The Historical Development of the “Sunnah” Reform Ideology in the State of Perlis, Malaysia

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Abstract
Since the arrival of Islam in Tanah Melayu or Malaya, traditionalist scholars have dominated the Islamic discourse through their close relations with the rulers (Sultans). Their domination over the religious authorities and the Islamic educational institutions has shaped the state version of Islam in Malaysia. However, in Perlis, the northernmost state in Malaysia, Middle Eastern graduate reformists, also known as Kaum Muda, were already preaching the earliest version of Salafism in the early 20th century. They found political patronage from the rulers of the state, hence imposing their version of Islamic teachings as the prevailing Islamic discourse of the state, which is also known until today as the “Sunnah Perlis” teachings. The widely presumptuous masses and researchers point that the dominating influence of the reform agenda or “Sunnah” in the state of Perlis is due to the state authority’s patronage based on historical facts that the “Sunnah” itself first emerged in Perlis in the early 20th century with the blessings of the ruler. This article attempts to look at the historical development of the “Sunnah Perlis” and to scrutinize the state authority’s patronage and influence in the state of Perlis. To achieve this, it employs a historical method of study to look at important milestones in the historical account of the Sunnah reform agenda in Perlis and its development at different periods hitherto through literatures, reports, interviews, and focus group discussions.

Keywords
Kaum Muda, Kaum Tua, Malaysia, Perlis, Salafism, Sunnah, Wahabism

Introduction
For many centuries, Islamic discourse in preindependent Malaysia or what was known as Tanah Melayu or Malaya was dominated by the traditionalist scholars through their influence on the religious authority and both formal and informal Islamic education institutions such as the mosques, surau, madrasahs, and pondok (Gordon, 1999; Roff, 1962, 1967), which were established resulting from their close relations with the rulers (Shellabear, 1978; Thomaz, 1993). The scenario, however, changed in the early 1920s following the introduction of a modern madrasah system initiated by young ulama who were mostly graduates of the al-Azhar University in Egypt (Abdul Hamid, 2010). These al-Azhar graduates were heavily influenced by the earlier version of the Salafiyyah reform ideology of Jamaldin Afghani and his disciple, Muhammad Abduh. This version of Salafiyyah thoughts, propagated among others, the ideal of pan-Islamism, and the Afghan-Abduh reform doctrine that emphasizes the importance of reviving the Muslim ummah globally through its progressive idea of reopening the gate of ijtihad, relinquishing innovation (bid’a) and reconciling elements of modernity into the Islamic culture of the people (Noor, 2004). This earlier version of Salafiyyah, unlike the current conservative Gulf or Saudi-style Salafiyyah, was known for its progressive and modern ideas. Lauzière accurately categorizes this version of Salafism as the “reformed Salafism,” although this version of Salafism may share similar elements with the current Gulf or Saudi-style Salafism in its epistemological references, but the former is closer to the ideals of modernity, while the latter is more conservative (Lauzière, 2010, pp. 369-389; 2015).

The graduates, widely known as Kaum Muda (Young People), also voiced their resentment toward some of the cultural practices of the Malay community, which, according to them, were the means to shirk and bid’a (Gordon, 1999; Othman, 1994; Roff, 1962, 1967). Moreover, in promoting its “progressive” version of Islam, the Kaum Muda also emphasized the importance of modern education, especially for women. The large number of ideas propagated by Kaum Muda created an atmosphere of hostility toward the establishment

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and resulted in a considerable backlash from the country’s religious authorities (Zakartya, 2008). Many incidents of debates and clashes are recorded as having occurred between the Kaum Muda and the establishment. These ended in most cases, in endless polemics (Means, 2009). Due to its controversial nature, the Kaum Muda was also labeled as the “Wahabi” (Malik, 2013, pp. 52-56).

Despite the continuous dominance of the traditionalists in shaping the state version of Islam in many states in Malaysia, in Perlis, a state located in the northern part of Malaysia, however, the Kaum Muda managed to gain political patronage from the rulers of the state (Othman & Rahmat, 1996). The state adamantly declared its inclination toward the reform ideas, and proudly established its own approach toward understanding Islam, which has been known as the “Sunnah” way of Islam or, in some cases, coined as “Islah” (Shukor Mat, 2000). It was known for its call for ijtihad by referring directly to the Qur’an and Sunnah, that is, without making any attachment to any specific madhhab (legalistic school of thought). Consequently, the state religious enactments and rulings were not bound to any madhhab, in contrast to the other states in Malaysia, which adhered to the Shafii madhhab.

This has been among the most apparent controversial principle that has caused continuous resentment between the Kaum Muda of Perlis with mainstream traditionalists from the other states in Malaysia, which religiously adhere to the idea of the necessity for Muslims in Malaysia to affiliate themselves to a specific madhhab, which, in the case of the Malay Archipelago, is the Shafii madhhab. According to mainstream traditionalists, any call to liberate oneself from the madhhab, or any attempt to abolish the affiliation or attachment of Muslims to a specific madhhab, is similar to belittling the founder members of those different madhhabs, and some perceive it as an act of insolence (A. R. Abdullah, 2007; Shukor Mat, 2000). This legacy of the reform agenda of the “Kaum Muda version of Salafism,” which is akin to Muhammadiyah in Perlis, is also known until today as the “Sunnah Perlis.” They sometimes refer to themselves as the “golongan sunnah” (Sunnah Group) as an antithesis of the “golongan madhhab” (madhhabic group) of the mainstream (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Interestingly, the Sunnah Perlis scholars and activists heavily rejected the labeling of Wahabi given to them or any association with the Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia. They always prefer to be known as “Ahli Sunnah wal jamaah” or “Sunnah” or “Islah” rather than Wahabi (Othman & Rahmat, 1996, p. 101). However, Man and Ali (2005) insist in using the “Salafi” label to the “Sunnah Perlis” thoughts and reform agenda due to its reform nature (islah and tajdid) and also its call for the pure version of Islam by referring directly to the al-Quran and Sunnah as well as by superseding the madhhabic interpretation (p. 75). In sum, to understand the position of Sunnah Perlis, in contrast to the mainstream Islamic discourse in Malaysia, one could compare it with the relation between Muhammadiyah and Persis in Indonesia against the Nahdatul Ulama.

It was widely discussed that the dominating influence of the “Sunnah” in the state of Perlis was due to the state authority’s patronage of the reform agenda. An early hypothesis indicates that it was the multifactors that led to the situation, among them was the Rulers’ patronage of the “Sunnah” reformists’ agenda, the Rulers’ power represented by Majlis Agama Perlis (religious authority) which is directly under the Rulers’ influence, the state administration represented by the ruling government predominantly occupied by the “Sunnah” followers and activists, and the relentless efforts by “Sunnah” preachers throughout mosques, schools, and publications (Man, 2007, pp. 141-156). However, the level of impact by these factors differs from one time to another.

This article will try to look at the historical development of the “Sunnah Perlis” discourse as another earlier version of Salafism and scrutinize its influence in the state of Perlis. In achieving this, it will employ a historical method in understanding the important milestones in the historical account of the Sunnah reform agenda in Perlis and its development in the different periods hitherto through literatures, reports, interviews, and focus group discussions. The term “Sunnah” will be used in this article intertwined with “Islah” as widely used by other researchers, to maintain the level of objectivity by calling the idea according to what the proponents call it.

“Sunnah” in Perlis: Historical Background and Development

Perlis is the smallest state in Malaysia situated at the northeastern part of the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The capital of Perlis is Kangar while its royal capital is Arau, where the Rulers of Perlis reside. It is bordered by the state of Kedah to the south and Thailand to the north, and was initially part of Kedah under the Siamese rule for many centuries. However, in 1842, the Siamese separated Perlis from Kedah and it became a principality, a vassal to Bangkok. On May 20, 1843, the Siamese made Sayyid Hussain Jamalullail, a descendant of Hadhrami Arab Sayyid, who was also the maternal son of the Sultan of Kedah, the first “Raja” of Perlis (Buyong, 1981, pp. 4-8). This made Perlis a sovereign state. His descendants still rule Perlis, but as Rajas, instead of Sultans due to their non-Malay origin.

The “Sunnah” in Perlis, a 20th-century phenomenon, is part of the global “Islah” or reform movement of the pan-Islamic agenda of Afghani–Abdul in Egypt. The development of the “Sunnah” in Perlis throughout the two centuries (20th and 21st) can be divided into six phases: the establishment, stagnation, re-enhancement, crisis, recovery-revival, and the golden periods. The categorization of the periods is mostly based on Abdul Rahman Abdullah’s chapter “Sejarah Islah di Perlis” (the History of Islah in Perlis) in his book, “Aliran Dakwah di Malaysia, Satu Titik Pertemuan” (Dakwah
Trends in Malaysia: A Meeting Point (see A. R. Abdullah, 2007, pp. 161-173). However, an additional period has been inserted into this article, the “Golden Period” of the “Sunnah,” which occurred during the term of Shahidan Kassim as the Menteri Besar together with his “Sunnah” acquaintance and reference, Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin as the Mufti of the State of Perlis. The word “golden” was not elaborated by Abdul Rahman, though he did mention it briefly when talking about the final stage of the recovery-revival period. Thus, he is not really being just to the historical facts.

Establishment Period (1920s-1930s)

There are a few theories on who was first responsible for bringing the “Sunnah” reform idea to Perlis. However, according to many researchers, it was Lebai Kechik who came to Perlis from Padang in the year 1925. Man (2007) argues that this wide-spread theory must have been taken from personal notes called “Agama dan Zakat di Perlis,” widely quoted by researchers, which belongs to Dato’ Wan Ahmad b. Wan Daud, a prominent “Sunnah” figure in Perlis (p. 148). However, Shukor Mat (2000), who managed to trace the date of Lebai Kechik’s arrival in Malaya, which was during the 1930s, has refuted this theory. According to Shukor Mat, the first attempt to bring the “Sunnah” idea was by Syeikh Hassan Sabani, known by his real name as Syeikh Hassan b. Ahmad, who came to Perlis from Surabay in 1916. However, he was chased away by Raja Alwi due to the controversial nature of his thoughts, and he later migrated to Johore and Pulau Pinang accordingly. Despite the failure of his first attempt in Perlis, he made his return to the state in 1926 and managed to get full support from a local religious scholar, Haji Abdul Ghani b. Dato’ Sakti, and a well-known community leader, Tuan Haji Abdullah b. Ahmad.

Wan Ahmad (n.d), in his account on the emergence of the “Sunnah” idea in Perlis, suggests that a scholar from Hadramawt, Yemen, Syed Ibrahim also made his contribution in spreading the reform idea in Perlis. However, according to historical records, it was Haji Ahmad bin Muhammad, also known as Haji Ahmad Hakim, who was the first person responsible to propose a radical change to the conventional practice of zakat collection and distribution in Perlis as part of the reform proposal to Raja Alwi in 1927 (A. R. Abdullah, 2007). This incident was the turning point that led to the positive attitude of the palace toward the reform ideas in religious matters, despite waves of rejection from the traditionalist local scholars. It also opened a new chapter in the support of the palace to the struggle of the reform idea later known as the “Sunnah” or the “Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaah” method.

Haji Ahmad Hakim was supported by two comrades: a political figure, Wan Ahmad bin Wan Daud, and a local scholar, Syeikh Ahmad bin Mohd Hashim, to spread the reform idea (islah) in Perlis (A. R. Abdullah, 1997). Among the three, Wan Ahmad was known for his proactive role in promoting the “Sunnah” or “Islah” among the authority, thus getting the support from the palace. He was reported to have established communication and relation with the Kaum Muda icon, Syed Syeikh al-Hadi, in Penang and succeeded in getting Abdul Wahab Abdullah, the assistant editor of “Saudara” magazine which belonged to al-Hadi to Penang. In disseminating its ideas, Kaum Muda managed to vary its approach. It published its literature and was also aggressively involved in publishing its own periodical newspaper—akin to its ideologue in Egypt. Saudara, Pengasah, “al-Urwat al-Wuthqa,” al-Ikhwani, al-Imam, and al-Muin are among the periodicals produced by these reformists (Othman & Rahmat, 1996, pp. 28-30, 81). Similarly, Abdul Wahab had a significant role in spreading the Kaum Muda ideas in Perlis.

Wan Ahmad and his two comrades are known in the Perlis Sunnah history as “Tiga Mat” (the three Mats; A. R. Abdullah, 1997, p. 219). They are identified as having been heavily influenced by the writings of Hassan Bandung from Persatuan Islam (PERSIS), one of the reform movements of that period in Indonesia. Apart from the “Tiga Mat,” another noteworthy scholar who contributed toward establishing the “Sunnah” idea in Perlis was Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, an Azhar graduate (1925-1932), and a former active leader of a student movement “Jam’iyat al-Malayuwiyah” (Malay Association), which consists of students from Malaya and Indonesia in Egypt along with the prominent Indonesian reformist leader, Abdul Kahar Muzakkir. Akin to the other reformists of Kaum Muda during his time, al-Ashaari also contributed significantly to the “Saudara” magazine while teaching in Pulau Pinang. The “Tiga Mat” invited al-Ashaari to Perlis together with Abdul Wahab. He began his career in Perlis as a teacher at the Alawiyah madrasah but was later given a more substantive role as the Imam of the Alawi mosque in Kangar (A. R. Abdullah, 2007).

It was the collective effort of the “Tiga Mat,” Abdul Wahab and al-Ashaari, that managed to place a foundational pillar to the teaching of the “Sunnah” or “Islah” in Perlis in what is coined by Abdul Rahman as the “Establishment Period” (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 173). It was during this “establishment period” that the Alawiyah Madrasah and the Alwi mosque became the propagation bastion of the reformists, together with their writings, especially those of Abu Bakar al-Ashaari. Among the factors that paved the way for the “Sunnah” reform idea to spread throughout Perlis, especially in Kangar and Arau, was the full support they received from the religious authority and the palace. Raja Syed Alwi, the king of Perlis, was known for his open support for the reform ideas and the influence of the “Tiga Mat.”

Stagnation Period (1941-1945)

The honeymoon of the Sunnah reformists did not last long; the Japanese Occupation ended the privileges enjoyed by them. They appointed Syed Hamzah, brother of Raja Alwi,
as the new ruler on February 2, 1943. Syed Hamzah was known for his disagreement with the former king, Syed Alwi, and his aides, the Sunnah reformists. He began to exclude all those who were associated with the former ruler and kept them away from any administrative post in the state. Most of the Sunnah reformists, apart from Syeikh Ahmad, went through a tough time and were pressured to abandon their reformation agenda during the occupation period. Syed Hamzah also appointed those without inclination toward the “Sunnah” reform ideas to lead the religious authority administration and consistently expressed his resentment toward the “Sunnah” reform idea, which he called as “deviant teaching” (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, pp. 178-181).

An interesting fact to ponder regarding this period relates to the situation of the other Kaum Muda or pro-Kaum Muda activists outside Perlis. The Japanese organized the “Pan-Malayan Religious Council” which aimed to put Muslim scholars, mainly from the religious authority (dominated by the traditionalists or Kaum Tua) in the Malay states under its patronage. Most of them were used by the Japanese to spread Japanese propaganda at the mosques to the Muslim community throughout preindependent Malaya (Ahmad, 2003).

The Japanese managed to get the support of the Muslim scholars by using “anti-colonial” discourse and promised them “independence” from Western colonization. The Kaun Muda scholars outside Perlis, in the meantime, became staunch supporters of the Japanese through their political ideas. Although they were not used by the Japanese to be part of religious propaganda machine like the Kaum Tua, the Kaum Muda scholars, thinkers, and political activists formed the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) to express their anti-British propaganda and propagate the idea of a bigger Malay state comprising Malaya and Indonesia, or what was then known as “Melayu Raya” (K. Abdullah, 2003, p. 43). Unfortunately, unlike the other Kaum Muda scholars who were not affected by Japanese policies, the Sunnah scholars were experiencing an eclipse for an internal palace-political power struggle in Perlis.

Re-Enhancement Period (1945-1960s)

The predicament experienced by the “Sunnah” reformists, however, ended with the end of the Japanese occupation. The British colonialists who came back to Malaya after the defeat of the Japanese in the Second World War appointed Syed Putra as the new king of Perlis on December 4, 1945. Syed Putra took a different approach toward the Sunnah reform idea. His openness and positive attitude toward the Sunnah reformists allowed them to make a comeback to finish their unfinished business in the state. Furthermore, the Sunnah reform agenda was fully supported by the ruling party “United Malays National Organization” (UMNO) as the leading and the most prevailing Malay party after the Japanese occupation and the rejection of the Malays of the “Malayan Union” proposal by the British to unify all the Malay states under a single government to simplify administration (K. Abdullah, 2003, p. 183). The proposal was perceived as an attempt to abolish the monarchy, thus endangering Malay dominance of their motherland.

The golden opportunity given to the Sunnah reformists during this period was capitalized by “Tiga Mat” and its acquaintances to regroup and pursue its reform agenda more aggressively. They managed to strengthen the Sunnah reform agenda by employing only those with Sunnah tendency to positions in the state religious authority offices: Imams for the mosques and teachers in the madrasahs throughout Perlis. The religious authority also emphasized the enforcement and monitoring issues to ensure the Sunnah practice was substantively installed and implemented by the people of Perlis and all the religious institutions within the state of Perlis (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014). Majlis Agama Islam (State religious authority) had also appointed the religious inspectors to monitor religious activities conducted by the people (State of Perlis, 1945).

Apart from the authority’s enforcement and support given by the palace, education and propagation also played an essential role in spreading the Sunnah reform idea in the state of Perlis. At this stage, considerable effort in propagating the Sunnah idea is attributed to Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, who was brought back by Haji Ahmad Hakim after his exile outside Perlis during the Japanese occupation. He was appointed initially as Imam of Masjid Alwi (Alwi mosque), which was pivotal to the proliferation of the Sunnah reform idea in Kangar and Perlis. Being a prolific writer, and considered as the most learned scholar in Perlis, he became the reference of the Sunnah idea by both the authority and the people of Perlis (Roff, 1975). His books have been considered as references for the Sunnah, and used by many to understand the “Sunnah” ideals. Despite the enormous influence of his books to the people of Perlis, many of which, especially his “Ibadat Rasulullah,” were being prohibited and banned in the other states due to its unconventional madhhhabic approach and controversial fatwas in contradiction with the mainstream Shafii madhhhab throughout Persekutuan Tanah Melayu then (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 186).

At this stage, Perlis was already known for its “Sunnah” inclination and its controversial scholars. Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, one of those scholars, was invited to many Malay states by the religious authority, muftis and scholars to engage in debate on many of his fatwas, mainly from his “Ibadat Rasulullah” (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 186). In most instances, Abu Bakar refused the invitation as he believed the result would be fruitless. He argues that everybody is entitled to his own ijtihad (reasoning) because his fatwas mainly deal with elementary issues and not those of the fundamentals of Islam (Din, 1976). Surprisingly, some of his controversial fatwas became popular and acceptable in the later period, such as his fatwa on the permissibility of organ (he was talking about eyes) donation from a dead person to a living person (A. R.
Abdullah, 2007, p. 188). He backed his fatwa with the argument of maslahah (public interest) that has always been protected and prioritized in Islamic teachings as mercy to humankind. Similarly, his fatwa on the permissibility for Muslims to pay zakat (alm) with money instead of crops and fruits was heavily refuted and led him to be labeled as a heretic, yet it is now widely accepted and practiced by Muslims in Malaysia (A. R. Abdullah, 2007).

Crisis Period (1960s)

Having Abu Bakr al-Ashaari as the icon of the “Sunnah” in Perlis brought both fortune and calamity to the reform agenda. As mentioned earlier, most of the Sunnah reformists in Perlis were UMNO supporters. Since the preindependent years until the postindependent period, the “Sunnah” reform agenda has been wholeheartedly propagated and defended by those who are within or related to UMNO unlike in the other states in Malaya. The establishment of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS; as the offshoot of the first Islamic party in Malaya Hizbul Muslimin) in 1955 became a turning point of the status quo. Initially, PAS had managed to attract most of the scholars from both the Kaum Muda influenced intellectuals and the Kaum Tua traditionalist scholars from throughout Malaya. PAS presented itself as different from UMNO through its goal to establish an Islamic State based on an Islamic ideology instead of a secular-nationalistic one as propagated by UMNO.

Furthermore, in 1956, Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, the prominent Kaum Muda and reform intellect, was appointed as PAS new president due to the leadership crisis within the party (Noor, 2004). Dr. Burhanuddin, during his presidency, made the party more dynamic, thus attracting the other Kaum Muda and reform-minded scholars. Abu Bakr al-Ashaari was among those who was convinced by Dr. Burhanuddin. A year after Burhanuddin became the president of PAS, Abu Bakr left UMNO for PAS, and eventually became Ketua Dewan Ulama (Leader of Scholars Council) of PAS in Perlis. His migration to PAS led to division among the Sunnah supporters in Perlis (A. R. Abdullah, 2007). Abu Bakar, since then, has not been known for his Sunnah ideal, and has been accused of being apologetic of his position to compromise with the other Kaum Tua traditionalists within PAS in Perlis (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Unlike Abu Bakar, most of the Sunnah leaders and activists in Perlis have remained loyal to UMNO, thus enjoying administrative and political status in the state administration (Othman & Rahmat, 1996). Haji Ahmad Hakim continued his job as the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam and Adat Istiadat Melayu Perlis (the head of Religious Council and Malay Culture and Heritage of the state of Perlis), while both Wan Ahmad and Syeikh Ahmad contested for UMNO in the 1959 General Election in Malaya. Both won the seats as assemblymen in the state assembly. Following their victory, Wan Ahmad was appointed as the assembly hall speaker while Syeikh Ahmad became the first elected Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Perlis. Despite the special treatment given to the Sunnah propagation in Perlis, however, not much essential changes were made during the tenure of Syeikh Ahmad as the Menteri Besar.

The most significant milestone of the Sunnah Perlis occurred before the period of Syeikh Ahmad’s predecessor as the Menteri Besar, Dato Laksamana Haji Mohd Razali. On March 26, 1959, the Sunnah ideology was duly enacted in the state constitution (Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis) with the endorsement of various parties involved (which includes the Tiga Mat, the Menteri Besar, and the King’s representative). Article 17 of the state constitution states clearly that “the Ruler of Perlis must be a Muslim man who adheres to the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah thoughts.” While in Article 3:1, it states that any regent to the throne and the council of the regent must “adhere to the teachings of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah.” Concurrently, Article 27 of the state constitution also states that “the heir of the throne must also adhere to Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah” (Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis (Perlis State Constitution), 1381/1962). The enactments have been acknowledged ever since as the cornerstone and the triumph of the struggle of the “Sunnah” ideology in Perlis.

During the period of Syeikh Ahmad as Menteri Besar, more substantive achievements to strengthen the domination of the “Sunnah” in Perlis were achieved. In 1963, as an example, the Islamic Administrative Laws (Undang-Undang Pentadbiran Agama Islam) indicate in Article 4 that “The Majlis (Religious Council of the state) in issuing a Fatwa and the Shari’ah (Fatwa) Committee when giving its opinion under sub-section (2) shall follow al-Quran and/or Sunnah.” Consequently, in 1964, an amendment was made to the Article 5(1) of the Perlis state constitution (Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis) stating, “The official religion of the state of Perlis is Islam according to the teaching of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah as being practiced in the state.” Similarly, in the same year, a significant amendment was done to the state Islamic Administrative Laws (Undang-Undang Pentadbiran Agama Islam), in Article 2, para. 7 (4), stating that any fatwa or decision by the Shari’ah council of the state that follows al-Quran and Sunnah must not contradict with the public interest. While in case of any contradictions, the decision must be presented to the King who will decide according to the convention practiced in Perlis.

Despite the law enactments, the late 1960s and early 1970s became witness to the demise of many “Sunnah” icons in Perlis. This situation left the “Sunnah” reform agenda in a relatively state of loss. Haji Ahmad Hakim died in circa 1964, Abu Bakar al-Ashaari in 1970, the same year as Wan Ahmad. The last “Mat” of the “Tiga Mat” (three Mats), Syeikh Ahmad died years later, in 1980, however, without making any significant contribution in his final years compared with the 1950s (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 199).
Furthermore, in 1967, the Government of Malaysia, through the Ministry of Education, started to gain control of some madrasahs in Malaysia, including the Madrasah Alawiyah in Perlis, once the bastion of the “Sunnah” activists, to educate the younger generation of scholars. After the takeover, Madrasah Alawiyah no longer used the “Sunnah” curriculum they were once proud of, but instead had to resort to the standardized Ministry of Education schools’ religious syllabus, which is mainly based on the Shafi’i madhhab (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 200; Othman & Rahmat, 1996, pp. 118-119).

In addition, the “Sunnah” reform agenda in Perlis began to deteriorate when the appointment to the main positions of religious authority was made by the federal government, and no longer under the state’s jurisdiction. Most of those who were deployed to Perlis from outside the state were not really friendly to the “Sunnah” approach, and in some cases appeared as the opponents to the state religious ideology such as Salleh Othman who was appointed as the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam Perlis (Head of Higher Islamic Council of the state of Perlis) on January 1, 1971, Mohd Said Pilus who succeeded him, and finally, Ghazali Haji Ismail who came after Mohd Said in 1976. The “Sunnah” followers in Perlis saw the aforementioned three Yang Dipertuan as persons who had been sent by the federal authority to change the “Sunnah” reform agenda in Perlis and replace it with the mainstream Shafi’i madhhab approach (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, pp. 200-201). This suspicion was strengthened when during those years, the federal Islamic authority aggressively banned literatures relating to the “Sunnah” such as the writings of Hasan Bandung, Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, and others (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

**The Recovery-Revival Period (1980s)**

Despite the eclipse that happened to the “Sunnah” in Perlis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new wave of “Sunnah” awakening emerged during the mid-1970s and 1980s. New icons with a new approach of enhancing the “Sunnah” agenda were initiated by a group of religious teachers and preachers who established a niche Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called “al-Islah Perlis.” This was led by Tuan Haji Ismail bin Haji Mahmud, widely known in Perlis as Syeikh Noor al-Surur. Syeikh Noor, of Hadramawt origin who was a religious teacher and a judge in the High Court of Makkah for 8 years before he came to Malaysia. He moved to Perlis with the purpose to be part of the “Sunnah” reform activists in the state during the 1950s (A. R. Abdul Rahman, personal communication, August 17, 2012). Nevertheless, he remained low profile as a religious teacher teaching at several religious schools in Perlis. However, the demise of the “Sunnah” icons prompted him to play his role as a reference for “Sunnah” thoughts, which were widely accepted by the “Sunnah” followers (A. R. Abdul Rahman, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Together with Abu Bakar Mahmud and Haji Abdullah Ali, Syeikh Noor founded “al-Islah Perlis” on March 18, 1971. Syeikh Noor’s disciples, later known as the al-Islah leaders and preachers such as Ustaz Abdul Razak bin Abd Rahman, Dato Wan Ahmad Wan Abdullah, Hj Abd Rashid Jasim, Ahmad Yusuf Amin (Mat Libya), and others came to lend their hands to uphold the “Sunnah” agenda through al-Islah (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014). Al-Islah also managed to attract a former Mufti of Perlis, Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail, who was then a teacher at Madrasah Alawiyah Arau. He eventually became the Imam of Masjid Alwi (Alwi mosque) in Kangar as part of his efforts to maintain the “Sunnah” practice at the mosque (A. R. Abdullah, 2007). Apart from the enormous efforts of the “Sunnah” activists through al-Islah in spreading the “Sunnah” practice, the state government also contributed significantly toward al-Islah’s activities. The then Perlis Menteri Besar, Datuk Ali Haji Ahmad, became part of al-Islah’s leadership and made his presence in al-Islah to strengthen the ties between al-Islah and the state administration (S. Kassim, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

Furthermore, the palace had also given its recognition to al-Islah and occasionally officiated al-Islah’s activities, especially its landmark events, the first Ijtimak Sunnah in 1986 and the second Ijtimak Sunnah in 1988. The palace, through the King, Raja Syed Sirajudin, who was also the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam Perlis, came to defend the state religious authority. The Shari’ah council’s decision was made according to the “Sunnah” method, which was considered controversial to others and often received criticism from outside Perlis. Due to the role played by the King toward the “Sunnah” enforcement, al-Islah maintained its support to the palace and valued its position in enhancing the survival of “Sunnah” in the state. Despite its existence as an NGO, al-Islah was also actively involved in strengthening the position of the state religious authority in issuing any fatwa, enforcing certain “Sunnah” practices and spreading the teachings of the “Sunnah” through any state institutions (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Similarly, the Perlis Menteri Besar, Hamid Pawanteh, who came after Datuk Ali Haji Ahmad also promised his commitment to adhere to the “Sunnah” and to lend his support to any cause related to the “Sunnah” in his speech given at the second Ijtimak Sunnah (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 205). Hamid was also proud of being a “Sunnah” follower and a Menteri Besar of a “Sunnah” state. Furthermore, Hamid Pawanteh also believed that the “Sunnah” in Perlis was dependent on UMNO. To him, for as long as UMNO still runs the state government of Perlis, the “Sunnah” will be maintained as the state religious ideology (Othman & Rahmat, 1996, pp. 123-124). However, according to Shahidan Kassim, the Menteri Besar who succeeded him, Hamid Pawanteh indeed had done something for the Sunnah during his period as Menteri Besar, but it was not enough.
compared with the state administrative power he held during his tenure (S. Kassim, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Shahidan’s claim is relatively true if one compares the achievements between the “Sunnah” propagation and the enforcement implemented during Shahidan’s time as Menteri Besar and with what happened during Hamid Pawanteh’s tenure. This will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs on the “Golden Years of ‘Sunnah’ Perlis.”

The arrival of Saudi-Salafism to Perlis. The early arrival of Saudi-Salafism to Perlis took place during the period of Islamic revivalism stretching from the 1970s until the 1990s (see Abdul Hamid, 2002; Zakaria, 1997). Within the context of the Middle Eastern oil boom of the 1970s and the ensuing rise of the Middle clout of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Saudi petrodollars started pouring into many Muslim countries worldwide through the Saudi embassies for the propagation of Islam and the spread of the Saudi-Salafi indoctrination process. It is historically an undeniable fact that Malaysia became a major recipient of oil-related aid distributed under the aegis of the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank (IDB; Idris, 2006; Yaakop & Idris, 2010).

Likewise, in many countries where Saudi embassies were established, an Islamic Cultural Council (al-Mustashar al-thaqafi) was also set up, designed specifically for the purpose of Islamic propagation. In addition, it also employed local graduates from Saudi universities to become its official preachers in spreading the teachings of Islam. Among the well-known preachers employed by the Saudi Arabian Embassy Cultural Council in Malaysia at that time were Abdullah Yassin, Zainal Abidin, Hussin Yee, and Sulaiman Nordin (A. Yassin, personal communication, March 17, 2014).

Accordingly, a few Saudi-based and Saudi government-supported da’wah (propagation) organizations were also actively engaged with the Islamic organizations in Malaysia (Idris, 2006). The World Association of Muslim Youths (WAMY), Rabitat al-’Alam al-Islami (also known as Rabitat) and others were among active bodies running Islamic propagation according to the Saudi-Salafism doctrine either through the Islamic Council or by direct communication with Islamic organizations, especially the Muslims Youth Organization or “Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Islamic Council, WAMY, and Rabitat were also actively involved in distributing free translated and nontranslated copies of the Quran to mosques, organizing free Hajj and Umrah trips for selected Islamic organizations and student leaders, disseminating literature related to the teachings of Saudi-Salafism as well as sponsoring Islamic and da’wah events across the country including Perlis (M. Nur Manuty, personal communication, June 1, 2013).

Similarly, the Islamic Council also acted as a reference point for local students to pursue their studies at the higher institutions of learning in Saudi Arabia such as the Islamic University of Madinah, Ummul Qura University in Mecca, and others (A. B. Abdul Rahman, personal communication, March 17, 2014). In this sense, those who returned from Saudi Arabian universities played an important role in rein-stating the Saudi-Salafism discourse in Perlis, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. It was during the years 1992 to 1994 that the state of Perlis started to initiate its official relation with the Saudi Arabian embassy and its cultural office in Kuala Lumpur through its Pengarah Majlis Agama Islam Perlis, Md Sadik Md Ismail. It was through this official communication that the state managed to get its students to secure scholarships to study in Saudi Arabian universities, mainly at the Islamic University of Madinah. It was through this relation too that many Saudi preachers were given the opportunity to deliver their lessons and talks in Perlis.

However, according to Md Sadik, his personal relation with the embassy started since 1986 to 1987 through the Islamic councilor of the Saudi Arabian Cultural Office in Jalan U-Thant, Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghannam, who was invited on a monthly basis to Perlis to deliver talks organized by al-Islah (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014). Other local preachers who worked with the Islamic Councilor of Saudi Arabia in Kuala Lumpur also frequently reported coming to Perlis to give lessons and talks such as Dr. Abdullah Yassin and Ustaz Sofwan Badri (U. Safwan Badri, personal communication, March 17, 2014). Nevertheless, despite the relation, and the space given to Saudi-Salafism preachers in Perlis, Sunnah Perlis did not transform or evolve into the doctrine of Saudi-Salafism. In fact, some of the younger Saudi-Salafi preachers among the graduates of Saudi Arabian universities after the year 2000 perceived that Sunnah Perlis did not embrace the Saudi-Salafism doctrine or what they coined as “manhaj Salafi” (Salafi method). As a result, most of these preachers established their own influence different from the mainstream Sunnah Perlis as propagated by the state religious authority (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

The Golden Period (“Sunnah” Perlis Under Shahidan Kasim) According to many veterans of “Sunnah” in Perlis, as quoted by Md Sadik Md Ismail, the former Pengarah Majlis Agama Islam Perlis (Director of Islamic Council of the state of Perlis; 1992-1994) and the former al-Islah activist, the most intensive and lively period of the “Sunnah” in Perlis since the 1950s was during the tenure of Datuk Seri Dr. Shahidan Kassim as the Menteri Besar, specifically when he was close friends with Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, an academic from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) or Malaysia Science University. The pinnacle of the golden period was seen by many as during Mohd Asri’s period in office as the Mufti of the state of Perlis. The Ruler of Perlis, King Syed Sirajudin,
with the recommendation from Shahidan on November 1, 2006, appointed Mohd Asri as the state Mufti. It was since then that the Shahidan-Mohd Asri symbiosis managed to put the “Sunnah” back as the jewel of the Perlis state crown, once again becoming the trademark of the state itself.

In adding more substantive “Sunnah” legacy to the state, Shahidan went a step further by changing the name of the state from Perlis “Indera Kayangan” (which literally means: heavenly sense) to Perlis “Darul Sunnah” (Abode of the Sunnah; Utusan Malaysia, 2006). However, the name “Darul Sunnah” was never officially promulgated to be the official name for Perlis until today. Similarly, in defending the “Sunnah” of Perlis, Shahidan often appeared in the media talking about “Sunnah,” Islah, and the need to return to the true practice of Islam as according to al-Quran and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (S. Kassim, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Furthermore, in reviving the “Sunnah” practice, Shahidan Kassim was himself involved in the implementation done congregationally especially during the month of Ramadhan throughout Perlis (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014). He was known for his generosity and his habit of distributing donations to all those who attended events and programs organized where he himself was present (M. A. Zainul Abidin, personal communication, July 29, 2014). In terms of the continuity of education for the people of Perlis on the “Sunnah,” Shahidan established “Institut Sunnah Negeri Perlis” (Perlis Sunnah Institute) with the aim to introduce the true teachings of Islam according to the “Sunnah” to all Perlis residents, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Associate Professor Zulkifli Abidin, a former academic, was given the responsibility to lead the institute (“Pusat Sunnah di Nusantara,” 2007).

There are few factors that made the Shahidan-Mohd Asri period comparatively unique from the other periods discussed. The development of the “Sunnah” in Perlis at this time was supported by young people, not only in Perlis but also outside the state. The media coverage of sensational news and events too had its impact in getting information about the “Sunnah” known to people throughout Malaysia. The media, when referring to religious matters, often quoted statements made by both Shahidan and Mohd Asri. This gave them the limelight; thus, whatever issues regarding the “Sunnah” they were trying to promote were publicized through the media. Furthermore, the social media revolution in mid-2000, especially the blogs, web forums, and advance version of email groups, had made discussions on religious issues a public matter (Malik, 2015). The “Sunnah” issue was also becoming a hot topic of discussion, especially with the emergence of the Global Salafism influence through the Internet.

In addition, the Global Salafism influence that was widely spread through the Internet since the Internet revolution before the beginning of the new millennia had contributed significantly in giving more information on all aspects of various issues to the younger generation (Malik, 2013). Notable websites famously propagated Salafism during this period, contributing to the spread of Salafi teachings directly and indirectly to college students, young middle-class graduates as well as in the educated circles. Among those websites were al-Ahkam.net, al-qayyim.net, hadith.info, alFikrahs.net, al-firdaus.com, al-nidaa.com, al-wahidah.com, Darulkautsar.com, and Indonesian salafy.or.id, apart from the personal website of the mufti of Perlis himself, “drmaza.com” (Ashaari, 2010, pp. 35-49). These websites had approximately 1.5 million viewers (A. K. Ishak, personal communication, August 28, 2015).

Despite the difference between the current Global Salafism thoughts and the Perlis “Sunnah,” the foundation and the methods in understanding Islam of the two, however, are still similar. This led some conventional Salafists to strongly accept the Perlis “Sunnah” as part of Salafism but with caution and exceptions. Another factor was the frequent open polemics and direct attacks by the opponent of Salafism on the “Sunnah” practices in Perlis which they often equated with Salafism and Wahabism, thus publicizing it to those who might never have heard of it (A. R. Abdullah, 2007, p. 208). As a response, the convincing academic styled refutation by Mohd Asri to the “Sunnah” opponents appeared more appealing especially to the middle-class and educated Muslims.

Among the triumphs of the “Sunnah” reform agenda during this period was its ability to expand beyond the Perlis border. The support given and attendance of the “Sunnah” events in Perlis were not confined to the people of Perlis. Due to the popularity of the controversial Mohd Asri on the mainstream and social media, most of the events involving him as a speaker were often attended by outsiders from as far as Singapore. Mohd Asri was also able to invite his like-minded scholar friends from all over Malaysia and overseas to help him in educating the people of Perlis about the “Sunnah.” Among the landmark events during Mohd Asri’s period as the Mufti of the state were “Seminar Antarabangsa Syeikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab” (International Seminar on Syeikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab) on March 16 and 17, 2006; Minggu Sunnah Kebangsaan (National Sunnah Week) on March 11 to 16, 2007; and Ijtimak Sunnah (a continuation of the previous al-Islah’s legacy) on November 28 and 29, 2008. Apart from the mentioned seminars, the state government also actively organized a series of seminars for government servants and other related agencies on Islamic issues (M. A. Zainul Abidin, personal communication, July 29, 2014).

Similarly, Mohd Asri himself went regularly to mosques in Perlis to ensure that they were abiding with the regulations promulgated by the Majlis Agama as part of his enforcement “approach” (M. K. A. Abdul Latif, personal communication, March 17, 2014). In addition, the office of the Mufti was also involved in organizing the “Ihya Masjid” (Reviving the Mosques), where selected mosques were chosen to organize fast-breaking feasts every Monday and Thursday followed...
by religious talks given by Mohd Asri himself or any other religious officer on duty (M. K. A. Abdul Latif, personal communication, March 17, 2014).

Mohd Asri and Shahidan Kassim also maintained strong existing ties between the state of Perlis and the Saudi Arabian Islamic Councillor in Kuala Lumpur. Mohd Asri was considered an authority in giving recommendations to Malaysian applicants who wished to pursue their studies at the Saudi Arabian universities under the funding of the Saudi government. Perlis too became a favorite destination for Saudi Arabia preachers to deliver talks, and organize seminars and trainings due to the good relations that had been established during Mohd Asri’s time. Perlis representatives on official visits and in delegations to the kingdom were always given special attention and treatment by the Saudi government (M. A. Zainul Abidin, personal communication, July 29, 2014).

It is believed that the short Shahidan-Mohd Asri golden period was a reawakening of the “Sunnah” for many people in Perlis. However, one may refer to Akram Dahaman in his MA dissertation (Universiti Malaya) who concludes that the Sunnah Perlis idea only had a significant role in the formulation of the fatwa with no real effect on enforcement and promulgation (Mohd Akram, 2005). This is due to the strong mainstream Shafii madhhab influence among Muslims in Malaysia which includes Muslims in Perlis. However, the dissertation was completed before Dr. Asri Zainul Abidin became the mufti of the state during which time he brought a new chapter to the practice of Sunnah Perlis and to the life of the people of Perlis. Although no thorough academic exercise has ever been done on the acceptance of the people of Perlis of Sunnah Perlis after the time of Mohd Asri as Mufti, however, the wide and all encompassing programs and enforcement done while he was Mufti have made significant changes to the way the “Sunnah Perlis” is practised beyond the fatwa formulation.

However, Othman and Rahmat (1991), who had conducted a research on the topic of acceptance of the people of Perlis of “Sunnah Perlis” in the year 1991, found that 76.5% of respondents agreed with Sunnah Perlis, while 23.5% disagreed (p. 402). In contrast, Man (2006) points out, in his report, that according to his observation on 30 mosques all over Perlis, one third of the mosques still adhere to Shafii madhhab and do not practice the “Sunnah Perlis” way in conducting their congregational rituals and worships (p. 154). Still, there is yet no thorough academic exercise done on the impact of Shahidan-Mohd Asri’s “Sunnah” legacy on the practice of Islam among the Muslim community in Perlis.

Part of Mohd Asri’s legacy and approach were later continued by his successor, Dr. Juanda Jaya. Juanda claims that even from his first day in office, his approach will be different from that of Mohd Asri (J. Jaya, personal communication, July 28, 2014). Things became worse after Shahidan Kassim failed to secure his position as Menteri Besar of Perlis after the 12th General Election. Despite his victory in his constituency, and his personal victory to secure Perlis from falling to the opposition due to the political tsunami in the 2008 general election, the King of Perlis did not give his consent for Shahidan to become the Menteri Besar. The King, instead, appointed his successor, Dr. Md Isa Sabu, an UMNO stalwart, as the new Menteri Besar of Perlis (M. S. Md Ismail, personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Unlike Shahidan, Md Isa failed to continue the aggressive struggle to uphold the “Sunnah” agenda in the state. He was never reported to have voiced any concern or made any substantial contribution toward the propagation of the “Sunnah” in Perlis. However, according to Juanda, he was not left alone to continue the “Sunnah” agenda. With all his limitation as Mufti, Md Isa did indirectly assisted him in his administration and never went against any decision made by the mufti on any issues related to “Sunnah” matters (J. Jaya, personal communication, July 28, 2014). However, the absence of any significant and aggressive effort from the Menteri Besar after Shahidan has led “Sunnah” Perlis once again into another phase of stagnation after the golden period it had earlier experienced.

Despite the stagnation, Juanda managed to multiply the publication of materials and books related to the Sunnah Perlis teachings unlike in the Mohd Asri’s era. There are more than 50 titles of books, monographs, journals, reports, and booklets published by the office of the Mufti under Juanda’s time. They were distributed without any commercial purpose as part of the propagation of Islam and Perlis Sunnah. The extensive publication during Juanda’s term is a mark of his legacy in strengthening Perlis’ domination in the history of Perlis (A. K. Ishak, personal communication, August 28, 2015). In comparison to Mohd Asri’s known for his Sunnah rhetoric and controversial statements, Juanda, as mufti was lesser known for these. He believed, instead, that the dissemination of knowledge through publications would create a long-lasting impact to the Sunnah cause (J. Jaya, personal communication, July 28, 2014).

Nevertheless, in 2015, Mohd Asri was reappointed as Mufti of Perlis after Juanda preferred not to continue to be in office. The reappointment of Mohd Asri gave a new momentum to the Sunnah Perlis movement after the relative stagnation period. Unlike his earlier appointment which was supported by the Menteri Besar, his second appointment was at the direct preference of the King of Perlis himself. Mohd Asri’s efforts in strengthening Sunnah Perlis during his second appointment was fully supported and blessed by both the King and his Crown prince (Raja Muda). Various events, activities, regulations, and platforms were conducted to enhance the teachings of Islam which exceeded the traditional teachings of Sunnah Perlis which focused on rituals (A. K. Ishak, personal communication, August 28, 2015).

Mohd Asri too proposed that a group of 15 PhD holders were mainly academics to be part of his Fatwa Committee, and they were later appointed by the King to the position (A. K. Ishak, personal communication, August 28, 2015). Numerous contemporary and nonconventional fatwa (decree)
related to the modern contemporary and multicultural and multireligious social cohesion were discussed and decreed by the group, such as the decision that the custody of children born into a non-Muslim family with any of their parents having converted to Islam should be granted to the parent deemed more capable of raising the child, regardless of their religion, for the welfare of the children, rather than to automatically convert them to Islam as practised in most other states, the fatwa on the prohibition of any doings that harm the environment beside the fatwa prohibiting the practice of the female child genital mutilation (FGM), the permissibility of having milk bank at government hospitals for the usage of premature babies.

Mohd Asri too was known for his contemporary, multiracial friendly but controversial opinions that usually went against the popular conservative views of the religious establishment. He also actively addressed the khalwat issue, and the ineffectiveness of the Zakat distribution, and his opinions have been seen by many as going against the thoughts and flow of mainstream official religious authorities. As an example, he went against statements made by some religious figures labeling certain non-Muslim parties, especially the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) as kafir harbi. He appears to be a strong critic of the efforts to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 to allow certain Hudud law punishment to be implemented in certain states in Malaysia despite the national campaign led by PAS and other Islamic organizations.

**Conclusion**

Unlike the perception about the term Salafism that was generally associated with conservatism, rigidity, and extremism, Sunnah Perlis, as a legacy of the early 20th-century reformed Salafism, has a different face. Unlike the conventional representation of the current Gulf-style Salafism, “Sunnah Perlis” emphasizes the freedom from madhhab rigidity calling upon Muslims to return directly to the two major sources of Islam in dealing with religious issues, namely, al-Quran and Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad’s tradition). The historical development of Sunnah Perlis, as a state-sponsored or patronaged Salafism, has shown us the dynamism of the movement itself. The presupposition and prevailing assumption about the spread of “Sunnah” teaching in Perlis is about the advancement of the state religious authority with the support from its monarchy.

It is undeniable that initially the rulers had played a pertinent role in keeping the “Sunnah” teaching strongly instilled with the practice of the Perlis Muslim community. However, throughout this research, historical evidence proves that both propaganda and education play a relatively significant role in maintaining the adherence of the people to the “Sunnah.” Moreover, the preaching of the “Sunnah” was not substantively sufficient in defending the “Sunnah” practice among Perlis Muslims. Historical events record that other factors, such as legal, political, and administrative measures, have been taken by “Sunnah” guardians throughout the 20th century to maintain the feasibility of the “Sunnah” teaching.

Furthermore, it was during the “Tiga Mat” and Shahidan Kasim-Mohd Asri periods that the religious authority of Perlis made countless efforts to secure the “Sunnah” teachings. These efforts are most significant in the establishment of the enactment that allows the “Sunnah” to be implemented, referred, and adhered to by the religious authority and the monarchy. This form of enactment does not just limit itself to the two institutions; it was also made use of in determining fatwas in Perlis. The domination of “Sunnah” teachings was then completed when the religious authority and scholars such as Mohd Asri went around the mosques in Perlis to enforce the enactment and regulations in the state. This is done to ensure this precious historical movement is passed down to future generations.

The historical events indicate that political influence will play a prudent role in ensuring the survival of the “Sunnah” in Perlis. During preindependent Malaya, the monarchs played a significantly pertinent role in installing and preserving the “Sunnah” teachings. During postindependent Malaysia, however, it was the politicians and mainly UMNO politicians who fought for the “Sunnah” teaching to remain as the prevailing substantive existence in Perlis. Unlike the 20th century, “Sunnah” survival in Perlis remains a local struggle for the reformists in Perlis. The 21st century has witnessed the “Sunnah” teaching as a nationwide reform movement, starting from the Mohd Asri-Shahidan period, and it can be said to be mainly due to media coverage and globalization.

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**Notes**

1. *Salaf* is an Arabic noun which translates to “predecessor” or “forefather.” In Islam, it refers to the first three generations of Muslims, the so-called “Pious Predecessors” (Bazmul, 2010).
2. Ustaz A. R. Abdul Rahman (personal communication, August 17, 2012), former official Preacher (Mubaligh) of Majlis Agama Islam Perlis and Sunnah activist of Perlis.

3. This earlier version of Salafiyah, unlike the current conservative Gulf or Saudi-style Salafiyah, was known for its progressive and modern ideas. Lauzière (2010 & 2015) accurately categorises this version of Salafism as the ‘reformed Salafism’ although this version of Salafism may share similar elements with the current Gulf or Saudi-style Salafism in its epistemological references, but the former is closer to the ideals of modernity, while the latter is more conservative.

4. Among his books published, some still being kept at the Perlis state library and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia library are Ibadat Rasulullah (Prophet’s Worships); Sejarah Nabi-Nabi (Stories of the Prophets); Pergerakan Kaum Wanita Islam (Muslim Women Movement); Jawahir al-bukhari (The Jewel of al-Bukhari); Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam, Memaksimalkan Taqlid (Freedom of Reasoning in Islam, Abolishing Blind following); Panca Penerangan Aka (Road to Mind Enlightenment); Prasa Rasulullah (Prophet’s Fasting); Panduan Prasa (Guide for Fasting); Tafsir Juz ‘Amma (Exegesis of the 30th Surah of al-Quran); Soal Jawah Agama (Q & A on Religious Issues); and Khutbah Jumaat (Friday Sermons).

5. Reports from newspapers on the first Ijtimak Sunnah could be found at Berita Harian, January 18, 1986, and February 12, 1986; Utusan Malaysia, February 11, 1986; Watan, February 18 to 21, 1986; as for the second Ijtimak Sunnah, see Utusan Malaysia, February 19, 1988.

6. For example, Islamic University of Madinah, Umm al-Qura University in Makkah, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah and al-Imam University, Riyadh.

7. A controversial child conversion bill was drafted to address concerns over the fate of children when a parent converts to Islam. The bill would have permitted unilateral conversions of minor children to Islam with the permission of only one parent. When conversion is allowed with the consent of only one parent, the right of the converting parent to change the child’s religion is recognized, but the right of the non-Muslim spouse is ignored. Although this is allowed under Sharia law in the states of Perak, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, Sarawak, and Malacca, the controversial bill would have allowed the practice throughout the country. However, the government withdrew the bill on July 5 amid vigorous criticism originating from the opposition, civil society, and some members of the ruling party. But it does not soothe the non-Muslim anger as the clause still exists in the Islamic enactments in the aforementioned states (see http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222357.pdf); Perlis Fatwa committee has decided that the custody of children born in a non-Muslim family who any of their parents converted to Islam should be granted to the parent deemed more capable of raising the child regardless of their religion for the welfare of the children. He insisted that such a view represents the true teachings of Islam that emphasize justice (see Shazwani, 2015).

8. Many of these fatwas could be found at the Mufti of Perlis personal website: http://drmaza.com/home/; and from the Office of the Mufti’s official website: http://mufti.perlis.gov.my/

9. His views and opinions could be found at the Mufti of Perlis personal website: http://drmaza.com/home/

10. See http://drmaza.com/home/?p=2827

11. He insisted that such a view represents the true teachings of Islam that emphasize justice (see Shazwani, 2015).

12. See: http://drmaza.blogspot.my/2007/02/kuala-lumpur-distribution-of-zakat.html. Furthermore, his criticism of the Zakat institution rhymes very well with the lay Muslim who demand transparency, accountability, and competency of the collection, utilization, and distribution of Zakat funds (see http://www.astroawani.com/gaya-hidup/10-hujah-jawab-viral-negatif-mengenai-zakat-109260).

13. The private member’s bill named Shariah Court Act proposes to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 was tabled by the president of PAS among others aim to enhance the punishment for Shariah misconduct, which eventually allowed certain Hudud (Islamic criminal punishment law) to be enacted and implemented in certain states in Malaysia (see Pejabat Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, 2016).

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