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OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Jihadism Studies in Counter Ideology: Time for Initiation in Universities**

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*Responding to jihadist terrorism has always not been easy. Although a huge amount of resources has been spent on this since September 11, the problem has not really gone away. Is it time to optimise the soft approach, such as introducing Jihadism Studies in courses on terrorism?*

ALTHOUGH RECENT studies indicate that the threat of violent Islamism is declining, it will not disappear anytime soon. The first years of the struggle against this globally have focused on the ‘hard approach’ using the military, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq; introducing stricter laws; and increasing security at airports, train stations and the like. While necessary this is insufficient to address the phenomenon. It is time to put greater focus on the “soft approach” which can be more effective in the long run.

### **Need for Deeper Research**

The key component in the soft approach is dealing with the ideas, or ideology, that underpin violent Islamist actions. Called variously as jihadist rehabilitation, extremist de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, or counter-ideology, all these programmes have at their core an effort to help the extremists see the error of their ways and reform. The latter terms – counter-radicalisation and counter-ideology-- are broader as the targeted audience is more of the community rather than the extremists themselves.

Despite studies highlighting ideology as a key driver in jihadist terrorism, countering it remains controversial. This is because, almost a decade after 9/11, the causes and processes of jihadist radicalisation remain little understood, due in large measure to the difficulty of pinpointing a single cause for jihadist terrorism. This strongly suggests the need for deeper research, because years of effort and expense utilising the hard approach paradoxically seem to be having little impact.

Indeed,, the complex interaction of grievances, ideology, and violent action requires a multi-dimensional approach to addressing the phenomenon. Moreover the cause of radicalisation, and the location of the battle may change, but the ideology remains constant, and allows for the movement to replenish and survive.

One of the odd occurrences in the ongoing struggle has been the slow development in research and studies by the academic community on this critical area. There is only a handful of institutions researching counter-radicalisation, and fewer still looking at the causes. Without dedicated efforts in this area there will be no long-term solution to the ongoing violence. To address both the causes of and solutions to radicalisation, more in-depth research needs to be conducted. In recognition of this need, some Norwegian scholars are already coining the term jihadi strategic studies, aside from jihadism studies.

### **Jihadism Research in Universities and Think Tanks**

Almost a decade after 9/11 there are only five centres globally focusing on jihadist counter-ideology -- or jihadism studies. Three are based in universities -- Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore, Aarhus University in Denmark, and the King's College in London.

In NTU, the research centre comes under S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and has two different units: the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), which focuses the bulk of its work on jihadist terrorism. Through its Ideological Response Unit established in 2003, ICPVTR examines ways to deal with the extremist threat. Separately, the School also has a programme on contemporary Islam which focuses on a broader approach. The aim of the programme is to deepen understanding of trends and issues in, and affecting, the Muslim world, including the phenomenon of Islamism.

In Aarhus University, the research centre on jihadism comes under the auspices of the Department of Political Science. It is called the Centre for Research in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR), also known as the Denmark School. The centre is an independent research institute founded by the Danish Ministry of Defence in 2008. Some DKK10 million has been set aside for the Denmark School over a three-year period.

Also in 2008, King's College established its International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. This centre is a partnership among three other academic institutions, namely the University of Pennsylvania; the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya (Israel); and the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy.

Apart from the three university-based centres, there are two other think tanks that are not based in universities. They are the Quilliam Foundation and a terrorism research group of the Norwegian defence Research Establishment (FFI). Other institutions that do studies on jihadism as part of their wider programmes are RAND, Jamestown Foundation and Combating Terrorism Centre (CTC). These efforts are encouraging, and it is better to be late than never. But the programmes are slow in coming.

### **Not Enough of Jihadism Studies**

While the emphasis in the past has focused on Islamism and radicalisation, more should be done now to studying jihadism and de-radicalisation, and eventually also to expanding community engagement to educate the public in countering radicalisation. Given the current global threat environment, this phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation has enormous research potential and one with very practical applications.

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