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COUNTER-IDEOLOGY

Jihad: Let's go back to intellectual roots

THE anti-terrorism war has entered a new phase, shifting from an exclusively military approach to one that deals with the underlying ideology. Just as the security-oriented approach required rigorous analysis, the counter-ideology strategy needs an understanding of the thinking systems of extremists and the religious justification of their actions.

Branding the actions of extremists as un-Islamic and unrepresentative of Islam may be acceptable to the general public. However, framing the argument in that way to extremists or their sympathisers would only lead them to believe the speaker is severely lacking in intellectual seriousness.

The critical point that those involved in counter-ideology work should remember is that Al-Qaeda, its hardcore sympathisers as well as the supporters of extremism in general, are not stupid or uneducated fanatics. They are people who are committed to an idea – which they believe represents the only true understanding of the world and their faith.

The only way to challenge such a view would be to have a sound, rational counter-argument.

Take Imam Samudra, for example, one of the executed Bali bombers, who wrote a book justifying his violent extremism from a religious perspective as he understood it. His ideas can be quickly dismissed, but that would ignore the years of study that led him to his conclusions. He tried to intellectually justify his actions; one should do the same in challenging them.

Extremist arguments are narrow and faulty but time and effort have been spent in shaping them. Simply dismissing them by saying “this is halal and that is haram” (permissible and not permissible, respectively, in Islam) is counterproductive. Contextual knowledge can be acquired only through a firm grounding in past and current studies of Islam.

The above consideration is important as out-of-context information can lead to misunderstanding. This, in essence, is a key cause of self-radicalisation. A lay person has access to information, intercepts it in a way that is not grounded in wider scholarship and, over time, comes to certain conclusions. This situation

needs to be addressed by scholars and community leaders with the proper knowledge.

So how is rigour to be ensured? The following are some pointers that may function as indicators.

Consider the doctrine of jihad. In countering the ideology of religiously motivated extremists, it is best to avoid generalisation. For example, to brand all who believe in jihad as violent extremists is in itself extreme. This is because the jihad ob-

ligation is clearly mentioned in the Quran and the Prophetic Tradition. Therefore, by extension, all Muslims believe in the obligation of jihad.

The issue, in fact, is not so-much one of jihad obligation but of how jihad

should be interpreted. The obligation of jihad is for self-defence only and not to wage war against ‘infidels’. The issue, thus, is about how jihad should be carried out – that is, by adhering to the established rules of jihad and international conventions. International law with regard to war does not contradict the law of jihad as both aim to contain the dangers of large-scale conflict.

It can be seen, thus, that to erase jihad from the Muslim dictionary would be impossible.

To try to persuade people that jihad should be practised only spiritually would betray the tradition and legacy of Islam. To say that jihad has many connotations would also not be sufficiently rigorous.

Some have gone to the extent of denying the non-spiritual connotations of the doctrine of jihad. This is problematic as throughout Islamic history, especially in the field of jurisprudence, jihad was never restricted to one connotation.

The term “jihad” is probably the most misunderstood word in the world today. Acknowledging all aspects of the term and the context in which various understandings emerged would help challenge the extremists. It would also avoid the charge that the scholar is taking sides and trying to shape the understanding of jihad to fit a political agenda.

Among other considerations in counter-ideology work, we would emphasise:

One: One should never lie, shade the truth or manipulate information to gain political advantage. One should not stoop to the level of the extremists in order to defeat them.

Two: Intellectual rigour demands that arguments should have a strong theological foundation based on principles found in the Quran, the Prophetic Tradition and valid independent reasoning known as *ijtihad*.

Three: One should focus on arguments instead of character assassination. The rich intellectual tradition of Islam is more than capable of defeating extremist ideas without resorting to personal attacks.

Without intellectual rigour, those seeking to refute extremism will only lose their own credibility and this will strengthen the rhetoric of the radicals.

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