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FRIDAY MATTERS

Muslim world needs moral and intellectual leadership

By Mohamed Ali

COUNTERING Islamic radicalism has been the main focus of global counter-terrorism efforts in recent years.

These have yielded some success. But terrorists have adjusted their strategies.

Although operational capabilities have been weakened, groups like the Al-Qaeda have shifted to 'franchising' their violent ideologies to like-minded groups and individuals - with the Internet increasingly becoming their main media.

The recent arrest of former lawyer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader shows that Singapore is not immune to the threat of radicalisation via the Internet.

This incident marks an important shift in the struggle against terrorism and radicalism here.

This is because from an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are harder to detect and monitor compared to those who belong to a group.

And it is equally challenging, if not impossible, to control activities on the Internet effectively.

More importantly, it illustrates that now, more than ever, we need to target the extremist ideology at its innermost core. The battle is in the realm of the hearts and minds, not merely in the use of guns and through legislation.

The first question we need to ask is: What drives the heart of Islamic radicalism?

Radicalism is the internalisation of a set of beliefs, including a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad as the paramount test of one's conviction.

In Abdul Basheer's case, his radicalisation was sparked by a desire to become a better, practising Muslim.

This, incidentally, was also the case with many Jemaah Islamiah (JI) members who, when interviewed, considered religion as their top-most priority - more crucial than developing themselves socially or economically.

What they were saying was that in an increasingly secularised world, their search for excellence went beyond material concerns. It was, in fact, equated with a search for spiritual meaning. It was to fill this spiritual void that they sought to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam.

Abdul Basheer is not alone in this. In fact, he is a part of a global phenomenon of Islamic resurgence today.

One of the main effects of globalisation is that some individuals increasingly find it difficult to cope with rapid changes without losing their inner sense of security and identity.

This happens across many societies, not just among Muslims.

Yet, one of the options many Muslims take to preserve their identity and values is to uphold the values and identity offered by Islamic teachings.

Unfortunately, many today, including Abdul Basheer and the JI members, are not equipped with proper knowledge to adapt true Islamic teachings to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

This is the result of a deepening intellectual and moral crisis in the Muslim leadership across many Muslim societies.

'Dogmatic literalists', or fundamentalists, who stand in contrast to modernist scholars, contribute to the deepening crisis today.

They reject the diversity of views, broad thinking and varying levels of rational discourse - and insist instead on a world view based on a narrowly defined traditionalist past, doctrinal conformity and uniformity of thought.

The crisis has led to a serious depletion of scholars and thinkers who can provide intelligent guidance to lead the Muslims through the challenges arising from globalisation.

One consequence of this is the emergence of a group of people who have adopted rigid, radical views with violent tendencies in a bid to withstand the pressures of secularisation and globalisation.

The problem of radicalism is, first and foremost, that it is a distortion of the true teachings and spirit of Islam - which promotes generosity, forbearance and gentleness.

Efforts must not be spared to uphold its proper teachings, and put right concepts that are misunderstood.

Muslim scholars and thinkers have a responsibility to correct perceptions of Islam through their publications, speeches and via the Internet.

It is worth noting that in the aftermath of 9-11, we were inundated by books on Islamic terrorism and extremism to meet the sudden demand to learn about Islam.

Unfortunately, many of these books were written largely - though there were exceptions - by non-Muslims.

It is imperative that Muslim scholars and thinkers come forward to portray the authentic Islam, and generate mutual understanding.

There must also be a parallel effort to revive the Islamic intellectual traditions in which knowledge is pursued in accordance with the correct code of conduct or adab prescribed by Islam.

One of the more important criteria is that it must be sought from a credible teacher, who is chosen not only because of his knowledge, but also for his good moral conduct.

Religious organisations and mosques also need to set aside time and find opportunities to cater to the

different needs of the community.

And it is important to catch young Muslims while they are still in school so they get a good foundation in the religion. What is clear is that a large number of radicals have shallow knowledge of the religion, having failed to pursue religious knowledge in a proper and consistent manner.

The public must also be encouraged to attend intellectual discourses and debates and be weaned off from a diet of talks and activities that have high entertainment value but low knowledge-content.

In addition to upgrading knowledge, Muslims must be equipped with creative and critical thinking skills. This is important in the face of religious impostors operating in the real and virtual world.

In the short term, we must provide a platform for Muslims to air their grievances or channel their energies and other forms of help to their Muslim brethren who are in difficulties abroad, in a legitimate and peaceful manner.

For example, just as we have performed mass prayers for those who died in the Sept11, 2001 atrocities, perhaps the same can be done for the victims of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the same time, dialogues should not be confined to those among different faiths. There must also be dialogues that provide a ear to the voices of dissent within Islam.

Self-radicalisation is just one of the many routes terrorists have adopted to achieve their aims. And as long as technology progresses, the terrorists will become more advanced and sophisticated too.

Given their resilience, we have no choice but to strike at the root of the problem if we are to achieve success.

The root of the problem, as I see it, lies in the lack of intellectual and moral leadership in the Muslim world. And any efforts to recast the direction of Muslim thought and action must arise from within Islam itself.

**The writer is a research analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He is also with the Religious Rehabilitation Group, a group of religious teachers who counsel JI detainees.**

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## **WANTED: GUIDANCE FROM WITHIN**

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