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DIY terrorists

News of the arrest of a well-educated young man who was drawn to radical Islamist ideology he looked up on the Internet caused waves in the community and among security experts last evening. JEREMY AU YONG finds out about this new phenomenon

POLYTECHNIC lecturer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader learnt about his faith not in the traditional way of going for classes conducted by an ustaz or religious leader.

You could say the Internet was his ustaz. And he became a do-it-yourself or DIY radical, all from his own Internet learning.

Last evening, the Government revealed that the 28-year-old, who studied law at the National University of Singapore, developed a mindset that he had to wage militant jihad in Afghanistan as a result of what he picked up online.

But here is the more disturbing fact: his story is not unique.

Security experts say it is a textbook example of a phenomenon known as 'self-radicalisation'.

It has been uncovered in several other countries, and now in Singapore.

The process of self-radicalisation has led to a changing face of terrorism, from that of card-carrying members of groups like Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah to that guy at a computer independently embracing the radical ideas he finds online.

'What this means,' says Ustaz Mohamed Ali, a research analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), 'is that anybody can be radicalised. Anybody can conduct terrorist operations without being affiliated to any terrorist groups.'

Mr Thomas Quiggin, a former Royal Canadian Mounted Police Islamist expert who wrote a book on the changing national security environment called *Seeing The Invisible*, describes self-radicalisation as 'perhaps the single most important security threat at this time'.

Dr Rohan Gunaratna, head of the ICPVTR at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, calls it the 'predominant terror threat to Singapore over the next five years'.

International Crisis Group terrorism expert Sidney Jones also acknowledges it as something 'all countries have to deal with right now', though she cautions against Abdul Basheer's arrest causing unnecessary alarm that it could be the start of a wave of self-radicalisation in Singapore.

Harder to find, harder to stop

THESE self-starting cells differ from the conventional terrorists in several important ways, many of which just make them harder to stop.

'International groups have a very defined structure and hierarchy - who is a leader, member, supporter or sympathiser. Self-radicalised groups have a flat structure,' says Dr Gunaratna.

The flat organisation, coupled with the fact that members do not live together or gather in physical places, just makes the task of tracking them down and nabbing them that much harder.

The independent cells also tend to be very small, sometimes consisting of one guy working alone. Few have more than 10.

One of the most important differences, however, is their reliance on the Internet and media.

In cyberspace, radical material is harder to regulate. According to security analysts, efforts by governments to clamp down on extremists material being distributed through books or classes have pushed much of the content online.

With just a little effort, the self-radicalised individual can look up on the Internet nasty bomb-making recipes, download instructional videos on how to operate as a militant and even find manuals on how to plan an attack.

It is out there, at anyone's fingertips.

So interwoven is the Internet in the operations of self-radicalised individuals that British terror expert Shane Brighton has described their brand of terror as 'Google terror'.

In an interview with Time magazine in the wake of the 2005 London bombings, he was among those who expressed concerns about self-radicalisation.

'If you already accept that there's a historic struggle between Muslims and the West and that the only resort is violence, you don't need to sit at the feet of an Imam for months.

'You just need to watch the news...'

Someone who latches on to 'Google terror' may find easy access to stuff online, but he himself is hard to access.

'Somebody could be surfing the Net at 3am, looking at websites with radical ideology and getting radicalised. Logically, we cannot know about him,' said Ustaz Mohamed, who is also a counsellor with the Religious Rehabilitation Group.

The concept of self-radicalisation in itself is not exactly new, says Mr Quiggin, with signs seen as early as the mid-1990s.

But he believes the impulse gathered momentum after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The phenomenon is being fuelled by the 'combination of wide television exposure of violence in places like Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Chechnya with Al-Qaeda's aggressive PR campaign on the Internet', adds Mr Quiggin.

What has happened, explains Dr Gunaratna, is that 'a segment of Muslims started to believe that Islam is under threat from the West and Muslims are being attacked'.

While this will heighten the ideological dimension of the terror threat, traditional terror groups are far from being out of fashion.

'They have not been dismantled,' says Ustaz Mohamed.

Spectre of a deadly partnership

SECURITY experts believe that the most destabilising outcome is when home-grown self-radicalised individuals hook up with the traditional terror bigwigs in the current landscape.

'On their own, home-grown cells have modest capability to conduct an attack,' says Dr Gunaratna. 'Only if they link up with traditional groups or people with expertise can they develop the capability to mount significant attacks.'

He cites the example of the London bombings in 2005 where leaders had trained with Al-Qaeda, and the Madrid bombing in 2004, where those responsible were in touch with experts from North Africa.

Those sort of attacks do not appear imminent here, but the battle against self-radicalisation has already started in earnest.

All agree, however, that it is a difficult fight.

Currently, security experts estimate that up to 80 per cent of domestic terrorism resources in Western governments are being channelled to try to monitor home-grown jihadists.

Practising 'cut and paste Islam'

PROFILING has proven a difficult exercise as perpetrators don't fit any clear mould.

Says Mr Quiggin: 'Some of the individuals have come from relatively poor families from disadvantaged groups. But others clearly come from stable families and have good education.'

The only common trend is that they are impressionable youth with little religious knowledge - practising what Dr Gunaratna calls 'cut and paste Islam' from the Internet.

Says Mr Quiggin: 'Without a basic working knowledge of the Quran, they are vulnerable to the twisted ideology of Al-Qaeda and other such groups.'

And it is at the ideological level that the fight against self-radicalisation has to begin.

To that end, policies targeted at preachers, like the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act, may hit a dead end. Quite simply, self-radicalised jihadists get their mindsets from the Internet, not at the mosques or madrasahs.

One solution being tried now is to reach out to them through the same medium - the Internet.

A group of religious teachers here, who have banded together to form the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) to counsel JI detainees and combat radical ideology, is planning a website to counter the radicals.

It would be similar to the one already set up by a teacher and academic, Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan (counterideology.multiply.com). He has also published a book countering arguments used by the bomber in the Bali attacks of 2002 to justify his actions.

Ustaz Mohamed believes that much more needs to be done.

'It's just one website. There are many many more radical ones out there.'

Beyond websites, the RRG is also reaching out to young people through events like discussion forums.

Other community leaders say that fellow Muslims have to look out for each other and suss out those who may be searching for answers in their religion. If they seem to be veering off paths that seem unconventional and far from the mainstream, the guidance and advice of others around them could help steer them in the right direction, they say.

Says Mr Khalid Saleh Basharahil, vice-president of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry: 'People close to people like Abdul Basheer have to be the ones to raise the alarm. The authorities can do only so much.'

Meanwhile, whether the efforts put in place so far will work remains to be seen. What is clear is that it is a threat not to be taken lightly.

Says Ustaz Mohamed: 'This is a small country. We cannot afford to let anything happen.'

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USTAZ MOHAMED ALI, a research analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR)

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