

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Islamophobia & Antisemitism in SG: Narratives of Grievance

By Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

The planned attacks on mosques and a synagogue in Singapore show the international reach of the grievance narratives key to Islamophobia and Antisemitism. Counter-narratives and critical perspectives are required to promote inclusivity in Singapore.

COMMENTARY

IN THE first few months of 2021 news has broken in Singapore of a [planned attack by a Protestant Christian on two mosques](#), and a [planned attack by a Muslim on Jews at a synagogue](#). These planned attacks demonstrate that grievance narratives, even with very little apparent relevance to Singapore, can inspire violence in the Republic.

In the first case, little information is publicly available but the 16-year-old plotter was allegedly inspired by Brenton Tarrant and his attack on mosques in Christchurch in 2019. The attacks were planned for 15 March 2021, the second anniversary of the Christchurch attacks. Like Tarrant, the Singaporean youth wrote an Islamophobic manifesto seeking to justify his attack on Muslims and in it he described Tarrant as a “saint”.

Overseas Narratives and Local Impact

Tarrant’s overwhelming obsession, suggested by his own manifesto entitled *The Great Replacement*, was immigration and so-called “white genocide”, the theory of the displacement of white European people from Western countries.

Notably, this concern would appear to have very little resonance in the context of Singapore and yet the young Singaporean seemingly found aspects of Tarrant’s

ideology and actions highly motivational. It goes to show how violent narratives and acts of terror overseas can have a local impact and why non-violent counter-narratives, and critical perspectives must circulate in Singapore, even about ostensibly foreign concerns.

In the second case, there is again little publicly available information, but it seems Amirull bin Ali had become enraged at what he saw as the [oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli government](#) and in particular the killing of Palestinian civilians by the Israeli military, while Jewish people were prospering in Singapore.

It would appear that in the mind of the would-be perpetrator, his anger could be legitimately channelled into the killing of three Jewish men worshipping at the synagogue, on the assumption that those males would have served compulsory national service in Israel.

Compulsory national service in Israel applies to Israeli citizens, not to Jews of all nationalities and it is unclear whether Amirull had targeted specific individuals he knew to be Jewish Israeli citizens.

Narratives of Grievance

Like the case of the young Singaporean Protestant planning to attack mosques, the narrative inspiring Amirull's potential violence in Singapore has very little or no connection whatsoever to Singapore. Objectively speaking, Singapore is not embroiled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and even if it were, it would make no sense for civilians to be targeted thousands of kilometres away in Singapore on the basis of their religion.

These cases show Islamophobia and Antisemitism to be truly globalised prejudices, with the potential to lead into violence anywhere there are individuals steeped in these mindsets. As illustrated by these plots in Singapore, both Islamophobia and Antisemitism share key features as merely different manifestations of the phenomenon of human prejudice.

In both cases, we see hatred of a "bad" out-group that is perceived to be thriving, typically via nefarious means and at the expense of a "good" in-group, often conceived as the native population.

Narratives of grievance are thus key to these prejudices. In the case of much of the Islamophobia afflicting Western countries, but also beyond the West in places such as India, where we see the idea of "love jihad" gaining such traction, Muslims are portrayed as a violent and unassimilable group unfairly growing in number at the expense of the "native" population.

In the case of Antisemitism across the globe, we encounter the narrative that Jews are unfairly prospering economically and conspiring to control the political system. A more recent but also very widespread feature of Antisemitism is the holding of any and all Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli government.

It should go without saying that to suggest Antisemitism and Islamophobia are

fundamentally similar, is of course not to say that the experiences of Muslims and Jews across the world are fundamentally similar. That is a much more complicated picture. But in order to best guard against these prejudices, we must identify the similar patterns of meaning making among human beings that fuel hatred.

How to Respond

So, how should we respond to cases such as the two cited? Firstly, I would counter the objection many will surely make that no concerted effort should be made to respond to such cases and that to do so would be overly alarmist, given that these cases relate to two particular individuals who may not be at all reflective of the wider population in Singapore.

It is true that we have limited information on the specifics of these cases and so we must be cautious about the lessons to learn, but I would argue that in general it is surely wrong to see persons who resort to violence as exceptional individuals necessarily suffering from some disorder. We are better off as a society understanding the kind of violent acts planned by the two individuals as existing on the extreme end of a spectrum of hatred.

At the lower end of this spectrum of hatred we can situate such things as avoiding individuals deemed to be members of a particular undesirable group, making derogatory comments about entire groups of people, or de-prioritising them in job applications. At the upper end of the spectrum could be placed acts of physical violence and ultimately even killing.

Islamophobia and Antisemitism thrive on the grievance narratives described above. These narratives, which can become widely-held stereotypes about Muslims and Jews, will have real world implications at some level. As scholar of prejudice theory Gordon Allport put it, "It is true that any negative attitude tends somehow, somewhere, to express itself in action".

Critical Thinking and Countering Stereotypes

To counter the spread of insidious narratives and stereotypes, which are sometimes very well entrenched within the community, everybody must be exposed to critical perspectives and counter-narratives that challenge overly simplistic negative beliefs about their deemed out-groups.

We should emphasise the reality of variegated communities of people, for example some richer, some poorer, some more international in outlook, some more parochial, rather than monolithic blocs of "Jews" or "Muslims" each made up of people sharing essentially the same characteristics.

Ideally this would take place in the family home so that children are raised to resist black and white, us vs them thinking, and to reject racial and religious stereotypes. The reality is that not all families encourage embracing the other, and this is where schools and teachers are vital in imparting inclusive values.

There is a role for the teaching of religious literacy and critical thinking skills to children

and adults. It is not necessary that we each become an expert in every religion we encounter but we should have the knowledge and skills to readily debunk the negative stereotypes that we so often encounter.

This is a long-term project that we must all be involved in, from the bottom up, not only to minimise the risk of terrorist attacks, but to build more harmonious and cohesive societies. It is a project that will come up against one of the worst aspects of human behaviour, the tendency to perpetuate stories to justify a preference for one's own group, but it is a vitally important one.

Luca Farrow is a Research Analyst with the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg