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Countering Self-Radicalisation

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The recent release of several Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members shows that the efforts of the Singapore government and the local Muslim community in de-radicalising terrorists are bearing fruit. Yet, this was overshadowed by the arrests of two young Muslim Singaporeans who have self-radicalised through the influence of the Internet. This shows the need for more preventive measures.

SEPTEMBER 11 has triggered vibrant intellectual debates, especially amongst youths in many Western societies, on the phenomenon of political Islam, terrorism, gender and other contemporary Islamic issues. Yet, as a student leader, chairing the then National University of Singapore Muslim Society, I noted a disturbing nonchalance on the part of my fellow Muslim undergraduates towards these issues.

Intellectual Gap Among Singapore's Muslim Youths

Many undergraduates remained unfamiliar with the different interpretations and understanding of Islam. Knowledge about Islam is limited to rudimentary ritualistic practices provided by local scholars. Many are not familiar with the Islamic position on various issues of public policy. While some undergraduates may have heard of names such as Sayyid Qutb and Maulana Maududi, the ideologues of Islamism, they are not familiar with the thinking or ideas of such men.

It is likely that this apathy remains true today. At the same time, most Muslim religious scholars in Singapore tend to shy away from addressing some of these issues due to the perceived lack of interest in these topics. These apathetic attitudes could be problematic especially given the nature of extremist ideology and its methods of recruitment.

Maajid Nawaz, a former member of the Islamist group Hizbut Tahrir (HT) noted that Islamism is a modern ideology masquerading as an ancient religion. He added that Islamism is not driven by a sense of material injustice in this life but is driven by an ideological agenda that will seek change regardless of material injustice. Islamists thrive on the lack of knowledge of a potential recruit.

The first point of contact could occur through videos or photos portraying the perceived injustices perpetrated against Muslims. Some of these videos demonstrate Muslims, including women and

children in Palestine, Chechnya and other conflict zones, being killed by non-Muslim ‘oppressors’. It is only later after these emotive appeals have been internalised by the audience that the Islamists begin to feed the potential recruit with literature from Islamist thinkers such as Maududi and Sayyid Qutb.

It is therefore important that Muslim youths are equipped with the necessary Islamic knowledge to handle such material. Unfortunately, at this juncture, many young Muslims are not equipped with the necessary knowledge to discern correct Islamic teachings espoused by traditional Islamic sources from the Islamists’ constructed Islamic ideals.

Current Preventive Measures

It must be added that in Singapore there are ongoing efforts by some scholars and academics to educate the young about the danger of extremism. Some examples are those of Habib Hassan Alatas of the Ba’alwie Mosque, Ustaz Ali Mohamed of the Khadijah Mosque and Associate Professor Farid Alatas of the National University of Singapore’s Malay Studies Department. Their efforts in organising seminars and forums on extremism and extremist ideologies must be applauded. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) has also conducted numerous seminars and talks to address issues of extremism.

An equally important effort at educating youths to face extremist ideologies is that by Young AMP, the youth wing of the Association of Muslim Professionals. Since 2005, Young AMP has been engaging Muslim youths on contemporary Islamic discourses and issues through its Muslim Intelligentsia Series. The programme seeks to present participants with the opportunity to assess views of traditional moderate Muslim scholars and Islamists on contemporary Islamic issues. To achieve this, a discussion group was formed with Muslim tertiary groups in local universities such as NUS.

The discussion group holds discourses on contemporary Islamic topics, which include the Arab-Israeli conflict, Political Islam and Islam and Gender. Tertiary students are exposed to two different sets of readings, one reflecting the views of the Islamists and the other, views opposed to the Islamists. The above programmes are initiated to ensure that participants are adequately equipped to identify, challenge and counter extreme Islamist ideas. Yet, the current efforts remain limited to a small group of young Muslims and are not enough as preventive measures against the dangers of extremist Islamist ideologies.

Potential Future Programmes

One of the possible programmes that could be initiated to complement current initiatives is utilising former radical Islamists to speak against extremist Islamist ideology. In the United Kingdom, former members of HT including Ed Hussain, the famed author of the book *The Islamists* have come together to form the Quilliam Foundation. The foundation seeks to challenge extreme Islamist ideas at an intellectual level. Being former members of radical Islamist groups, members of the foundation are able to provide an in-depth analysis of the religious doctrine of Islamists groups and understand the psychology of its members.

The foundation has also publicly challenged the teachings of radical Islamist groups through publications, public debates and road shows. Their target audiences are Muslim youths who are most susceptible to being influenced by radical Islamist groups. In Singapore, a similar programme could be initiated. Former radical Islamists could be invited to speak to Muslim youths in Singapore, relate their experiences and explain the methodology of radical Islamist groups. This would be useful in insulating young Muslims from radical Islamist ideologies who would hopefully thus not conflate Islam with radical Islamism.

Another possible programme could be the organisation of public campaigns and road shows to educate young Muslim Singaporeans about the danger of extremism. An example that could be taken for such roadshows is the work of the Inner City Muslim Actions Network (IMAN). IMAN is a Chicago-based Muslim civil society group. One of its most popular and signature events is a biennial citywide festival entitled "Takin' it to the Streets," that started in 1997. In 2007 over 10,000 people attended the event.

The key to IMAN's success is its interesting fusion of youth-friendly programmes such as artistic performances including hip-hop music performances and sports tournaments with lectures and talks to educate youths about the need for Muslims to be moderate. Muslim groups in Singapore could also organise similar events. These events would be especially useful in educating Muslim youths who are less inclined to attending public lectures or talks.

It is indeed unfortunate that extremist teachings continue to make inroads amongst young Muslims. However, it is an important reminder that the Singaporean society must strive harder in ensuring that extremists do not undermine the fabric of a plural society in Singapore.

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