

PROBLEM:

Terrorists using Net to radicalise young

SOLUTION:

Use Net to debunk their lies



How to fight hate websites?

wwwWebfight



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FIGHT fire with fire when you enter cyberspace. That's what Muslim leaders are doing to counter terrorist or extremist ideologies on the Net. They have set up websites that debunk the dangerous views and misinformation that characterise these rogue sites. The moderate voices range from religious leaders to scholars to research analysts. One such counter-terrorism website features blog entries, forums, music and even videos. Another is filled with book reviews, interactive multimedia clips and links to similar sites. The first site belongs to local terrorism research analyst Ustaz Muhd Haniff Hassan, found at counterideology.multiply.com. The second is the work of British Islamic scholar Aftab Malik, whose website is at www.amalpress.com. Though countries apart, their cause binds them – they aim to denounce terrorist ideologies by making their views available on the Internet. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, or Muis, has also started a forum at www.iask.com.sg to answer and clarify religious queries.

Offline too there have been many efforts to engage youths who may be Net-savvy and mosque-shy. The reason: Leaders know that youths, who form one-third of all Muslims here, need to be addressed. Some might be disillusioned and angry and can be targets for terrorist recruiters. The tragic example of the 2005 London bombings highlights this. The attacks were carried out by four youths who were radicalised by websites preaching extremist ideologies. The four later carried out the attacks in July 2005 which killed 52 and injured more than 700 people.

BATTLE ON THE NET

Terrorism research analysts have warned that the next battleground in the war against terror is on the Internet. The recent arrest in Singapore of law-trained academic Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader underscores this view. Abdul Basheer became influenced by extremist ideologies on the Internet and began to study Arabic to understand the language of the mujahidin fighters. He was nabbed before he could fly to Pakistan, where he intended to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The most powerful tools on the Net are accessibility and interactivity. The extremists know this and are exploiting it. Terrorism research analyst Rebecca Givner-Forbes, who studies as many as 20 extremist websites daily at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said these sites provide a sense of community. Ms Givner-Forbes said: "This sense of community is crucial to completing the jihadist experience. "With online forums and instant chats that connect you directly to other radicals, that person no longer feels alone or like an outcast for his strange views in his mainstream community." At the same time, the person is bombarded with an audio-visual dose of rhetoric and lies, which have been misinterpreted and manipulated to suck him into an ideology of hate. Muslim scholars and religious leaders who spoke to The New Paper, rebutted the five most-cited extremist ideologies. (See report on facing page.)

MORE WEBSITES

Leader Habib Hassan Al-Aftas wanted more counter-terrorist websites to be created. He suggested having a website that is created by, say, a local Muslim

MYTH v FACT

PANEL of respected scholars and religious leaders, known for their work in Islamic history and theology, butt the top five most-cited ideologies on extremist websites.

JIHAD

Extremists say: Wage holy war. In her words, armed combat against anyone who threatens or endangers Islam. They legitimise their call by use of Quranic scriptures.

Panel says: These scriptures, which refer to a specific historical event and context in the Quran, have been misinterpreted.

Jihad is an Arabic word meaning "to strive", "to make an most effort" or "to struggle", and is can be striving to attain perfect with or promoting justice.

Islam has several rules of engagement to be met before going to war. Even so, the act of war itself is considered a last resort, not something to be championed at the top of a hat.

So, to equate jihad with terrorism is sacrilegious.

There is no text in the Quran which mentions attacks such as Sept 11.

NON-MUSLIMS

Extremists say: All disbelievers are

infidels who deserve to be killed. Muslims who do not observe their religion are deemed hypocrites and should also be attacked.

Panel says: Contrary to this, Islam emphasises respect and goodwill to all humankind, regardless of race or religion.

The scholars interviewed cited examples from Prophet Muhammad, who treated the Christians and Jews well and had even signed peace treaties with them.

There are many verses in the Quran which show Islam is a religion of peace, designed to teach Muslims to have good relations with non-Muslims.

Using coercion to convert is deemed wrong.

3. MARTYRDOM

Extremists say: Carry out suicide bombings and die a martyr.

Panel says: These are distorted comparisons between martyrdom and suicide operations. They are not the same.

A martyr is someone who dies in the cause of God, like Prophet Muhammad's companions, who died defending Islam.

On the other hand, suicide bombings are abhorred in Islam for a several reasons.

Taking one's life against the teachings of Islam as life is considered sacred, and suicide operations cause much destruction and death to innocents, which is also wrong in Islam.

4. MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Extremists say: That it is the duty of any responsible Muslim to go to the aid of his brothers who are being attacked, oppressed or persecuted. It is his duty as part of the ummah, or the Muslim community.

Panel says: The idea is right but the execution is wrong. Scholars agree that extremists have been able to manipulate this concept of brotherhood.

The concept of ummah is to help a Muslim do good, not to achieve violent ends.

This is another example of how these radicals oppose over 1,000 years of scholarship, and a scholastic methodology... and apply a literal understanding which is devoid of wisdom and erudition.

The radicals use this literal approach to convince others that they have a religious duty to go and fight.

5. AGGRESSION IN TERRORIST CULTURE

Extremists say: They use revenge to

instigate hate and rally people against their enemy. Beheadings of captors and suicide operations are justified.

Panel says: This concept of an "eye for an eye" is not encouraged by Islam as it is a religion of peace, not war.

"Islam" is derived from the Arabic root word of "salaam", which means peace, and "aslama", which means "to submit to the will of God".

So Islam is a religion which asks its believers to submit themselves to a life of peace and harmony with all of God's creations.

THE PANEL

◆ **Ustaz Mohamed Ali**, a research analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University. He graduated from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, in 2001 with a degree in Islamic jurisprudence.

◆ **Habib Hassan Al-Attas**, imam of Ba'alwiyah Mosque and member of the Inter-Religious Organisation

◆ **Mr Aftab Malik**, visiting fellow at the Centre for Ethnicity and Culture, University of Birmingham. He has edited four books and authored one.



► The scholars (from left) Habib Hassan Al-Attas, Mr Aftab Malik, Ustaz Mohamed Ali
File pictures



organisation with links to Muslim scholars and noted religious teachers worldwide, in addition to local ones. For a start, Muis in Singapore recently announced plans to create a website specifically catering to the religious needs of the young. It will be officially launched in the next few months and features interactive games, forums, webchat functions and podcasts. But websites should complement other efforts offline. In a bid to be more youth-friendly, mosques have organised screenings of

soccer matches, like during the World Cup last June. Some mosques have also offered tattoo-removal services at half the market price. Even language barriers are being tackled, to allow people to learn religion in a language they are comfortable with. Other than Malay, which has been the predominant language of religious instruction here, English and, as recently as last year, Tamil has been offered. Mr Aftab told The New Paper last

year that he very nearly got sucked into a radical thread of thinking. He was taught by an imam (mosque leader) in Bristol, UK, who spoke only Punjabi. Unable to pick up the language and because most books on Islam at that time were imported from the Middle East, he then joined a religious group which had material in English. But the youths from the group were full of anger. He grew uncomfortable and left the group, and started reading widely about Islam. Mr Aftab also cautioned against reading from one Internet source and from people he termed "Google religious teachers".

SPECIAL REPORT:

The New Paper team visits the root of terror in the Middle East