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IS Terrorism: How to Win the Ideological Battle

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

The recent terrorist attacks in several countries by individuals inspired by the so-called Islamic State (IS) highlight the enduring ideological threat of IS. Serious consolidated efforts are needed to meet the threat with counter-ideology messages to target audiences.

Commentary

THE SPATE of terrorist attacks across Asia claimed by the so-called Islamic State group during Ramadan have marred the spiritual victory enjoyed by Muslims during the holy fasting month. Spanning cities across the Muslim world like Istanbul, Baghdad, Dhaka, Jakarta and even Islam's second holiest city, Medina in Saudi Arabia, the terror attacks appear coordinated.

The deliberate attacks by terror groups like IS were probably motivated by their fallacious claim that Ramadan is a month of armed struggle for Muslims, which is another misuse of the notion of Jihad in the Islamic legal tradition. While efforts to step-up counter-IS ideology is necessary it is more critical to dispense accurate counter-extremist prescriptions that reach all of its target audiences.

IS Attacks in Ramadan

Terror attacks by Muslim extremist groups in the month of Ramadan are not new. Before IS, Al-Qaeda had a history of launching attacks in Iraq during Ramadan. However, the attacks in Ramadan 2016 are seen to be the worst to date in terms of their frequency, intensity and choice of location, especially those attacks that took place in three locations in Saudi Arabia where four suicide bombs exploded killing at

least four people. One of the locations was in proximity to the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

While Muslims devote the month of Ramadan to spiritual jihad, IS and other violent Islamist groups claim that Muslims must also perform the physical jihad or armed struggle in this holy month. The attacks in Ramadan are based on their interpretation and emulation of the Battle of Badar, the first battle in Islam which occurred in the month of Ramadan. In that battle that took place in 624 CE, Muslims gained victory against their opponents, the then-pagan Quraish of Mecca.

The attacks by IS in Medina, Dhaka and Baghdad occurred in the last ten days of Ramadan. According to Islamic traditions, the Night of Power or *Lailatul Qadar* will occur in the last ten nights of Ramadan when Muslims are encouraged to perform devotional acts such as extra night prayers and charity to seek blessing and forgiveness of God. IS believe that killing their enemies in the name of jihad - as understood by them - in the last ten days of Ramadan is one of the most preferred forms of devotional acts and a way to gain martyrdom.

IS Ideology

To counter IS ideology and the misuse of religious concepts such as jihad and martyrdom it is important to understand their religious orientations. IS attempt to assert themselves as the representative of the authentic and original Islam as practised by the early Muslims. They advocate strict adherence to their understanding of Islamic practices as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad, the final prophet, and subsequently practised by the early pious Muslims known as the *salaf al-salih*.

In their attempt to portray the authenticity of Islam in their propaganda, IS manipulate religious doctrines such as *Jihad* (struggle), *Syahadah* (martyrdom), *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* (Loyalty and Disavowal), *Hijrah* (migration) and many others to influence young Muslims to join their fold. They also inherited a legacy of *takfiri* (excommunication) from violent Islamists before them.

As shown in the recent attacks, IS ideology is also based on a culture of hate and hostility towards both Muslims and non-Muslims. This means that while they preach hatred towards infidelity (*kufri*) and polytheism (*syirik*), they also harbour hostility towards Muslims who hold different opinions and disagree with them such as the Shias or those Muslims who promote innovations in religious matters (*bid'ah*).

It is critical to appreciate that IS strength lies not only in their military capabilities but also their ideology and propaganda. This is paramount in any counter-terrorism efforts against them. IS rely heavily on jihadi literature that supports their stance to attack nominal Muslims. This propaganda and literature can be clearly seen in their online magazines such as *Dabiq* and more recently, their Malay language newspaper known as *Al-Fatihin*. Using this online magazine, IS reinforce their ideology and attempt to unite all jihadists from across the globe including Asia.

Three Target Groups in Counter-ideology

IS utilise Islam and Islamic concepts for both recruitment and justification purposes. This ideology and propaganda are seen as the most powerful tool for IS. Countering IS ideology has become a priority in the fight against IS. While this is important, it is more critical to ensure that counter-ideology messages effectively reach their targeted audiences.

Generally, there are three target groups in counter-ideological efforts. The first comprises those IS-influenced individuals who have been apprehended by the authorities. These individuals need to be deradicalised and given religious counselling. The most important objective of the religious counselling is to correct any misinterpretations of Islamic concepts held by them. Consequently, this is hoped to bring about genuine feelings of remorse and repentance, hence removing the motivations for their involvement in extremist and terrorist-related activities.

The second group is the community at large. The Muslim community needs to be informed on the dangers of IS ideology. In fact, the primary and more effective target of the ideological response is the Muslim majority by providing them with a correct understanding of Islam so that they will not be easily influenced by IS propaganda.

One of the biggest challenges is to educate the masses and engage them in a battle of ideas against deviant religious ideologies. Of particular concern are the Muslim youths, who are more vulnerable victims to deviant understanding of Islam, as indicated by the recruitment of youths for IS suicide bombing squads.

The third group is the IS members and supporters themselves. While the two former target audiences have received adequate attention, this third group has been largely neglected. However, they are the ones who may hold the key to swing the counter-terrorism tide. Several considerations come into play to engage this group. First, what can be done to develop a realisation among the terrorists and extremists who are still at large?

What differing approaches could we adopt to make them agree their religious beliefs are warped and indeed unIslamic? What strategies could we offer to provide them with insight into the repercussions of their actions? What are the steps we could suggest for them to take towards true and lasting repentance from their ways? Targeting them in counter-ideological work is critical as they are the ones who will be able to influence their peers and subsequently bring change in their lives.

The enduring threat of IS clearly highlights that the ideological battle is still far from won. Looking at the significant role that ideology plays in terrorist groups like IS, there is a need to move forward and search for a new and strategic approach to deal with their ideology and appeal.

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