables a reinterpretation of the identity politics narrative that often describes trends of Islamisation as a nativist resurgence in the face of globalisation's many destabilising effects.[160] However, if (state-led) Islamisation has always kept the West as its imagined audience, current predicaments within the West that fuelled perceptions of its relative decline, not to mention, in some cases, its disowning of liberal democratic norms, may prompt one to ask one question.[161] That is, whether what we are seeing as resurgent Muslim identity politics today is really an effect of East–West mirroring or a case of the 'stigmatised' finally being able to dissociate themselves from the gaze of their audience.

(2017): 48–68; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

160   Menderes Çınar, 'Turkey's "Western" or "Muslim" identity and the AKP's civilizational discourse', *Turkish Studies* 19, 2 (2018): 176–97.

161   G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94, 1 (2018): 7–23.