

## THE ENDURING THREAT OF SELF-RADICALISATION

On 25 January 2008, the Singapore government announced the arrests of three young men under the ISA for their involvement in activities that pose a potential terrorist threat. They were Muhammad Zamri Bin Abdullah, Maksham Mohd Shah and Mohammad Taufik Andjah Asmara. Zamri and Maksham were detained while Taufik was placed Under Restriction Order (RO). At the same time, the government also announced the release of five Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees who have been detained since 2002.

### **Not a “new trend”**

As a media that is cheap, accessible, anonymous and largely unregulated, the use of the internet for terror purposes is not a new phenomenon as it can potentially tap a huge audience. Even before the September 11 attacks, terrorists have already begun to exploit the internet for their evil purposes including fundraising, training and planning their activities. However, in more recent years, using the internet for radicalization and recruitment purposes have become the most dominant online activities for extremists. This is increasingly so as measures taken against terrorism globally have made it more difficult for extremists groups to recruit in more conventional ways, such as mosques and religious classes and organizations. By propagating its extreme ideology in cyberspace, it grants the extremists direct access to their audiences, bypassing mainstream media outlets and institutions to which they no longer have access.

As a result, we are now witnessing the emergence of a leaderless movement, marked by individuals who are self-radicalized and self-recruited into terror activities, influenced and inspired through the internet to join the global jihadi struggle. Singapore has not been spared. In June of 2007, the Singaporean community was shocked by the arrest of a self-radicalised individual Abdul Basheer Abdul Kadir, a young lawyer who was detained for planning militant activities, after being influenced by radical ideas online. The further detainment of three self-radicalised individuals in January this year reflects the complex nature of the problem.

### **Harder to detect**

The question that may spring to mind regarding the recent arrests is why the authorities took so long to detect and arrest these individuals? For instance, Zamri began to spread his radical ideas to his peers in 2003. We can thus assume that he was radicalized much earlier than this. However, they were only detained late last year, which means that they have had at least five years to deepen their ideology or spread their ideology to others.

The reality is that detection of radicalized individuals is a challenging feat. Usually, it is only when someone translates his or her ideas into action, can we then detect them. But by that time, the ideology has already been etched into their belief system and pervaded their life style that it will be more difficult to counter and eliminate the ideology. From an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are harder to monitor and detect compared to those who belong to a group as they will be minimal communication to monitor.

## **Appeal to the youth**

The extremists have become adept in crafting their message and target audience in increasingly sophisticated ways. Many terror websites are flashy, well-designed and feature visually arresting graphic content. Many offer chat rooms and music videos or any other feature that is obviously targeted at a computer-savvy, media-saturated generation, namely the youths. After attracting this group of people, they can then be exposed to the extremist message, which is almost invariably about an Islam that is under attack, a hostile West as the enemy and the need to undertake jihad as a religious and moral duty.

These messages can be in the form of videos that makes use of footage from conflicts involving Muslims around the world, including the Israeli-Palestine conflict, Afghanistan and Iraq. Muslim men are often depicted as part of an angry crowd resisting Western aggression, hence directly appealing to Muslim youths around the globe to join the jihadi movement. It can also include current music trends in music to portray their message, like the use of hip-hop and rap musicians who extol jihadism and calls to violence.

## **Why youths are more vulnerable?**

In many cases self-radicalization was sparked by a desire to become a better, practicing Muslim. Incidentally, this was also the case with many members of JI who when interviewed, considered religion as their topmost priority, above economic gains. Effectively, what they are saying is that in an increasingly secularized world, their search for excellence goes beyond material concerns; it is in fact equated to a search for spiritual meaning. It is in pursuit of filling this spiritual void that they sought to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam. This search for an ideal world and ideal self-image is most prominent among the youths. However, a combination of blind fervour and shallow understanding of Islam among the youths is a lethal combination that can be exploited by the extremists.

## **Efforts to prevent radicalism**

In Singapore, many efforts have been taken to prevent further radicalization of the Muslim community. The discovery of JI network and the arrest of its members in 2001 have taught us many lessons as the government and community take the threat of terrorism and extremism very seriously. Due to the effectiveness of the security authority and the willingness of the government to work hand-in-hand with the local Muslim community, the threat of terrorism posed by JI in Singapore has been severely reduced.

The threat of self-radicalization in Singapore has shown that Singapore is not immune from the penetration of radical and extremist ideologies. The Muslim community here has been working hard to address this issue. In responding to the pervasive spread of radical ideologies in the internet, several Muslim organizations and individuals have produced websites and blogs to counter extremism.

Besides developing websites, initiatives to continuously engaging and educating the youth are also undertaken by several Muslim organizations here. This aims to impart a correct understanding of Islam within the youth and to highlight the dangers of extreme ideas.

## **The way forward**

As the threat of self-radicalisation is an enduring one, there is a need for us to evaluate our strategies and increase our efforts in addressing this issue. Among the efforts that can be considered are:-

Embark on an in-depth research to study the phenomenon of radicalization and self-radicalisation. This is an important step for us to understand the problem before addressing it

The role to inform educate the public on dangers of extreme ideologies should not only fall on the shoulders on religious leaders and Muslims only. Each and every Singaporean has an important role to rebut extremist views and prevent it from spreading.

Looking at the common profile of self-radicalised individuals who are young, it is important to reach out and send the messages to all levels of education, from primary, secondary, pre-university and graduate students.

Utilizing technology to find ways to prevent extremist websites from being widely disseminated.

More anti-radicalism and counter extremist ideological websites need to be developed to at least match the number of existing extremist websites.

The content of counter-terrorism websites could also be improvised. For instance, we can attempt to show graphic photos of effects of terrorism, including the Muslim victims. This is exactly what the terrorists have been doing to gain sympathy to their cause.

Use existing models that have been tailored to other settings to regulate internet for example, study how attempts to control pornography on the internet.

## **Conclusion**

The problem is complex and people from many disciplines required to pool their talents and expertise. Furthermore, the face of terrorism is dynamic, ever-changing and transforming, propelled by changes in legislation, technology, political and social events. Hence, a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates the diverse perspective of religion, criminal science, behavioural science, law, intelligence, information science is vital. We must also begin to understand the radicalization process, in order to develop metrics and better identify the phenomenon when it happens.

As in many open, globalized societies, Singapore continue to be exposed to potential sources of radicalization through a variety of human and institutional catalysts, such as formal and informal religious institutions and increasingly within university settings and youth groups. The Internet plays a significant role in this process as it creates a dynamic environment characterized by a confluence of political, religious, racial, and cultural flashpoints. This environment is being exploited by a small, yet influential number of radical actors to serve their evil purposes.

Singapore's efforts to counter extremism that is widely spreading in the internet are just at the beginning. More voices of moderation need to be heard from the local community, especially the religious leaders and scholars, as much as more counter extremist websites need to be created. One of the most important lessons that can be learnt and drawn by the Singapore experience is that active and continuous engagement with the Muslim community is vital in the fight against extremism. Cooperation with governments in the region and internationally is crucial to keep abreast of the latest developments and radicalization trends. Ultimately, it is only when we challenge ideas with ideas that hearts and minds may ultimately be changed.