

## **RESPONDING TO TERROR IDEOLOGY ON THE INTERNET: THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE**

**By Ustaz Mohamed Bin Ali\***

Islam is an established religion with more than a billion peace-loving adherents round the globe. Unfortunately, this peace – loving Muslim community has been tainted by those who advocate violence and terrorism under the banner of Islam. By espousing an extremist ideology that is craftily based on a rigid and distorted understanding of Islam, this group is continuously attracting innocent adherents. Curbing their progress is made even more challenging as they increasingly make the internet a crucial part of their armory. If this is left unchecked, Muslim youths will become increasingly vulnerable to the radical ideologies that are fast spreading on the internet. The use of the internet as a tool for extremist propaganda further highlights the need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to international terrorism and the widespread of radical Islamism.

### **The Internet and the Spread of Extreme Views**

The internet is a cheap, convenient yet powerful gateway to access a vast reservoir of information, knowledge and entertainment every moment of every day. The use of the internet has been vital, even indispensable in the life of the international community today. Unfortunately, the internet has also empowered technology-savvy terror networks and extremist groups to expand their reach beyond national borders by enabling wide distribution of a compelling message to their targeted audiences, especially the younger generation. For example, terrorist group like al-Qaeda has made massive use of the internet to communicate and propagandize. These web sites show terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, as well as the execution of foreigners, in an attempt to enthuse other young Muslim men to join the cause and take up arms.

The ability to generate interest and action to the terrorist cause through extremist propaganda on the internet has already been proven many times in the past. For example, the train bombings in Madrid of March 2004 were committed by terrorists from North Africa who, though not directly linked to Al-Qaeda, shared its ideology.

In the UK, Shabir Hussain, the imam of a mosque near one of the homes stormed by anti-terror police, believes that the dangerous ideology of radical Islam is coming not from a small number of imams sowing anti-western sentiment at secret meetings, but from the Internet. *"The children are not learning from the mosques, not learning from the parents,"* he said. *"Young kids, they see the news and see the Internet. They think, 'something's happening in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Palestine, in Kashmir, and Muslims are oppressed everywhere and some injustice is happening in the world.'"*

### **Self-Radicalization**

As a tool of propaganda to promote and enforce a point of view, the Internet is also seen, to a certain extent, an agent for the process of self-radicalization whereby individuals are believed to be radicalized solely through the Internet, without having any contact or

affiliation with any terrorist or extremist group. From an intelligence perspective, self-radicalised individuals are harder to monitor and detect compared to those who belong to a group. Furthermore, it is equally challenging, if not impossible, to control the 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 Singapore Experience**

The arrest of former lawyer Abdul Basheer early this year 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.

At the strategic level, from the beginning, the Singapore has recognized the importance of ideological response as an integral part of the counter-terrorism measures against Al-Qaeda and JI. In addition, the government was of the view that the primary responsibility of combating Al-Qaeda and JI's ideologies should fall squarely on the shoulders of the Muslim community. Hence, after the arrest of JI members in December 2001, the Singapore government has sought the cooperation of the Muslim community to be involved in fighting terrorism and extremism. A local group of Singaporean Muslim scholars has taken up the task of forming the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) whose primary aim is to rehabilitate and reform the thinking of the JI detainees. Apart from rehabilitating the JI detainees, the RRG has, since 2005, extended the religious counseling to the families of JI detainees.

### *Islamic Religious Council of Singapore*

As the ultimate religious body looking into the affairs of the Muslim community in Singapore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), has taken several steps to ensure that correct and proper Islamic teachings are being propagated to the Muslim community in Singapore. As more people are using the web as a source of reference in their religious understanding, MUIS has developed several useful websites ([www.iask.com.sg](http://www.iask.com.sg), [www.invoke.sg](http://www.invoke.sg), [www.radical.mosque.sg](http://www.radical.mosque.sg)) to provide a correct and relevant understanding of Islam and its practices. These websites which primarily aim the internet savvy young generation hope to provide tips, guide and information to tell radical and extreme ideologies apart and to live a harmonious and progressive religious life.

### *Religious Rehabilitation Group*

At the organizational level, the RRG has launched its official website ([www.rrg.sg](http://www.rrg.sg)) to counter radical ideologies which are spreading widely in the cyberspace. Apart from countering radical ideologies and promoting the peaceful message of Islam, the website also aims to attract web-savvy, vulnerable youths who may be taken in by false doctrines of extremists. The website contains information about RRG, its formation and members, articles on debunking extremism, counter-ideological responses, recommended books on

terrorism and counter terrorism. Audio and video recording of several talks organized by RRG are also made available in the website.

### *Individual Efforts*

Looking at the urgency to counter radical views that is spreading widely in the cyberspace, several commendable initiatives have been undertaken by the Muslim community to counter the phenomenon. At the individual level, Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan who is an Associate Research Fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies has developed a blog to refute extremist ideology. The blog [www.counterideology.multiply.com](http://www.counterideology.multiply.com) seeks to offer responses towards radical ideology that underlies Muslim perpetrated terrorism, share perspectives on how counter-ideology can be executed, and provide relevant materials on Islam's position on jihad, terrorism, extremism and other related issues.

### **Conclusion**

As in many open, globalized societies, Singapore continue to be exposed to potential sources of radicalization through a variety of human and institutional catalysts, such as formal and informal religious institutions and increasingly within university settings and youth groups. The Internet plays a significant role in this process as it creates a dynamic environment characterized by a confluence of political, religious, racial, and cultural flashpoints. This environment is being exploited by a small, yet influential number of radical actors to serve their evil purposes.

Singapore's efforts to counter extremism on the Internet are just at the beginning. Cooperation with governments in the region and internationally is crucial to keep abreast of the latest developments and radicalization trends. Regulation of the internet through legislation should be carried out but we must realize the limit of this approach alone. One of the most important lessons that can be learnt from the Singapore experience is that active and continuous engagement with the Muslim community is vital in the fight against extremism. In this respect, more voices of moderation need to be heard on the Internet, to drown the voices from the extremist front. This means that more counter extremist websites and counter-blogs need to be created.

Finally, it must be said that though the Internet is to a certain degree, responsible for the radicalization process, ultimately it is the lack of critical thinking skills that has enabled many to fall prey to the extremists' call. This is something that we must urgently address and there is no better way than through education, re-education and engagement. This involves equipping our youths with the ability to think and question critically. It also involves getting the religious teachers and leaders to start a dialogue with the youth who are immersed in the net culture.

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