

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and 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 and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Demolishing the Islamic State Myth: Defeating the propaganda of ISIS

By Mohammad Alami Musa

Synopsis

ISIS' ideology centred on establishing the Islamic State is a powerful lure for global Muslims to seek salvation by emigrating to this Caliphate. The Muslim community has to develop a strong narrative to defeat the ISIS propaganda.

Commentary

AS COUNTRIES across the world confront the extended reach of ISIS, particular attention is being paid to the ideological appeal of the group. The ideology is centred on the establishment of God's kingdom on earth through the Islamic State (Daulah Islamiyah), ruled by a Caliph (Khalifa) and its call for global Muslims to emigrate (hijrah) to this borderless state.

The skilful use of these hallowed terms by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has enabled the militants to win the support of many Muslims across the globe who idealise and romanticise the belief that God's law (Shariah) must rule the earth and His authority resides in the supreme leadership of the Caliphate. They feel obliged to emigrate to the newly established permanent abode of divine blessings to attain salvation.

Need for counter narrative

Muslim communities in secular countries in Asia and Europe have to develop a counter narrative to neutralise the complex issues of Islamic State, Caliphate and emigration which take into cognisance the religiously plural nature of their society. From a religious perspective, arguments need to be developed that it is not a religious obligation to set up the Islamic State and that the Caliphate is not relevant in today's world.

Muslims need to be reminded that their Prophet, Mohamed, and the successive early generations did not establish a state. Their focus was on organising the life of the *umma* (community of believers) to be a moral community, with its hierarchy, social arrangements, economic system and defence capabilities. Appointed as a prophet-philosopher rather than a prophet-king, Prophet Mohamed never thought in terms of power structure of the state. Moreover, the idea of state is a modern invention. It is therefore a fallacy to believe that setting up the Islamic State is a religious obligation.

The use of the Caliphate is even more contentious. There is a religious view that the Caliphate no longer existed after the Prophet and his four companions who succeeded him, but the consensus among Islamic scholars is that Muslims no longer have a Caliphate after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 CE. Today global scholars on Islam adopt the position that the Caliphate is no longer valid in view of the changed nature of Muslim existence. There are 1.5 billion global Muslims today, but they are deeply divided politically and in numerous Muslim countries and represented by highly divisive organisations of Islamic scholars.

Finally the idea of emigration (hijrah) has been invalidated by the Prophet himself, who categorically stated that there would not be any more emigration after the conquest of Mecca in 629 CE. Islamic scholars and teachers need to thoroughly discuss and develop positions to counter ISIS propaganda that setting up the Islamic State, reinstatement of the Caliphate and emigration are religious obligations. The community cannot afford to lose in this ideological battle to prevent its youth from becoming radicalised.

Singapore Muslims response

The Singapore Muslim community has taken on board the idea that the powerful ISIS ideology and its narrative, have to be defeated and its harmonious coexistence with other religious communities be safe-guarded. They responded to the recent detention of two self-radicalised youths by resolving to guide Muslim youth to the correct teachings of Islam. However the community needs to arm itself with a stronger counter narrative to defeat ISIS' ideology centred on the Islamic State, Caliphate and emigration. They need to neutralise the slick propaganda that ISIS is the saviour of today's spiritually dispossessed Muslims who come from non-Muslim lands, live under non-Islamic laws and are ruled by non-believers.

The Muslim community can refute the notion that living in a secular Muslim-minority state like Singapore is a "darurah" or sinful situation, from which it is an obligation for Muslims to hijrah to the blessed abode of the Islamic State. They are guided by the religious narrative of the Singapore Muslim identity adopted over a decade ago, called *Risalah*. Embedded in Singapore's multi-religious context, it states that it is permissible for Muslims to live in a non-Muslim majority secular state as loyal citizens, without the imposition of Shariah law.

The *Risalah* made it clear that there is no contradiction between being a good Muslim and a good citizen. It argued that the emotional attachment of a Muslim to his country of abode is a natural instinct and acceptable, as long as this love for the country is based on his religious faith and a deep sense of responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of the state, based on universal values. Islam encourages Muslims to work and collaborate with anyone in the pursuit of goodness as it is within the Islamic creed to be inclusive and pluralistic, and as long as the actions are not immoral. Like their other co-religionist, Muslims enjoy a number of privileges within the ambit of the secular state. On the whole the Muslim community, like other religious communities, sees that Singapore is a "secular state with a soul".

A study by two scholars from George Washington University using proxy indicators to measure how Islamic a country is in terms of non-spiritual dimensions such as economy, social life and political systems, found that Singapore was ranked as "more Islamic" than all Muslim-majority countries studied. The report, published in the Journal of Global Economics, affirms the point that it makes a lot of sense for Singaporean Muslims to defend their Islamic life within the context of a multi-religious society in this secular country which offers more "Islamicity" than Muslim-majority countries and provides conditions for them to freely perform religious practices without causing disharmony or encroaching on common space. This defence of the Singapore Muslim identity and thriving Islamic life in a modern and secular state, which undergirds the multi religious social milieu, can be the new positive agenda for the Singaporean Muslim community.

Mohammad Alami Musa is Head, Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. This is based on his article which first appeared in The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg