

Assessing Strategies in Counter-Ideological Work and Practical Solutions to Radicalization in the Community

Introduction

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. Using terrorist propaganda, a group can successfully radicalize and indoctrinate public into terrorist sympathizers, mobilize terrorist supporters, and recruit terrorist members.

To counter terrorism effectively, a multi-pronged approach is needed. Any effective blueprint for an ideological response to the “war on terrorism” should conceptualize counter terrorism not only as a military “shooting war” or law enforcement operation, but as a “war of ideas” as well. Measures to disrupt and degrade a terrorist group’s military and economic infrastructure should be supplemented with measures targeting the terrorist group’s political apparatus. If left unchecked, this apparatus will continue to harvest political support, transform it into logistical assistance, and eventually generate a new pool of terrorist recruits.

Process of Radicalization

Radicalization entails "the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal (and political) change."¹

Yet, there is no single pathway or causative agent that is responsible for the radicalization process. In a study by US Homeland Security Department of Intelligence and Analysis, it was found that the radicalization dynamic varies across ideological and ethno-religious spectrums, different geographic regions, and socio-economic conditions. Thus, individuals and groups can be radicalized or "de-radicalized" due to a variety of factors.²

Bearing that in mind, it is therefore of utmost importance to study and understand the perpetrating cause of radicalization within the particular community in question before we can even begin to hope to provide an antidote to it.

For instance, in Singapore, the arrest of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees in 2001 revealed a shifting profile of the radicals. Contrary to the previous picture of extremists as poor, lowly-educated individuals on the fringe of society, many of these detainees were found to be average Singaporeans, with good educational background and occupations. What drew them to JI was their desire to deepen their knowledge on Islam

¹ Charles E Allen, *Threat of Islamic radicalization to the Homeland*, <http://www.sofir.org/sarchives/005978.php> (13 May 2007)

² Ibid

and to alleviate their dilemmas of living in a secular setting while desiring to be good, practicing Muslims.³

Unfortunately, they fell into the JI trap and were radicalized through a combination of charismatic leadership, fallacious ideology and peer pressure dynamics and their own psychological disposition. 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.

Solutions to the Problems

Ascertaining Objectives and Identifying Target Groups

Before embarking on the ideological response programme, it is important to ascertain the objectives and also identifying the target groups. Important objectives for ideological response work should be to :-

- immunize general Muslims from extremist ideology,
- persuade less fanatic members of terrorist groups to abandon the ideology,
- create doubt and dissension within terrorist organisation,
- rehabilitate detained terrorist members, and
- to minimise non-Muslims' anxiety and suspicion by presenting alternatives to terrorist ideology .

It is important to note that the primary target group of the ideological response is not the terrorists but the majority of Muslims. The aim is to provide them with a correct understanding of the religion that is relevant to the contemporary context and current priorities, so that they will not be easily influenced by the terrorists' propaganda. The majority Muslims should be "immunised" against the viral threat of extremist ideologies that are freely disseminated through the Internet.

It might be impossible to persuade any fanatic hardcore members of Muslim terrorist groups to give up their ideology. However, in the battle for the hearts and minds, the majority of Muslims, can be convinced to desist Al-Qaeda's ideology and to defuse any motivation to support it. Terrorist groups can only persist through popular support. Conversely, such support also "plays a fundamental role in the group's decline."

Another important target group, which is usually overlooked in counter-ideological work, are the non-Muslims at large. The aim is to provide them with alternative perspectives to

³ Ministry of HomeAffairs ,*Singapore White Paper, The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, 7 January 2003, p15

terrorist ideas that hopefully will reduce their anxiety, concern and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims. In a multi-racial and multi-religious country, this is an important aspect of social harmony, which counter-terrorism strategy needs to preserve and protect. Often, terrorism also aims to destabilize a society or a country. It may be a direct or indirect objective because instability will make counter-terrorism operation more complicated and difficult.

In short, there are three broad targets audience for counter-ideological effort. They are

- members of terrorist organizations and their sympathizers,
- general Muslims, and
- non-Muslims at large

Important Partners in Counter Ideology

1- Ulama (Religious Scholars)

The proposed “theological and juristic approach” as the primary approach for the “third way” will not be effective without the involvement of the *ulama*. Scholars who are not trained in this field still have a role to play in counter-ideological work, but they may not have the know-how and religious legitimacy to respond to the theological and juristic arguments of the extremists.

Due to the overlapping grievances of general Muslims and the extremists, or the fact that the extremists are trying to manipulate Muslims grievances for their cause, one can often find a voice or view of a Muslim scholar which overlaps with those of the extremists, especially in criticizing the West, and in addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict and the establishment of an Islamic state.

In this respect, it is important to ensure a holistic approach in assessing such scholars. It is not prudent to deny such scholars’ roles in combating extremism and terrorism in society just because of a few views that one finds disagreeable.

2- The Moderate Muslim Leaders

While the broad moderate-radical categorisation is a useful means of essentialising differences of tendencies within Muslims leaders and scholars, one should note that making clear distinction between the “moderate” and the “radical” is difficult because in reality there is no such neat dichotomy. Community and political leaders all over the world behave in ways that defy such easy categorization. On certain issues, Muslim scholars can be “moderate” and “progressive” but on others they can be Islamist or sectarian. Thus, a more subtle or nuanced approach is needed when characterising Muslim scholars and Islamic groups.

3- The Madrasah

Madrasahs should also be made an important partner in this effort, rather than be treated generally as a threat. It is this institution that schooled many moderate Muslim scholars and thinkers.

Usually, *madrasahs* occupy a strategic position because they are the main provider of the right foundation for students keen on learning the traditions and theology of mainstream Islam, which are important ballasts in combating extremist ideology. They also potentially function as the bastion for the preservation of mainstream Islam, which is the moderate and pragmatic strain observed by general Muslims.

The *madrasah* and the *ulama* are important conveyors of the message of Islam – peace and compassion. But this can only be achieved if their potential role is recognized by governments. A healthier relationship between the *madrasahs*, *ulama* and the government is crucial in the ideological struggle against extreme militancy.

Preventing Radicalization by Providing a Counterweight in the Community

This aspect which focuses on the concept of ‘prevention is better than cure’ is the more critical and expectedly more effective than efforts to ‘de-radicalize’ particularly the hard core radicals.

Individual/Family Level

- Upgrade the level of true Islamic knowledge in the family.
- Cultivate individual awareness of the problems associated with extremism and violence.
- Educate parents on how to guide and monitor the activities of their children.
- Build up a network of inter-family connections to provide a broader safety net for the children.

Community Level

- Enhance community-based initiatives to propagate the true message of Islam and promote inter-religious harmony.
- Public support of these community-based initiatives to build their resources and capabilities.
- Streamline efforts by various groups to work effectively and in sync with each other.
- Build up good Islamic scholarship and leadership to address the problems associated with practicing Islam in a fast-changing world. Part of the reason is the Islamic intellectual crisis that is currently facing the Muslims the world over, such that the community at large is left to grapple by themselves issues pertaining to the challenges of globalization and the perceived erosion of the Muslim identity with it.

- The efforts to reach the youths are a great initiative but the net has to be cast wider.

Government Level

- Build up meaningful models of tolerance in a multi-cultural setting i.e. tolerance as a two way street in which both the majority and minority groups work towards a win-win situation and not a tolerance model in which only the minority is expected to adjust and tolerate the majority while the majority spares no effort to accommodate the unique needs of the minority which in no way harms the integration of the society per se.
- Handle relations with other countries in a sensitive and fair manner, such that no one group in the society feels that they have been unfairly treated, e.g. while being on good terms with the United States or Israel, Singapore should also be morally strong enough to criticize/condemn their actions when necessary.

Counter Existing Radicalization

Community Level

- There is insufficient dialogue between those with differing opinions within the Muslim community. More effort have to be made to engage in genuine dialogues sessions, not monologues where people have the chance to be heard and corrected if necessary. This will also sharpen the focus on what and where the real problem of the community lies.
- Efforts to rehabilitate the radicals should not be confined to those who are detained but the community should also be on the lookout for individuals that may not be detained but shows inclination or tendency towards a more rigid or merciless interpretation of Islam.

Government Level

- The Singapore government initiative of not merely locking up the JI detainees but to provide avenues to persuade them to change their radical orientation is a commendable one.
- All government efforts to eradicate the radical acts of the few should never compromise the trust and loyalty of the many moderate Muslims.
- Knowledge of the true Islam is indispensable for the government to distinguish between the genuine need for Islamic revivalism and extremism.

- Cooperation with governments in the region and internationally is crucial to keep abreast of the latest developments and radicalization trends.

Key Success Factor in Counter Ideology and Radicalization

1-Avoid Generalization

It is very important in counter-ideological work to avoid generalisations, be it in making assessments, analysis and conclusions. Examples of generalisation are Wahabis are extremists, Saudis are Wahabis, Arabisation is not good, Political Islamists are dangerous, *Madrasahs* are terrorists' haven or factories.

Generalisations hamper counter-ideology work because it defines the threat too widely. Counter-ideology workers will have to face a wider 'battlefront', larger target audience or possibly creating too many unnecessary 'battlefronts' for themselves. Most destructively, counter-ideology workers will end up creating more enemies for themselves by unnecessarily antagonizing others e.g. antagonizing the whole Saudi population by painting all of them as synonymous with terrorists.

It is in the interest of counter-ideology that effort takes into account the heterogeneity of Muslims and Muslim organizations around the world, consider them as partners and assets, and not lump them as one malignant community to be distrusted.

2- Understanding Specifics and Context

Counter-terrorism measures, which involve counter-ideology, need to take into consideration different cultural and contextual realities. A policy that worked for one group or one area may not be successful for other groups or areas. Even within the same group, cultural and contextual differences will need to be addressed. Political, historic and socio-economic considerations are all part of the contextual consideration in formulating policies at the national and international level.

3- Optimism

Counter-ideological battle against Muslim extremism is a long-run effort, much like a marathon. To succeed, one requires strong stamina, which is facilitated by a sense of optimism that the effort is worth it and will produce positive results. While it is acknowledged that some of the hard-core extremists may not be persuaded by alternative arguments, it is wrong to conclude that such effort is futile or fruitless.

4-Winning Over the Trust and Addressing Grievances

Winning 'hearts and minds' will be an uphill task as long as some of the root causes of global Muslim grievances are not addressed. Three years after Sept 11, one sore issue still is the uneven foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East, especially vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine, the occupation of Iraq and the continued American 'support' for undemocratic regimes in the region. Muslims all over the world share a deep sense of frustration with the injustices experienced across Muslim societies. As long as these issues are not resolved, the hearts and minds of Muslims may not be easily won.

5- Moderates From the Other Side Also Need to Voice Out

Non-Muslims and Western governments must also make the effort not to allow the extremists among them to dictate the agenda of Muslim and non-Muslims relation by continuously casting doubts on Islam general Muslims that Islam is inherently problematic, incompatible with democracy and modernity, or anticipating an inevitable clash between Islam and the West.

Strategic Focus on Minority Muslims

- Focus on minority Muslims is important because they are a significant segment of the present Muslim *ummah* which have not been given due attention, nor distinctly identified, because Islam still and has closely been associated with its traditional countries in the Middle East, and with the Arabs.
- Minority Muslims here refers to Muslims who are citizens of non-Muslim countries or countries, which do not belong to the Organisation of Islamic Conference.
- Minority Muslims are significant because they are estimated to be 30% of Muslim population in the world today. Also, the number is expected to grow due to the migration of Muslims and conversion of local Europeans, making Islam a fast-growing religion in Western world.
- Minority Muslims are also a strategic target for Al-Qaeda propaganda because winning over their support will facilitate Al-Qaeda's plans to launch operations and bring the battle to non-Muslim countries regarded as hostile, such as America and some European countries and assist its operation elsewhere by giving access to safe sanctuaries, financing and recruits from the minority Muslims community.
- Al-Qaeda seeks to manipulate the identity dilemma faced by minority Muslims; between being Muslim and citizen of the state, and the common discrimination against minority groups.
- It is important to see minority Muslims as a distinct segment in counter-ideology work because of the different context that they live in. It will be argued later that this different context and reality offer opportunities to minimize the potential threat, from the theological and jurisprudence point of view.
- Another opportunity also arises from the increased awareness and efforts by minority Muslims in Europe, America and other countries to integrate with the mainstream society in the non-Muslim countries where they live. The new generation of Muslim migrants are increasingly making attempts to entrench their roots in the country that they live in and disassociate themselves from the past and historical context of their forefathers.
- Muslim thinkers and religious scholars, increasingly, recognizes Minority Muslims as a different segment of Muslim *ummah* in which their different context requires different solutions and approaches for their problems, thus, the idea of special *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for minority Muslims and the establishment of European Council for Fatwa and Research.

- By treating Muslim minorities as a different segment of Muslim *ummah*, more fitting approaches and strategies can be devised. This will increase the effectiveness of counter-ideology work.
- Admittedly, minority Muslims are also diverse in many aspects. But the first important step is to identify that the minority Muslims are a distinct segment of Muslims *ummah* as a whole, before attempting to divide them into smaller sub-segments.
- This segmentation is a corollary to the idea that understanding different contexts in which Muslims live: politically, historically and socially, is essential in counter-terrorism and counter-ideology measures.

Obstacles in Counter-Ideological Work

1-Muslims-Non-Muslims or Muslim World-West Gap

One of the biggest obstacles that hamper a cohesive counter-ideological work at a grass root level is the presence of a gap between Muslims and non-Muslims or the Muslim world and Western countries. Much of this gap is due to lack of trust between each other, resulting from a long historical conflicts between both parties such as the Crusades, expansion of Muslim empire into European lands and colonialisation of Muslim countries by Western powers. This is aggravated by the long history of theological conflict that occurred between them. This gap prevented an effective counter-ideological work as it is extremely difficult to get both parties to work together at grass root levels beyond the superficial joint-statements made against terrorism.

2- Media

Needless to say the media plays an important role in influencing social attitudes and public opinions. Thus, the media can be an obstacle to effective counter-ideological work as much as it can be a good tool for counter-ideology.

Firstly, if media continues to promote Islamophobia the effort to bridge gap between Muslims and non-Muslims or Muslim world and the West will not have any effect at grass root level. Secondly, Muslim leaders and scholars need the media to make their voices heard.

While, these leaders and scholars may have reasonable media space in local Muslim countries, they have next to nothing when it concern the 'big media giants' like CNN, Fox or BBC.

This problem is also related to the issue of trust and perception about who is the moderate and who is not. This means greater understanding about Muslims and Islam among media people will contribute towards a more balanced coverage and a more diverse Muslim voice to be heard.

Counter-ideological work will need to incorporate this agenda in its work and devise appropriate strategy and plan.

Research Approach

Before a comprehensive plan can be devised, the above concepts must be agreed upon first because subsequent steps such as drafting action plan will depend on the agreement of the key ideas mentioned above. For example if the idea that *ulama* and *madrasah* are strategic partners is acceptable, then the action plan will have to give due consideration to it. The action plan then should reflect the important role of *ulama* and *madrasah*.

Because terrorism is a complex phenomenon and it has been argued about the importance in understanding different context in order to combat it, it is then not appropriate to come out with a generic blueprint of counter-ideological work for worldwide application.

It is thus proposed that a deductive approach be adopted. This approach requires extensive individual country studies relevant to the issue or regional studies. From these various studies, deduction then can be made for broad guiding principles for counter-ideological work.

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