STRIKING THE ROOTS OF RADICALISM: RECLAIMING ISLAM'S INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

Countering Islamic radicalism has been the main focus of global counter-terrorism efforts in recent years.These largely operational strategies have yielded some success. But terrorists have displayed a high level of resilience and adjusted their strategies accordingly. Though operational capabilities have been weakened, groups like Al-Qaeda have shifted to "franchising" their violent ideologies to like-minded groups and individuals, with the Internet increasingly becoming their main media. The outcome of this strategy can be seen in that five years after 9-11, the 2006 US National Intelligence Estimate reports that "activists identifying themselves as jihadists, although a small percentage of Muslims, are increasing in number and geographic dispersion".

The recent arrest of former lawyer Abdul Basheer shows that Singapore is not immune to the threat of radicalisation via the Internet. This incident marks an important shift in the struggle against terrorism and radicalism here. This is because from an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are harder to monitor and detect compared to those who belong to a group. Furthermore, it is equally challenging, if not impossible, to control the activities on the Internet effectively. More importantly, it illustrates that now, more than ever, we need to target the extremist ideology at its innermost core. The battle is in the realm of the hearts and minds, not merely in the use of guns and through legislation.

Globalisation and Islamic Resurgence

The first question we need to ask is: What drives the heart of Islamic radicalism?

Radicalism is the internalisation of a set of beliefs, including a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad, as the paramount test of one's conviction. In the case of Abdul Basheer, we realise that his radicalisation was sparked by a desire to become a better, practicing Muslim. This, incidentally, was also the case with many Jemaah Islamiah members who, when interviewed, considered religion as their top-most priority - more crucial than developing themselves socially or economically. What they were saying was that in an increasingly secularised world, their search for excellence went beyond material concerns. It was, in fact, equated to a search for spiritual meaning. And it was to fill this spiritual void that they sought to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam.

Abdul Basheer is not alone in this. In fact, he is a part of a global phenomenon of Islamic

resurgence today. One of the main effects of globalisation is that some individuals increasingly find it difficult to cope with rapid changes without losing their inner sense of security and identity. This happens across many societies, not just among Muslims. Yet, one of the options that many Muslims take to preserve their identity and values is to uphold the values and identity offered by Islamic teachings.

Unfortunately, many Muslims today, including Abdul Basheer and the JI members, are not equipped with the proper knowledge to adapt true Islamic teachings to the demands of a rapidly changing world. This is the result of a deepening intellectual and moral crisis in the Muslim leadership across many Muslim societies.

The origins of the crisis can be traced back to the 19th century when the Muslim world, along with other non-western parts of the world was challenged by the economic, political and cultural hegemony of Europe. As a result of adopting foreign concepts without first evaluating these concepts and incorporating only what is of value through the guidelines of their own intellectual heritage, Muslim scholars from both dogmatic literalists(what is commonly known as fundamentalists) and modern liberal secularists(or modernists) were born.

For instance, Western thought had the effect of intruding upon the integrity of the Islamic intellectual tradition by mutating and marginalizing several of its disciplines. For example, Sufism came to be viewed as a mystical, personal experience of the religion and thus sidelined from mainstream Islamic practices. This, Omid Safi asserts can only be argued if one looked at Sufism through the lens of post-enlightenment theories of religion. The rejection of this core Islamic teaching which emphasizes morality and spiritual cleansing signifies the onset of an intellectual imbalance and subsequent moral decay within the Muslim ummah. This can be seen manifest in the many problems that beset many Muslim nations and leaders who struggle with issues of corruption, authoritarian regimes and immorality-all of which have directly or indirectly responsible for the insurgencies and terrorism-related activities in the Muslim world.

The crisis is deepening with a current trend towards anti-intellectual minimalism spearheaded by the dogmatic literalists. This group of people strongly rejects the diversity of views, broad range of thinking and varying levels of rational discourse found in the intellectual Islamic disciplines in the past. Instead, they insist on a worldview based on a narrowly defined traditionalist past which forces doctrinal conformity and uniformity of

thought across the whole spectrum of Muslim communities worldwide.

The crisis has led to a serious depletion of scholars who are able to provide intelligent guidance to lead the Muslims through the challenges arising from the forces of globalisation. The incapacitation or marginalization of creative Muslim thinkers from both the professional and educational fields further add to the general failure to respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation and to increasing secularism. One of the consequences of this are Muslims who are unable to embrace these changes and at the same time still hold fast to the obligations of their religion. This has resulted in many problems in the Muslim world, one of which is the emergence of a group of people who have adopted rigid, radical views with violent tendencies in a bid to withstand the pressures of secularisation and globalisation.

Return to The True Teachings of Islam

The problem of radicalism is, first and foremost, that it is a distortion of the true teachings and spirit of Islam - a religion which promotes generosity, forbearance and gentleness. Efforts must not be spared to uphold the proper teachings of Islam, and put right concepts that are misunderstood. Muslim scholars and thinkers have a responsibility to correct perceptions of Islam held by radicals and by the public - through publications, speeches and the Internet. It is worth noting, for example, that in the aftermath of 9-11, we were inundated by books on Islamic terrorism and extremism to meet the sudden demand to learn about Islam.Unfortunately, many of these books were written largely - though there were exceptions - by non-Muslims who were ignorant of the religion, or who tried to benefit from the situation for their particular political and religious agendas. It is imperative that Muslim scholars and thinkers come forward to portray the authentic Islam, and generate mutual understanding.

There must also be a parallel effort to revive the Islamic intellectual traditions in which knowledge is pursued in accordance with the correct code of conduct or adab prescribed by Islam. One of the more important criteria is that it must be sought from a credible teacher, who is chosen not only because of his knowledge, but also for his good moral conduct, which his students should aim to emulate. For this, the students must be in direct physical contact with their teacher. This concept of pursuing knowledge face-to-face with a teacher is exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, who did not receive the Quranic revelations directly from God but through the Archangel Jibrail as his teacher and guide.One of the main arguments today against learning religion face-to-face with a teacher is that people are constrained by work and time. So the Internet becomes the most attractive option due to its

convenience and accessibility.

Religious organisations and mosques need set aside time and find opportunities to cater to the different needs of the community. It is important to catch young Muslims while they are still in school so they will have a good foundation in the religion. What is clear is that a large number of radicals have shallow knowledge of the religion. This is probably the norm here and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Such individuals fail to pursue religious knowledge in a proper and consistent manner. This could be due to a combination of their work and lifestyle demands.

The Muslim public must also be encouraged to attend intellectual discourses and debates and be weaned off from a diet of talks and activities that have high entertainment value but low knowledge content. In this regard, mosques and other Muslim organisations have to ensure their programmes are of high educational value, rather than just a means to entertain or raise funds. In addition to upgrading knowledge, efforts must be made to equip Muslims with creative and critical thinking skills. This is important in the face of religious impostors operating in the real and virtual world. Muslims must have the means to be able to contribute to resolving important issues inherited from the past as well as the future challenges that the modern world brings to bear on them.

The crisis of governance and of intellectual and moral leadership in the Muslim world has been aggravated by a failure to resolve long-standing conflicts that involve the large scale the victimisation of Muslims. In the short term, we must provide a platform for Muslims to air their grievances or channel their energies and other forms of help to their Muslim brethen who are in difficulties abroad, in a legitimate and peaceful manner. For example, just as we have performed mass-prayers for those who died in the Sept 11, 2001 atrocities, perhaps the same can be done for the victims of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.At the same time, dialogues should not be confined to those among different faiths. There must also be dialogues that provide a ear to the voices of dissent within Islam.

Self-radicalisation is just one of the many routes that terrorists have adopted to achieve their aims. And as long as technology progresses, the terrorists will become more advanced and sophisticated too.Given their resilience, we have no choice but to strike at the root of the problem if we are to achieve success in both the short and long term.

The root of the problem, as I see it, lies in the lack of intellectual and moral leadership in the Muslim world. In particular, there is great concern with regards to what can be termed as the anti-intellectual movement within certain Islamic circles, which rejects critical methods of analysis and contextual thinking thus undermining the legitimate authority of Islam's intellectual and moral-spiritual heritage and the required flexibility and space to providing guidance to Muslims through the challenges in a dynamic and ever-changing world. It thereby impoverishes current Muslims by stripping them of a powerful weapon for combating the values of secular materialism and worldview of globalizing culture. In addition, a more dangerous effect of this trend is the legitimization and ideological empowerment that the group provides to the most radically inclined minority in their midst, namely the militant jihadists. This is best reflected in the myopic jihadist goal of a political Islam system which is devoid of its intellectual-rational-spiritual dimension. As this trend involves a subtle internal challenge to the legitimacy and relevance of the Islamic legacy, efforts to recast the direction of Muslim thought and action can only arise from within Islam itself.