



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

Whither e-jihad: Evaluating the Threat of Internet Radicalisation

Mohamed Abdul Saddiq

27 July 2010

The detention of Fadil Abdul Hamid, like the handful of others before him, has left a lot of unanswered questions. What exactly was the threat to Singapore given his intentions were directed externally? Also, is the Internet the root cause as widely alluded to?

Threat to Singapore

On 4 April 2010, Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid, a 20-year old full-time national serviceman in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), was detained for two years under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA). The common thread in the radicalisation of Muhammad Fadil and others such as Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, Muhammad Zamri bin Abdullah and Maksham bin Mohd Shah before him who were detained under the ISA was the exposure and desire to address "injustices" towards Muslims in places such as Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq through armed jihad. The two key questions that remain unanswered are: what role did the Internet play and what threat these individuals pose to Singapore?

It seemed that their desire for action was directed at overseas conflicts and theatres. However, the identification of individuals who were willing to fight overseas is the most powerful indicator that radicalisation is metastasising. As was seen in the United Kingdom, once a national demonstrates a desire to go abroad and fight, it may be only a matter of time before this radicalised individual consider conducting operations domestically. As such, it is important to stem radicalisation before it gets to this stage.

Thus, while Singapore has at least a moral obligation to prevent terrorism from occurring anywhere it can, there is a perception of a looming direct threat to Singapore, demonstrated by the continuing threat of radicalisation. Given the lack of a direct threat to life and property in Singapore, some may argue that the detention was an overreaction on the part of the authorities. However, from a security

standpoint, it seems that it is always better to overcompensate on safety than fall short. The most important open question is this: Why does radicalisation still occur, given all the laudable counter radicalisation efforts and community engagement efforts?

Internet the Root Cause?

According to media reports and statements by authorities, Fadil's self-radicalisation was a result of his fervent search on the Internet for jihadist propaganda and videos. The threat of online radicalisation is taken as a given. But does the Internet serve as a cause or merely an accelerant for radicalisation? The emphasis on the concept of online radicalisation ostensibly removes the agency of individuals to make judgments independently, but instead casts them as mindless automatons readily susceptible to the unparalleled horrors that the Internet seems to pose. The apparent pervasiveness of websites espousing jihadist views, as hostile and aggressive as they appear, ultimately does not explain the radicalisation of an individual.

Jihadist websites and the extreme rhetoric contained therein may be notable for spreading propaganda that aim to cast aspersions on Western hegemony, but they are not the engine of radicalisation. Rarely, if ever, do people alter their views after exposure to radical websites; more often than not, they tend to seek out information which serves to reinforce their original views. This is, arguably, why cases such as Fadil's remain the exception rather than the norm since the majority of Muslims are not of radical leanings and would not seek radical websites or pay any heed to such sites if they chance upon it while browsing the Internet.

Some experts see Internet forums as more damaging than 'passive websites' since people actually bounce ideas off each other creating an 'echo chamber' effect. This gives the illusion of strength in numbers as an affirmation of a radicalised individual's beliefs. It remains unknown whether Fadil's reported 'contact with Awlaki' meant communication with the US-born Anwar al-Awlaki or exposure to Awlaki's materials or videos. The former could have expedited Fadil's radical fervour but he arguably would not have gone searching for Awlaki if he had not had a radical bias in the first place. As mentioned, Fadil and the three detained before him were 'outraged' by the apparent injustices suffered by fellow Muslims in conflict areas such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan among others.

This anger is one of the major ingredients in the process of radicalisation – it is a sort of powder keg that begins offline. This powder keg may be ignited if this anger resonates with personal experiences and be amplified by radical ideologies (as individuals) which could be reinforced through participation in a group such as an online forum.

There is also the danger of confirmation bias. It was revealed that Fadil searched the Internet for jihadist propaganda and videos and was influenced by the ideas of radical Muslim clerics such as Awlaki. While there is undoubtedly a correlation between his Internet activity and his radicalisation, no causal connection has so far been found. The distinction is important, because claiming a causal link leads to policy solutions. If the policy solutions fail to address the causes of radicalisation, they may misallocate counter-radicalisation resources.

Solutions?

Following the announcement of the detentions, there were calls for stricter punitive legislative measures against online religious extremists and racial chauvinists. Such measures are, arguably, useful only on a superficial level as only the symptoms, not the cause is being tackled. To address the root cause of the issue, other observers call for an increase in counter-ideology/narrative websites so as to compete with the already wildly proliferating radical Islamist materials. However, this would have limited success given the tendency for users to gravitate towards sites that conform to their original bias.

Rather than online, these ‘counter-ideology’ debates and dialogues should be propagated offline in a more prominent way, perhaps in open debates where the community at large can be educated. Instead of shielding the young and the community at large from radical ideology – which is at best a stop-gap measure in the vast World Wide Web, parents, religious and community leaders should discuss openly with their children and youth, much like how sexual education is now being approached, and thoroughly debunk these radical ideologies.

The idea is to plant seeds of resistance offline against radical materials online and not let them make up their minds only after coming across such materials. The traditional media should also be utilised to constantly spread such counter-narratives. The emphasis in countering radical ideas should therefore not only focus on online measures; it must begin offline - where the seeds of radicalisation are sown.

Mohamed Abdul Saddiq is a Research Analyst with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.