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Self-Radicalisation and the Awlaki Connection

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7 July 2010

The latest arrest of three Singaporeans for jihadi tendencies underscores the continuing challenge of self-radicalisation through the Internet. Early warning indicators and a whole-of-society approach can help address this.

THANKS TO the Internet, jihadist ideologues such as the charismatic Al Qaeda leader Anwar Al-Awlaki, enjoy a global reach. That this reach extends even into Singapore's homes has been underlined by the news that a full-time national serviceman has been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA), while two other Singaporeans have been issued with Restriction Orders, for being radicalised by Awlaki. The episode underscores the importance of two factors: first, recognising the early warning indicators of religious extremism; and second, the ability of Singaporeans to recognise distorted religious teaching when they encounter it online or elsewhere.

Self-Radicalisation

That a full-time Singaporean national serviceman had been self-radicalised to the point of wanting to wage militant jihad overseas reinforces the uncomfortable fact that transnational terrorism remains a clear and present danger. Moreover, the threat emanates not just from JI and related transnational terror networks. Self-radicalised Singaporean individuals like 20-year old Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid who evidently bought into the virulent global jihadi ideology of – and even made direct online contact with -- the likes of the Yemen-based Al-Awlaki must also be considered. Fadil was certainly attracted to global jihadi ideology as reports indicate that he had wanted to fight in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan alongside Awlaki. While Fadil was detained under the ISA for two years, two other Singaporeans, freelance religious teacher Muhammad Anwar Jailani, 44, and his student, Muhammad Thahir bin Shaikh Dawood, 27, were placed under Restriction Orders by the Ministry of Home Affairs as well. It seems Al-Awlaki, through CDs of his sermons, had radicalised both Jailani and Thahir too.

Anwar Al-Awlaki: the Common Thread

That Awlaki appears to be the common thread linking the three Singaporeans is significant. He has been in the news especially over the past year or so because of his reported influence on radicalised high-profile individuals elsewhere. One such individual is Major Nidal Hassan, the US army psychiatrist who perpetrated the Fort Hood shooting incident in Texas last November. Awlaki was also implicated as a radicalising influence on the failed underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to bring down an American commercial flight en route from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. A few of the September 11 2001 Al Qaeda hijackers had apparently heard Awlaki preach before the 9/11 attacks as well. Awlaki can speak excellent English and comes across as a charismatic individual -- factors that may help explain the wide appeal of his sermons on YouTube. Very tech-savvy, he apparently also has a Facebook page.

Awlaki's popular, folksy sermons glorifying the cosmic war against the US and its allies were the very sermons that Fadil had accessed online. Those were the very sermons that Jailani had been motivated enough to distribute via CDs to his students and even members of the public. These were the very sermons that had apparently moved Thahir to actually fly to Yemen and seek out even deeper physical immersion in a jihadist milieu. It should be noted that Awlaki has been called the "bin Laden of the Internet". He is the epitome of what some call "jihadist cool". The cold, hard fact that he had influence on the three Singaporeans named in the latest announcement suggests that these appellations are worryingly accurate.

The Radicalisation Conundrum

Self-radicalisation remains a concern because of the Internet. Anyone who is sympathetic to extremist views can access extremist websites, participate in online chat-rooms and get sucked into the extremist worldview by being immersed in a virtual online community of religious extremists -- with little recourse to alternative, more rational, points of view. This is called the "echo chamber effect". It is not just Singapore that is at risk but all countries where there is a high degree of Internet connectivity. Anyone can be potentially self-radicalised via the Internet. This time it was a national serviceman. Tomorrow it may be a university student. Another time it may be an office worker. It really depends on the individual's state of mind at that point in time. There really is no fixed profile.

There may be risk factors though. A sense of personal dissatisfaction -- even humiliation -- at one's lot in life is one common factor. A profound sense that one's wider religious community is not getting the dignity and respect it deserves is another. A search for solid spiritual moorings amidst a fast-paced, globalised world that offers a frighteningly overwhelming array of lifestyle and moral choices is yet one more factor. Until more concrete facts emerge about the backgrounds of these latest radicalised Singaporeans, we can only guess what their respective "radical pathways" were.

Implications

The need to develop greater sensitivity to "early warning indicators" of religious extremism seems to suggest itself. That this latest case occurred within the SAF should not be taken to mean that the challenge is unique to the SAF. The challenge is germane to all sectors of society -- government, private businesses and educational and grassroots institutions. How then can a sensible whole-of-society approach to managing the risk be fashioned? First, the well-respected moderate Muslim scholars in the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) clearly have a key role to play. They should be supported in focusing greater effort on educating leaders in government, the security forces, private businesses, the tertiary education sector, as well as grassroots and religious organisations, to identify early warning indicators of religious extremism in their respective social spheres.

Second, reputable Muslim organisations such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)

should intensify initiatives to promote religious education that clearly differentiates scriptural truth from distortions. In this respect, it is gratifying that MUIS was able to weed out Jailani from its list of accredited religious teachers through its rigorous Asatizah Recognition Scheme. If Jailani's lack of formal credentials had not been discovered, Al Qaeda ideology, through Jailani, would have been able to influence many more Singaporeans. Religious education should include programmes to hone the critical thinking faculties of ordinary citizens toward what they read, see and hear on the Internet and on CDs that they chance across.

Lastly, there is scope for religious and community institutions, relevant government agencies and think tanks to work together to identify best practices in building "theological and ideological firewalls". Such firewalls would help "immunise" the wider population against violent extremist ideas perpetrated by the likes of Al-Awlaki. The faster we are able to forge a whole-of-society response to violent extremism, the better.

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