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The 'Coney Island Caliphate' and Radicalised Youth

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

The news of the arrest of a self-radicalised youth for an unusual terror plot, that amongst other things, included plans to engage in knife attacks on unbelievers, should be taken seriously. It sheds light on the ongoing challenge of youth radicalisation in recent years. That said, a sense of perspective is also in order. In the recent case, it seems clear that this was basically a youth with an overblown imagination, in dire need of stronger peer support and mentoring.

COMMENTARY

What is one to make of the bizarre plan of a teenage Singaporean to turn Coney Island into a province of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)? Given the daunting logistical challenges of maintaining the *wilayat* (province) even if he succeeded in seizing it, it would seem hard at first sight to take Muhammad Irfan Danyal Mohamad Nor and his ambitions seriously.

But there are serious aspects to the detention of the self-radicalised student in December 2022. Coney Island quest aside, Irfan had other violent plans, including knifing “non-believers in dark alleys”, recruiting a suicide bomber for an attack at Amoy Quee Camp and bombing a grave site at a Tanjong Pagar mosque for its supposedly “un-Islamic” physical configuration.

What's more, since 2015, Singapore had dealt with nine radicalised young people under the Internal Security Act (ISA), a trend which Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam described recently as “concerning”. Six of them were detained and three were handed restriction orders.

The Radicalisation Process

Some terrorism scholars suggest that three basic elements are needed to understand how radicalisation works: the individual's profile, the legitimising ideology and the enabling group.

Individual's profile: Young males such as Irfan are prime targets of recruitment by the likes of ISIS and Al-Qaeda for terrorist attacks. Some analysts in the West reckon that teenagers between 15 and 18 years old made up 20 per cent of suicide bombers. In South-east Asia, Jemaah Islamiah recruits have tended to be "young and male". This demographic's general lack of impulse control as well as its members' tendency to seek black-and-white answers to complex issues and find fulfilment in grand causes make them attractive to extremist groups.

Legitimising ideology: Irfan was said to have sought to kill "disbelievers", whom he defined as "non-Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims and Sufi Muslims". These ideas bear the clear imprint of extremist Islamist ideology of the type that animates Al-Qaeda and especially ISIS, and which, problematically, is often accessible online.

Enabling group: Young people are often indoctrinated into extremist ideology within enabling groups. These groups are to be found in physical settings such as private homes, non-mainstream religious institutions and clubs, as well as exclusive WhatsApp or Telegram chat groups. In Irfan's case, his exposure to ISIS propaganda came via videos by foreign preachers and discussions on social media platforms.

Four Observations

Based on what we know of the radicalisation process, here are some observations arising from the Irfan case.

First, while Irfan was under the influence of radical Muslim preachers, youth radicalisation is not specific to any particular religion or faith. In Singapore, a 16-year-old student was detained about two years ago under the ISA for planning an attack on two mosques on the second anniversary of the Christchurch terror attacks perpetrated by far-right extremist Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand.

Second, removing extremist content from circulation is not easy. It is easier to do so with public-facing social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram but much harder to track and remove from private, end-to-end encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp. Therefore, it is arguably more important to reduce the psychological vulnerability of young people to the deluge of extremist content online.

Third, a key way to reduce such psychological vulnerability is to strengthen the family and peer networks of at-risk youth. Mental health professionals have warned about emotional deprivation in dysfunctional homes stunting the psychological maturing of young people. A related risk is that in their search for role models and "father figures" to fill their emotional void, they are left vulnerable to the lure of charismatic foreign extremist preachers.

Fourth, the role of quality secular and religious educational systems in reducing youth vulnerability to radicalisation cannot be over-emphasised. Such education must not

only aim at equipping young people with the skill sets to succeed in a modern globalised economy like Singapore, but it must also provide them with the values and mindsets that enable them to live confidently and authentically in a secular, multicultural society; in particular, the ability to discern extremist ideology – of any stripe – is an essential skill to nurture. When education is insular in focus and retrograde in its messaging, it risks inculcating in the young a sense of self-righteousness and prejudice towards others not in their social group.

Closer scrutiny of Irfan's activities, such as his planting of an extremist flag on Coney Island to inaugurate his improbable "Islamic State of Singhafura", as well as his plans to somehow recruit a suicide bomber to attack a military camp and to muster "an ISIS army of between 100 and 500 fighters to help him conduct attacks in Singapore", certainly appear extreme – extremely naive, to be precise.

Even though it is still not fully clear from the public record what the key drivers of Irfan's radicalisation are, it is fortunate that his plans for violence were foiled.

A sense of perspective is also perhaps in order. While his arrest was certainly justified because of his active steps to engage in knife attacks on unbelievers, one also comes away with the impression that here is a troubled youngster with an overblown imagination – and in dire need of better peer support and mentoring.

It is hoped that he – and the other young people detained for terror activities – would respond well to rehabilitation and will be able to reintegrate back into society soon, and that the wider community will be magnanimous and help the process along.

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