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Abu Uqayl's Video: What Does It Portend for 2018?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The video showing the execution of unarmed prisoners by Singaporean Abu Uqayl and other ISIS militants underlines the continuing terrorist threat despite ISIS' military defeat in Iraq and Syria. In 2018, countering violent extremist ideology and managing excessively puritanical teachings that emphasise an 'us-versus-them' mindset, will remain important.

Commentary

ON 29 DECEMBER 2017, a video surfaced on a website known to be associated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS, called Khayr Wilayah Media. Eight minutes long, the clip – in Arabic and English – featured footage of ISIS attacks in Paris and Nice, interspersing these with scenes from Middle Eastern conflict zones as well as festivities in Western capitals such as Sydney and New York City.

The video also included a segment in which the known Singaporean ISIS militant Megat Shahdan Abdul Samad, also known as Abu Uqayl, led two other Southeast Asian-looking ISIS fighters in executing three kneeling Arab-looking prisoners, with gunshots at point blank range. Before carrying out the cold-blooded shootings, Abu Uqayl addressed the camera in English, urging ISIS supporters to kill all “unbelievers” and “apostates” from East Asia to the west of Africa.

Some Broad Observations

The video clip has garnered much attention on social media, prompting the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to condemn the clip, asserting that it represented a “desperate attack” by ISIS to drive a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims. A few broad observations about this latest clip appear pertinent:

First, with Abu Uqayl's videotaped killing of an unarmed prisoner, a certain psychological and symbolic barrier has been crossed. He had killed a man in cold blood for what he believed to be a righteous religious cause and recorded it for all to see. His criminal act along with many other such atrocities by ISIS in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, underscores the susceptibility of some individuals to violent religious fanaticism.

The danger of such acts is that they could inspire impressionable and disaffected individuals to carry out copy-cat attacks. As MUIS warned, such "videos prey on the minds of the weak, or those who do not have proper religious guidance". In September 2014, the Australian police thwarted plans by young supporters of ISIS in Sydney to carry out videotaped beheadings – "demonstration killings" -- of random members of the public, similar to what ISIS was doing at the same time in Iraq and Syria with captured enemies.

Second, the tactical bar for staging violent attacks has been lowered as well. ISIS propaganda for some time now has called for what has been termed the "weaponisation of everyday life". In other words, instead of getting hold of firearms or learning how to make improvised explosives from the Internet, all that is needed to wreak havoc in densely populated cities like New York, Barcelona, London and for that matter Singapore, are everyday items like cars, trucks and knives.

It is worth noting in this regard that in the same clip featuring Uqayl, another Malaysian militant identified as Muhammad Aqif Heusen Rahizat, assured supporters that if they cannot make it to Syria to join ISIS Central, they could do so in their respective countries. The clarion call to would-be lone wolves could not be clearer: carry out attacks wherever you are.

East Asia Still A Target

Third, Abu Uqayl's injunction to kill "unbelievers" and "apostates" from East Asia to Africa are most telling. It affirms that despite the defeat of ISIS-backed militant groups seeking to carve out a territorial base in Marawi City in Mindanao last October, ISIS Central still identifies "East Asia" as an area where they want to establish a *wilayat* or regional province.

Furthermore, Uqayl's violent exhortation suggests his deep indoctrination in the virulent, skewed ISIS interpretation of Islamic texts to justify extreme violence. This is a complex issue, but suffice to say that ISIS basically emphasises the so-called "sword verses" of the Quran, totally ignoring other passages and traditions that counterbalance the former and provide a more textured and nuanced understanding of the faith.

Finally, Uqayl and ISIS' use of terms such as "*kuffar*" (or "*kafir*" - unbeliever) and "*murtadin*" (apostate) in the context of extremist propaganda speaks to the dehumanising effects of indoctrination in violent extremist ideology. Social psychological literature is replete with warnings that linguistic dehumanisation is a slippery slope that, in conjunction with political, social, economic and ideological factors, can pave the way towards out-group violence.

The dehumanising of out-groups – before extremist ideology even enters the picture - can occur imperceptibly through the spread of excessively puritanical interpretations of a religion.

Overly puritanical interpretations of Islam - or any other faith for that matter - that entrenches a dehumanising mindset towards other groups, may well “soften up” impressionable individuals to the violent extremist ideologies of the likes of ISIS and produce more Abu Uqayls.

Implications

In sum, the latest video clip suggests two major implications as we begin the new year. First, continued public vigilance, as the ongoing SG Secure campaign seeks to promote, remains important in view of the threat of lone wolf attacks.

Second, countering the content and dissemination of ISIS extremist ideology should continue apace, accompanied by parallel efforts by religious leaders to strengthen wider interpretations of the faith that eschew stark, us-versus-them categorical thinking. These include emphasising respect for not just co-religionists but all humanity, as equally enjoined by the faith.

As MUIS rightly observed, Islam contains within its rich heritage intellectual resources that amply recognise “the sanctity of human life”. Rediscovering and reasserting this aspect of the faith’s proud heritage – through, for instance, deeper theological excavation of the longstanding, tolerant traditions espoused within Islam, and widely practised in the Southeast Asian region -- seems an increasingly pertinent task.

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