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Don't be a religious EXTREMIST

23-point booklet tells you how not to

IT IS a battle for the minds of the young. And it has to start with finding out how the young are inducted into extremism.

So Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Ustaz Mohd Ali produced a booklet titled *Don't Be Extreme in Your Religion*.

The two men, who had also produced a booklet explaining jihad last year, are also terrorism analysts at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

They produced the booklet based on their knowledge of Islam and research work, which included talking to extremists.

Targeted at parents and youths, the booklet contains 23 points on how extremist websites teach their readers to hate.

IN THREE LANGUAGES

According to the booklet, these websites typically start by giving simple advice on religion, before moving on to advocating armed jihad. (See report below.)

Ustaz Muhd Haniff, 39, said: "We want to empower the community with a guide book that identifies tactics used by such websites. We want to put this in a simple and clear manner."

Written in English, Malay and Tamil, their 19-page booklet will be given away free at mosques and religious organisations.

Other than reaching out directly to the teens, it also serves as a handy guide for family members of any would-be radical to identify the symptoms.

It includes a section on how and where to get help when you have identified a potential radical.

The booklet is supported by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore

◆ Ustaz Mohamed Ali (right) and Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan holding the booklet *Don't Be Extreme in Your Religion*



Picture: RISIS, NTU

(Muis) and the Singapore Adult Religious Students Association (Perdaus).

Ustaz Muhd Haniff said youths are the target readers because their high rate of computer-literacy, impressionable nature and generally shallow understanding of religion. This makes them vulnerable.

The nature of online content also makes it easy for anyone to speak about teachings of a religion – even if they are not qualified to do so – he said.

He added: "These websites often focus on ideas and not on the credibility of the scholars writing the materials."

The danger is when the ignorant start subscribing to such extreme ideology, believing that these are "better" forms of Islam, he said.

Websites countering terrorism are not new – Muis runs one and so does Ustaz Muhd Haniff, who offers blog entries, forums, music and even videos on counterideology.multiply.com.

Still, they feel more needs to be done.

Ustaz Mohd Ali, 34, said: "At this stage, it has come down to this – whoever manages to influence more people wins.

"The challenge today is not just about countering extremist arguments, but being able to propagate our arguments to reach out to more people."

The two authors said that more moderates need to be heard and so, more platforms to reach out to youths need to be created.

QUESTIONS

Ustaz Muhd Haniff said young people have asked him questions via his website. These are mostly on the daily application of religion, such as how to pray.

A check on the Muis website also showed similar questions.

Though the questions may seem trivial, Ustaz Muhd Haniff is not disappointed.

He said: "We need to get youths acquainted with religion through us and so, it can start with small things like these. If they go to extremist websites for answers ... they can get sucked in by radical ideas."

He said he also gets comments from people condemning Islam.

But neither the comments, nor the recent controversy over the "Fitna" video produced and released by right-wing Dutch MP Geert Wilders depicting Muslims as radicals, dishearten Ustaz Muhd Haniff or his co-author.

Instead, it spurs them on.

Ustaz Mohd Ali said: "As religious scholars, we are given the 'amanah' (trust in Malay) to talk about religion and counter such extreme ideas.

"It is our responsibility to step up on behalf of fellow Muslims who may feel it is not in their position to do so."

That is why they are also planning a website related to this booklet.

No date has been set as they are still looking for sponsors.

5 points from booklet

Some of the 23 points in the *Don't Be Extreme* booklet on what extremist websites teach:

- ◆ Once you show increasing interest in learning more about religion, you might be asked to join religious classes conducted privately by unregistered teachers or organisations at locations outside of mosques.
- ◆ Progressively, you will be taught the nobility, superiority and importance of armed jihad and martyrdom compared to peaceful solutions.
- ◆ You will be persuaded that armed jihad is an obligation for any good Muslim to free the "umma" or community of Muslims from injustice and persecution. You are told it is also your obligation to fight in troubled Islamic lands such as Palestine and Afghanistan.
- ◆ You will be told that the Islam you are being taught by the extremist website and teachers are more accurate and "true", compared to what is understood by the mainstream community.
- ◆ You will be discouraged from working in public service as it represents support for non-Muslim governments.

For more details and other points, pick up the booklet at mosques or religious organisations. You can also download it at <http://counterideology.multiply.com>.

For other information on countering extremist ideology, you can visit Muis' website at www.iask.com.sg.

