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### WAR AGAINST TERROR

Countering the threat of self-radicalisation

By Ustaz Mohamed Bin Ali

THE latest arrests of three young men under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for their terror-related activities signal that the threat of self-radicalisation is a long-term one.

The pervasive spread of extreme ideas on the Internet has become a great concern for the authorities and community here in Singapore.

On Jan 25, the Singapore Government announced the arrests of three young men under the ISA for their involvement in activities that posed 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 a Restriction Order. At the same time, the Government announced the release of five former Jemaah Islamiah (JI) members detained in 2002.

The use of the Internet for terror purposes is not a new phenomenon. Even before the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the US, terrorists were exploiting the Internet for fund-raising, training and planning purposes. It is now primarily used for radicalisation and recruitment purposes.

This is increasingly so because counter-terrorism efforts have made it more difficult for extremist groups to recruit through conventional means, such as using mosques and religious classes and organisations. By propagating their ideology in cyberspace, extremists gain direct access to their audience, bypassing mainstream media outlets and institutions.

As a result, we are now witnessing the emergence of a leaderless movement, consisting of individuals who are self-radicalised and self-recruited. Singapore has not been spared. Last June, Singaporeans learned of the arrest of self-radicalised Abdul Basheer Abdul Kadir, a young lawyer. He was detained for planning militant activities after being influenced by radical ideas online.

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, but was arrested only at the end of last year.

The reality is that the detection of radicalised individuals is a difficult task. Often, it is only when someone manifests his or her ideas in action that we can detect them. From an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are harder to monitor and detect compared with those who belong to a group as there is little communication - what the trade likes to call 'chatter' - to monitor.

### Appeal to youth

EXTREMISTS have become adept in crafting their message to suit their target audience. Many terror websites are flashy and well-designed and feature visually arresting graphic content. Many also offer chatrooms, music videos and other features that are obviously targeted at a computer-savvy, media-saturated generation -

namely, the young.

The messages they receive can be in the form of videos that make use of footage from conflicts involving Muslims around the world, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 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. The videos even use hip-hop and rap musicians who extol jihadism.

In many cases, self-radicalisation begins with a desire to become better Muslims. In an increasingly secularised world, many people are turning to religion to give meaning to their lives. This search for ideals is most prominent among the young.

Unfortunately, the fervour of youth coupled with a very shallow understanding of Islam is a lethal combination that can be easily manipulated by the extremists.

Some analysts have argued that many youths today may be highly educated yet lack critical thinking skills. They blame the education system for producing individuals who are unable to distinguish propaganda from truth.

Self-radicalisation has shown that Singapore is not immune from radical and extremist ideologies. The Muslim community here has been working hard to address this issue. In responding to the spread of radical ideologies on the Internet, several Muslim groups and individuals have produced websites and blogs to counter extremism.

Initiatives to engage and educate the young have also been undertaken by several Muslim organisations here. These measures aim to impart a correct understanding of Islam 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 to evaluate our strategies. Among the efforts that can be considered are:

- Embark on in-depth research to study the phenomenon of radicalisation and self-radicalisation.
- Reach out to youths, as the profile of self-radicalised individuals suggests the young are susceptible to bad influence.
- Utilise the latest technology to prevent extremist websites from being widely disseminated.
- Use existing models to regulate the Internet - for example, measures to control pornography.
- Develop more anti-radicalism and counter-extremist ideological websites.
- Improve the content of counter-terrorism websites. For instance, we can show graphic photos of the effects of terrorism, including Muslim victims.

The face of terrorism is dynamic and ever-changing, propelled by changes in legislation, technology and political and social events. Hence, a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates the diverse perspectives of religion, criminal science, behavioural science, law, intelligence and information science is vital.

The Internet plays a significant role in the radicalisation process. As an open society, Singapore will continue to be exposed to this source of radicalisation. As such, reducing the threat of self-radicalisation is a long-term

effort and success cannot be easily achieved.

It is crucial, however, to sustain this fight, especially on the ideological front for ideology is the lifeblood of the extremist movement.

Ultimately, it is only when we challenge ideas with ideas that hearts and minds can be changed.

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