

New worry: Homemade extremists

They turn to the Web for religious advice, but fall prey to radical views

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HE IS an idealistic Singaporean youth in search of a "pure" form of Islam.

He turns to the Internet for answers — and along the way stumbles onto websites and videos, some of them slickly packaged with MTV-style editing, that detail Muslims' sufferings in hotspots such as Iraq and the West Bank.

His anger stoked, his worldview becomes increasingly skewed as he links up with others in cyberspace who share his sentiments. Before long, he becomes convinced that he must support the cause of violent jihad, or holy war — and a full-fledged "DIY extremist" is born.

In the immediate aftermath of 911 the main threat was from established terrorist networks — such as Al Qaeda and its allies, including the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

Now, intelligence services around the world, including those in Singapore, are increasingly concerned with the dangers of "self-radicalisation".

The urgency of the issue was underlined by Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng in March. He revealed in Parliament that, according to investigations by the Internal Security Department (ISD), some radical Muslim youths were found to be linking up with like-minded people and making contact with extremists from the Middle East involved in terrorist recruitment and financing — all over the Internet.

And as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted in his speech at the 6th International Institute of Strategic Studies' Asia Security Conference on Friday, the complex situation in the Middle East will not be resolved any time soon. "Continued deadlock and lack of progress will fuel growing frustration and extremism," he said.

Ironically, the process of self-radicalisation usually begins with the best of intentions on the individual's part.

Mr Syed Hassan Alsagoff would testify to that. He and many of his friends turned to the Internet in their quest for religious knowledge and spiritual well-being.

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Said the 26-year-old shipping executive, who volunteers at the Muslim Converts Association: "Because of time constraints, many are unable to go for religious classes and get their knowledge the traditional way, of meeting teachers face-to-face."

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Said Mr Ridzuan Wu, 56, who chairs the Centre for Islamic Contemporary Studies: "In the era of open access to information, the idea of religious knowledge being regulated in a class is wishful thinking."

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New wave of cyber-extremism

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While the strong-arm tactics used to dismantle the Al Qaeda have seen some success, they have paradoxically spawned a patchwork of homegrown cells or "lone wolves" — as Belgian terrorist expert Rik Coolsaet put it — heralding a new-age terrorism.

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And this new breed of terrorists turns to the Internet for bomb recipes, how-to videos and even moral support to carry on their mission — or what is now known as "Google terror". The term was coined by British intelligence expert Dr Shane Brighton after investigations into the London bomb blasts in July 2005 revealed the extent of the terrorists' reliance on the Net.

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As one of the most wired countries in the world, with seven in 10 households having access to the Internet, the threat of self-radicalisation in Singapore looms large. While in European countries, self-taught extremists tend to emerge from disenfranchised communities, in Singapore, the cases that have come to the Ministry of Home Affairs' attention involved "students and young working adults", a spokesman told Today.

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"These individuals were attracted to terrorist and radical ideas purveyed in the mass media, particularly over the Internet. They had expressed sympathy with the cause of extremists to varying degrees," he added.

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Since 911, Singapore's counter-terrorism efforts have led to a crackdown on the JI terror group, thwarting a bomb plot on Yishun MRT station in the process.

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To date, there are no known active extremist cells here, said Dr Rohan Gunaratna, a terrorist expert with the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). But this also means that radicalised youth are "increasingly looking for ideologues and groups outside Singapore, as well as visiting extremist websites", he added.

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Unlike organised extremist groups, which have bases, financial structures and a leadership who could be identified, self-radicalisation is harder to detect.

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In Singapore, Today understands that so far, such cases have surfaced only when family members, school teachers or close friends of would-be extremists detected behavioural changes — such as displaying extraordinary angst and expressing deep-seated radical

world views — and alerted the authorities, who then moved in to investigate and referred the individual for counselling by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis).

The Government estimates that there are about 6,000 websites — and counting — espousing radical ideologies, with most of them based overseas.

Some of the hardline websites engage in heavy philosophical and religious discussions and allow users to download lectures, while others disseminate texts written by slain Al Qaeda fighters or terrorists who are serving time in jail.

Combining religious songs and war images in conflict areas, videos aimed at drumming up support for violent jihad are also making their rounds on the Internet.

And even more worrying for the authorities, the extremists are increasingly camouflaging their message under slick packaging, complete with rap music and MTV-style editing. Radical websites masquerading as innocuous blogs are also sprouting on the Internet.

One such blog is maintained by a man who described himself as a Muslim living in Britain with his family.

Writing in English, the blogger offers his own interpretations of passages from the Quran. His most recent post derides Muslims who live happily in the West and who are unsympathetic to the sufferings of those in Afghanistan and Iraq.

From his interaction with radicalised youth who were undergoing counselling, Ustaz Mohamed Ali, a counsellor with the Religious Rehabilitation Group, said these youths found the websites "very fascinating".

Said Ustaz Mohamed, who is also a research analyst at RSIS: "Because of the youths' lack of knowledge of the religion and their own grievances and feelings, they can be susceptible to radical ideologies."

While acknowledging the Muslims' plight in some parts of the world, he said: "We need to educate the youths that it is not necessary for them to go and fight."

Bracing for the online ideological war

Worldwide, especially in Europe, intelligence officers are awakening to the threat of self-radicalisation. For instance, after its intelligence department uncovered 12-year-olds surfing extremist websites and developing radically anti-Western ideas, the Netherlands reportedly adopted a targeted approach by drawing up profiles of those whom they believe are particularly susceptible to self-radicalisation.

The British government, in turn, frames the issue in terms of income disparity and sees increasing economic opportunities for Muslims as a possible solution. Australian

authorities have introduced legislation to curb the rise of homegrown extremism, including preventive detention.

In Singapore, the Government's efforts to counter extremism centre around the belief that the Muslim community is best placed to guard itself against deviant ideologies.

According to Ustaz Mohamed, there are 70 mosques in Singapore that serve the Muslim community here, which numbers about 500,000.

Ustaz Mohamed said: "Not every Muslim child goes to Islamic school. What we can do is to use these mosques as the platform to reach out to those who don't undergo mainstream Islamic education."

Established Muslim organisations have put in place numerous programmes, including the latest initiative by Muis to forge a "Singapore Muslim Identity". Religious leaders have also published articles and books to counter radical ideologies. For their part, Muslim organisations have partnered secular bodies, such as schools, to reach out to youths outside the mainstream religious networks.

For instance, in January, voluntary welfare organisation Taman Bacaan organised a convention on terrorism and extremist ideology that was attended by some 300 Muslim and non-Muslim youths. A month later, a group of Malay students from the Malay Literary, Dramatic and Debating Society at National Junior College initiated a dialogue with officers from the Internal Security Department and members of the Religious Rehabilitation Group.

Speaking at the Taman Bacaan convention, MP Mohd Zaqy called on the youths to practise self-policing on the Internet by setting up a network to identify and blacklist offensive websites with the help of religious experts.

However, he acknowledged that such a system could "unintentionally draw more attention" to these websites.

For Taman Bacaan president Abdul Halim Kader, "the best way to insulate our youth against radicalisation and extremism must be through upgrading their knowledge and understanding of our religion".

Since last October, Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan, another research analyst with RSIS, has been maintaining a blog to refute extremist ideology.

Pointing out that Ustaz Haniff's blog is possibly the only one that has been set up in South-east Asia by a Muslim cleric to counter extremism, Ustaz Mohamed said that Muslim leaders in Singapore are working to develop more such websites. According to Dr Gunaratna, it is crucial to take the fight right to its source, since those who are most at risk of radicalisation "live in their own virtual world".

He said: "The solution to this is for Muslim community leaders and religious elites to dominate not only the real world, but the virtual world."

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And given that Internet users tend to reinforce their existing perspectives, the counter-extremism websites have to be thoughtfully constructed to attract the very same people who would be lured by radical ideologies, he added. For example, the websites should have sermons from former violent jihadists who had recanted.

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Indeed, Ustaz Mohamed said that Muslim leaders in the region are now realising the impact of self-radicalisation and the importance of using the Internet to respond against it.

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Or as Mr Wu put it: "The battle of minds is out there. If you are not battling with the other websites, you lose."