

IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM

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The Ideological Battle

Terrorism as an act of violence has been committed by people from all religious and political backgrounds. Several groups who called themselves Jews, Christians or Muslims, have used terrorism to force their agenda, issues or beliefs. None of these groups represent the true religion of the Jews or the Christians as much as these terrorists represent Islam.

Attacks on the civilians and the least expecting people around the world by these groups is the kind of strife that cannot be justified by any religion or under any cause and is strongly condemned in all religions including Islam as clarified by the words of God in the Quran and the Final Testament. Thousands of women, children and men, young and old have been killed in attempts to achieve or hold on to special interests whether political, social or "religious".

Terrorism occurs when ideological motivation meets with operational capability. The way in which a terrorist group shapes its radical worldview and disseminates it to audiences worldwide plays an important role in the public interface between the group and its target audience. The war on terror is ought to be called the ideological battle against radical extremists who happen to use terror as a weapon to disrupt the conscience of the free and peaceful world.

Counter Terrorism Approaches

An effective multi-pronged approach is needed for us to combat terrorism in the long run. Technically, counter terrorism can be divided into 2 approaches, namely Operational and Strategic. Operational Counter Terrorism aims at reducing the immediate threat by targeting the terrorist cells and disrupting their attack plans. On the other hand, Strategic Counter Terrorism aims at changing the mindset and to create a hostile environment for the terrorists. In other words, we can say that it aims at changing the hearts and minds of the terrorists

Why Ideology is Important for Terrorists?

Let us look at the significant role that ideology plays for terrorists' organizations like *Al-Qaeda* and *Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)* in Southeast Asia. Firstly, ideology is the organizing principle of the terrorist organizations. It provides a motive and framework for their actions. Secondly, as demonstrated by the World Trade

Centre, Bali 1 and 2, Marriott and Australian embassy bombings, it provides justification for their acts of violence. Thirdly, ideology is a language of mass mobilization. Calling for jihad in the name of Islamic duty has enabled Al-Qaeda and JI to continuously indoctrinate and recruit terrorist members. Fourthly, in the guise of a social program, ideology can generate Muslim public support whether as supporters who provide financial, logistical assistance or as sympathizers who do not morally condone these acts. Finally, over time, the ideology will further radicalize Muslim communities by indoctrinating them into a culture of violence and radical interpretations of Islam.

Why Ideological Response?

Given the unique challenges posed by religiously-motivated terrorism, effective counter-terrorism measures demands a multi-pronged approach. In particular, we need to focus our deterrence efforts on battling the ideological and social framework of radical Islam for four main reasons:

Firstly, counter ideology will provide alternative solutions to terrorist propagating violence. Given the alienated and uncompromising worldview of the terrorists, they cannot be bought by political concessions, amnesties or other personal incentives. The best chances for success is to engage them in dialogue, show them where they have gone astray and provide them with better alternatives to their violent acts.

Secondly, it is important to note that geopolitical battle rather than ideological battle will result in the loss of human lives, damage to property and vital installations and create a greater sense of fear and insecurity. In fact, engaging in physical battle may create the opposite effect desired; that the terrorists may have reason to validate their actions and in turn increase their pool of recruits, supporters and sympathizers. Thirdly, counter ideological work will prevent further radicalization of Muslim communities.

And finally, it is crucial for us to immunise especially the Muslim youth from being indoctrinated into a culture of violence, hence preventing new generation of terrorists from being recruited

Ideological Response. How?

To develop a viable blueprint for an ideological response, we must factor in the multifaceted, global threat of religiously motivated terrorism.

In the short term, we need to pre-empt and prevent the propagation of terrorist messages by obstructing its channel of transmission, like the websites and sales of books. In the longer term, it is important for us to target the terrorist recruitment

mechanism. This can be done by marginalizing the Islamic radicals, promoting the ideological tenets of traditional Islam and strengthening the bonds between Muslim communities and the state

We also need to accumulate sufficient knowledge and expertise in the terrorist ideology before we can develop an effective counter-ideology programme. Towards this end, there is a need to accelerate academic research, particularly to study the various Islamic concepts that have been misinterpreted by the extremists and terrorists. Concepts like Jihad and Islamic State, for instance, need to be studied and understood correctly and practiced contextually.

The spread of the religious ideology cannot be halted without the participation of Muslim communities. In particular, the Ulamas or Muslim religious scholars are the only people who can steer the efforts of counter ideological work. Active contributions from religious scholars and practicing Muslims are crucial as they follow incentives to speak out against radicals, define and defend their own religion

Countering the threat through education can be implemented by engaging the channels of Islamic intellectual activity and the traditional routes for knowledge transmission. As the terrorists' ideologues are often disguised as religious teachers/leaders, there is also a need for a watchdog body to filter out deviant teachers and deviant teachings. In this case, the introduction of an Asatizah Recognition Scheme by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore late last year is a step in the right direction as a committee of prominent Islamic scholars will act to control the access to religious status and limit the number and quality of individuals competent to provide religious instructions.

Ideological Response. Who?

Firstly, it is important to engage religious deviants in dialogue or counseling sessions in an attempt to bring them to correct Islamic teachings and to instill into them genuine feelings of repentance and remorsefulness.

Secondly, it is equally crucial to extend the counseling services to the families of religious deviants to break the cycle of violence as direct families members are highly exposed to the ideology. As in the case of Singapore, the welfare of the detainees and their families are taken care of for e.g. looking into the children's education needs, financial assistance while their father are being detained and assisting the detainees to secure jobs once he is released.

Finally, the general public should also be targeted in order to create awareness within the community of the danger of these ideologies. One way of doing this is

through public talks on deviant ideology, hence preventing them from becoming susceptible to the terrorists ideology.

Progress in Counter Ideological Work

In Yemen, the ancestral home of Osama, those suspected as having links with al-Qaeda or sympathizers were engaged in regular religious dialogue sessions by a committee represented by prominent Yemeni Islamic scholars. Other efforts to help them reintegrate into society include providing jobs for them. As of June last year, the committee claimed a 90% success rate, with the recommendation of the release of 350 out of the 400 detained with whom they have had four rounds of dialogue.

In Indonesia, after privately watching videos showing Bali bombers recordings before blowing themselves up, Indonesia's scholars decided to form a task force to counter extremist ideologies in the country. The gathering included members of the nation's highest Islamic authority; the Indonesian Ulama (scholars) Council, Muhammadiyah movement and Nahdlatul Ulama who count on some 40 million members.

Indonesian government has also been requested to ban books that propagate terror like books written by Imam Samudra and Amrozi, two of the three 2002 Bali bombers. Mainstream scholars are also urged to write books to counter these books.

In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group or the RRG has played a very important role in rehabilitating the JI detainees and their families. While these counselling sessions are still ongoing, RRG has embarked on to the next phase, which is the public education phase. This is crucial to immunize the public especially the younger generations from JI's deviant ideology, thus cutting off JI's supply of new recruits in the longer term.

Stay Vigilant. Be Resilience

The terrorist network may have been crippled but terrorist will continue to present a long-term security threat to countries in this region. Terrorist resilience can be partly contributed by their religious ideology; hence an effective counter terrorism strategy should not only disrupt the terrorists' base but also its ideology and appeal.

As an example, the emergence of new groups and factions like Tanzim Qaidatul Jihad headed by Noordin Mohd Top indicates that al-Qaeda's ideology still persists in the region in spite of efforts to eradicate the bases, structural organization and support system for the group.

We should also note that while the current crop of terrorist leaders can be killed, captured or even rehabilitated, the seeds have already been planted for the next generation. Hence, in the longer term, counter-ideological responses are crucial to disrupt the recruitment and regeneration cycle. The younger generation is particularly vulnerable, as it has been shown that these terrorist groups have been able to recruit young people for their suicide bombings.
