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Banning of ISIS' Al-Fatihin: Is this Enough?

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

The authorities in Singapore recently banned Al-Fatihin, a newspaper published by an Islamic State-linked media agency. Will this be enough to reduce the lure of jihadism?

Commentary

THE SINGAPORE government recently gazetted Al-Fatihin, a Malay language newspaper published by Furat Media, an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) affiliated media agency as a prohibited publication, making it an offence to possess or distribute the paper.

On the banning of the document, the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) said: "ISIS is a terrorist group which poses a serious threat to the security of Singapore. The newspaper is yet another step by ISIS to spread its propaganda abroad, with a clear intention to radicalise and recruit Southeast Asians to join ISIS. The Singapore Government has zero tolerance for terrorist propaganda and has therefore decided to prohibit Al Fatihin in Singapore."

The Challenge of Self-Radicalisation

The decision to ban Al-Fatihin is a timely move to prevent the paper from falling into Singaporean hands. Singapore takes a strong stand against terrorist propaganda and will embark on decisive measures to counter it. However, the banning of Al-Fatihin newspaper alone will not prevent individuals from being self-radicalised as such materials abound online and offline. The threat of self-radicalisation is far more complex and challenging.

The use of propaganda materials like Al-Fatihin by extremist groups is not a new phenomenon either. Many Muslim youths have been radicalised and influenced by extremist messages they receive largely from the Internet which is the primary medium for their radicalisation and recruitment purposes.

This is increasingly so as counter-terrorism efforts have made it more difficult for extremist groups to recruit through conventional ways, such as mosques and religious classes and militant organisations. By propagating their ideology in cyberspace, extremists gain direct access to their audiences, bypassing mainstream media and institutions.

Leaderless Movement

As a result, we are now witnessing the emergence of a leaderless movement, marked by individuals who are self-radicalised and self-recruited to join the jihadi struggle such as by ISIS through the Internet. The detection of radicalised individuals is a challenge.

Often, it is only when someone translates his or her ideas into action can we detect them. By then, the ideology has already been imbibed into their belief system and thoroughly shapes their lifestyles thereby increasing the difficulty in countering and eliminating the ideology. From an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are also harder to monitor and detect.

Banning extremist materials like Al-Fatihin will no doubt be effective if the authorities are able to detect those who are in possession of the materials and show signs of embracing radical beliefs. The problem is that Al-Fatihin is still being circulated online and it is difficult for the government to know what is going on in cyberspace. Moreover, those who have already possessed or downloaded Al-Fatihin could also share the materials with others.

Why Are Youth Vulnerable?

For Muslim youths, the current trend is to refer to the Internet when sourcing for religious guidance. However, without a strong foundation in religious knowledge, these youths are unable to discern correct Islamic teachings from contrived Islamic ideals imparted by the likes of ISIS. Indeed, research has shown that many of the radicalised youth attracted to ISIS ideology actually possess a shallow understanding of Islam.

The wave of Islamic revivalism currently underway is a key reason why many youths are returning to the Islamic fold. Many of them experience feelings of repentance and regret in delaying to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam. This motivated them to search for religious guidance. It is during this process of searching that many of them are drawn towards and get trapped in extremism. This process of entrapment begins in a very discreet and unconscious manner.

Many of them are attracted to ISIS due to the excitement and sensation they found in ISIS. By being part of ISIS, they feel they are “somebody” chosen for the “honour” of

fighting for Islam and the Muslims whom they believe are trampled upon and badly treated by the “Evil Other”. They are also taken in by the glorious promise of a “shortcut” to heaven via martyrdom.

What Can Be Done?

Muslim youth need to be equipped with the ability to have a critical mind and be discerning in what they read. They need to be more critical in assessing the legitimacy and authority of materials they obtain online. In this respect, knowledge is a key armoury. For example, to place the current conflict in the Middle East in its proper context, they must know the historical and political landscape of the Middle East. For them to manage the challenges of practising Islam as a minority in a secular and multi-racial setting, they must be equipped with a sound understanding of how to contextualise Islamic practices according to different settings and situations.

It is critically important for Muslims to have a contemporaneous understanding and practice of Islam. In this respect, creating institutions of authority and credibility for Muslim youth to refer to for guidance and enlightenment is essential.

Parents and those who work with youths have a great role to play. They must be vigilant and be fully aware of the signs of radicalisation. An example of a warning sign is an attempt to isolate oneself from the company of family and friends.

These radicalised youths could also exhibit hatred or intolerance of behaviours deemed impious or not in alignment with their beliefs. They believe that they have found the only true path to religious enlightenment and refuse to engage or debate with ideas that run contrary to theirs. They declare enmity not just to disbelievers but also to fellow Muslims of different sects or those who repudiate violence. Finally, they may develop obsessive patterns of behaviour and pine for martyrdom and the apocalypse.

With the threat of self-radicalisation Singapore is not immune from the infection of radical and extremist ideologies. As an open, globalised society, Singapore will continue to be exposed to potential sources of radicalisation. Therefore reducing the threat of self-radicalisation is a long-term effort and success cannot be easily claimed. It is, however, crucial to sustain the fight, especially the counter-ideological battle as ideology is the lifeblood of the extremist movement. Ultimately, it is only when we challenge ideas with ideas that hearts and minds may ultimately be won.

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