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THE FIGHT AGAINST TERROR: Psychological Defence, Ideological Response

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Much of the National Security Strategy on The Fight Against Terror is devoted to the hard measures taken by the Government to counter the threat of terrorism in Singapore. However, significantly, it concludes with a section on the role of psychological defence against the global scourge. It states:

"The battle against terrorism is not that of the Government alone. We need to muster our collective resilience and individual strengths to live with terrorism. This has to be a united effort against a national threat."

An unstated but essential component of this defence is the battle for hearts and minds of the people involved. Singapore's approach to counter-terrorism has always been based on a judicious combination of physical security/ law enforcement measures and ideological and psychological defence.

Even though there has been no terrorist attack in or against Singapore in the past decade the detention in 2002 of 31 members of the Jemaah Islamiyah who were engaged in plots to attack western entities and interests and government installations have brought home the real danger of the threat. The bombings of nightclubs in Bali and a hotel in Jakarta have highlighted the lethal nature of this threat in the region.

Since the JI arrests and the exposure of the transnational terrorist networks in and around the region, the Government has sought to increase public understanding of the terrorist threat while taking measures to enhance the physical security of vital installations and sensitive institutions such as the airport, port and communication centres, and the petro-chemical plants, government ministries and western embassies.

However unlike the US-led military-security campaign against terrorist concentrations and networks the Singapore approach has emphasised the importance of the ideological component of the overall strategy to fight terrorism.

For underlying the global conflict between terrorist networks who seek to destroy western states and overthrow pro-western Muslim regimes is a battle for hearts and minds of Muslims across the world. It is a battle that the leaders of the Islamic militant groups have declared on western governments and interests, but which many governments have not geared themselves to fight, or even recognised that they are engaged in.

Singaporeans were shocked to learn of the existence of JI members among them who

had been drawn to the global jihad declared by Arab leaders of the Al Qaeda. They subscribed to the ideological basis of Al Qaeda's claim that its mission was to save Islam from the west and to open the way for political and religious purification of Islam.

Drawing attention to this ideological challenge the NSS noted that Al Qaeda and related terrorist groups around the world including JI have rationalised their action in the name of Islam. Fighting western and other secular governments, even pro-west Muslim governments, they seek to overthrow the existing global order and replace it with an Islamic order (or *Daulah Islamiyah*). Al Qaeda, with its anti-modern message, represents intolerance and extremism. However many Muslims worldwide have rejected Al Qaeda's perversions of Islam and its view of jihad.

The Singapore Government is concerned with the repercussions of terrorism in multi-racial, multi-religious Singapore. "At a more important level, even if terrorism were to inflict damage to people and property we cannot let it destroy Singapore's national psyche and sense of nationhood," it said. "Crucially terrorism must not be allowed to break Singapore's multi-racial accord and divide Singaporeans along racial and religious lines. We have to respond as one people, cohesive and determined."

Singapore's ideological response

This motivation underpins Singapore's response to the terrorists' ideological challenge. The Singapore Muslim community, which is moderate, tolerant and law-abiding, has spoken out strongly against the actions of JI and condemned the actions of the militants. The NSS also recognises the need for all Singaporeans to guard against extremist interpretations of religious teachings. In this regard the formation of Inter-racial confidence circles across the island-republic has been instrumental in promoting multi-racial understanding and inter-communal harmony.

Beyond speaking out and denouncing those who distort Islam, Singapore Muslims are enjoined to engage the extremists from the media to the mosque and the madrasah, and "assert mainstream Islamic values". However the NSS does not attempt to suggest how the Muslims should shape their ideological response; it prefers to leave this to the Muslim community leaders and scholars.

Such an ideological response, we suggest, involves the following steps: knowing the enemy and its ideas, knowing the target group and taking the right approach. The first step is to understand the ideology and main ideas of the extremist groups, especially Al Qaeda and its regional affiliate JI, so as to be able to devise appropriate response and establish tools to monitor and counter them.

Any meaningful approach should take into account the theological nature of terrorist's ideas, couched in juristic and jurisprudential pronouncements. Muslim terrorists do not believe in philosophy, considering it heretical.

Muslims by and large are more comfortable with theological and juristic interpretations of religious questions. The opinion of ulama still carries more weight than that of other scholars. This is an important point to bear in mind in any effort to get the ideological response to succeed and be widely accepted.

It is important to note that the primary target group of the ideological response is not the terrorists but the majority of Muslims. The aim is to provide them with a correct understanding of the religion that is relevant to the contemporary context and current priorities, so that they will not be easily influenced by the terrorists' propaganda. The majority Muslims should be "immunised" against the viral threat of extremists' ideologies that are freely disseminated through the Internet.

Another important target group is the non-Muslim community at large, who should be provided with an alternative message that hopefully will reduce their anxiety, concern and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims. This is an important aspect of social harmony which the counter-terrorism strategy aims to preserve and protect.

For an ideological response to work it is crucial to involve the participation of the ulama and Muslim thinkers and win the confidence and trust of the Muslim community. This is because the battle has to be fought by the Muslims themselves, a point acknowledged by Singapore government leaders.

It is necessary to recognise that for Muslims in general, terrorism by Muslim extremists is not just an ideological question but also concerns their grievances about perceived injustices in the international arena, eg the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and western support for tyrannical regimes. Therefore an ideological response should also be related to the need to moderate certain policies that are perceived to be harming Muslims. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's call to the United States to be sensitive to Muslim feelings and concerns in dealing with Mid-East issues was an important message in this respect.

In this battle governments have the equally important role of encouraging and supporting the moderates among Muslims, particularly those who live in multi-religious societies. The former PM's exhortation to Singapore Muslims to stand up against those who advocated intolerance and extremism, and not allow the extremists and militants to set the Islamic agenda or push their political goals, underscores this point.

However governments should take into account the heterogeneity of Muslims around the world, consider them as assets, and not lump them as one malignant community to be marginalised. It means that governments must not be seen as supporting views that are partial or biased towards one group or view. Tolerance of differences in political issues is a primary requirement for attaining the common goal of neutralising extremist ideas, which are at the root of terrorism.

The NSS measures to enhance security preparedness and strengthen psychological defence include the study of terrorist groups and their ideologies, to be conducted by research institutes such as IDSS. These studies will be critical in building up our psychological resilience. To be forewarned (ie knowing the enemy) is to be forearmed. As the NSS concludes: "As long as the government stays resolute and the people remain united in the fight against terror Singapore faces a secure future."

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