



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

Communicating Counter-Ideology

Muhammad Haniff Hassan

19 February 2008

Counter-ideology work against jihadist groups has no value if it is not communicated effectively. In communicating counter-ideology, means and styles are matched with the appropriate audience. For credibility, counter-ideology practitioners must possess the scholarly gravitas.

THE RECENT arrests of three self-radicalised Singaporeans highlight the importance of counter-ideology work. Counter-ideology refers to work that seeks to refute, de-legitimise and debunk the ideology and propagandist ideals of radical groups, such as jihadists. Within the framework of an ideological response, there are two components.

Firstly, counter-ideology practitioners must possess the kind of scholarly gravitas that establishes their credibility. They must be able to communicate theologically sound arguments to refute and de-legitimise the jihadist's ideology. Secondly, counter-ideology practitioners must be able to reach out to a wide spectrum of target audience. Credible theological responses will have little value if it is not communicated effectively. The communication component of counter-ideology is equally crucial to the theological arguments put forth. Both components reinforce each other.

Despite its importance, counter-ideology communication against jihadist views is an undeveloped research area. It is a new field for counter-ideology practitioners, with no established best practices.

Three Fundamentals in Counter-Ideology Communications

There are, on the other hand, at least three fundamentals in counter-ideology communications. Firstly, the crux of a counter-ideological response must be based on strong theological foundations coupled with an aggressive pro-active approach.

Sympathetic audiences are won over by seemingly persuasive jihadist ideology through their passionate conviction, no matter how warped. The jihadists are highly sophisticated in crafting their message. They are able to fully leverage on the inherent grievances of the Muslim community. Counter-ideology practitioners must be equal to the task. They must deploy a theological arsenal to withstand the rigorous discourse taking place online.

Knowledge alone is not sufficient; issuing of fatwas and general condemnations from religious authorities and community leaders are helpful, but of limited value. The counter-ideology community needs to have strong communication skills to attract and hold the attention of the community, to support their compelling and theologically- substantive response.

The most powerful tool and means of communication is the Internet. Singapore has had an increased awareness of the role of the Internet in radicalising Muslim youths, and efforts have begun to bring counter-ideology work into cyberspace. Important examples are the various websites established by the Religious Rehabilitation Group, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, and private blogs set up by concerned members of the Muslim community. These initiatives, however, are quantitatively insignificant compared to the number of extremist websites that are growing at an exponential rate.

While valuable, the majority of the initiatives are passive. Rather than actively challenging the jihadists in their own forums, they wait for individuals to visit the counter sites. They are thus not attempting to compete for followers.

A second critical aspect of counter-ideology responses is to understand and deploy the proper mix of communication tools. This can only be achieved through understanding the target audience. A good counter-ideology response must utilise the whole spectrum of styles and media. Some work better with youths, adults, or jihadists than other styles. For example, a short pamphlet with a basic FAQ segment could be effective enough for the average curious individual, but it is not effective for someone who already has sympathetic jihadist leanings.

There are two broad media categories: traditional and non-traditional media, or new media. Traditional media like books, forum, and video/audio recordings, remain useful. However, studies on jihadist ideology have shown that new media has the most influence on their community, with the Internet providing the most vital communication channel. The most recent arrests in Singapore support this conclusion. Thus a media strategy aimed at traditional media will have a limited audience, and value. Counter-ideology practitioners must be well versed in the full plethora of communication styles and media to have an effective strategy.

The logical target

The third component in the response is to enable the target audience to comprehend the message. This again requires one to understand the audience, the message delivery method, and which style of delivery will resonate.

The jihadists and their sympathisers are the logical target. Responding to this audience will require the most investment in terms of the intensity of scholarly debate, and a concerted effort to sustain an open and frank dialogue with them. Counter-ideology practitioners must focus on the objective of correcting the misunderstanding of the religion by bringing the jihadists back to the correct path so they will stop their violent activities. A related objective is to rehabilitate those who are under detention.

Another equally important audience is the ordinary Muslim, who needs to be “immunised” against the campaigns of the jihadists. If such immunisation is successful, the terrorist groups will face difficulty in recruiting members and garnering support for their cause.

An often-overlooked group in counter-ideological work is the non-Muslim community. The aim is to provide them with alternative perspectives to jihadist ideas with the view of reducing their anxiety, concerns, and misunderstandings of Islam and Muslims. In a multi-racial and multi-religious country, this is an important facet of social harmony, which counter-terrorism strategy needs to preserve and protect.

Taking Stock & Possible Suggestions

Singapore has given each of the above elements proper attention. This is evident through the detainee rehabilitation programme, the after-care programme for families of the detainees, public talks, printed materials for the public and community engagement programmes that include non-Muslims. The programmes are good, but they can be refined to make them stronger.

For the purposes of improvement, two suggestions are put forth for serious consideration. Firstly, a study can be conducted to help identify sub-groups within each target audience and their needs and the best communication strategy to reach out to them. The second suggestion is to develop the means to identify the high-risk group that is prone or easily influenced by jihadist ideology. This will help practitioners to adopt a more focused approach in counter-ideology work saving more time, energy and resources.

While the current predominant view is that there is no single profile of a terrorist, the rate at which this self-radicalisation phenomenon is taking place adds a lot more urgency to the problem. Hanging onto prevailing norms about terrorism profiling should not be an excuse to stall efforts to try and explore different approaches or challenge the current norms we seem to hold.

Credibility and Integrity

Counter-ideology work is not psychological war or political propaganda. It is a scholarly theological endeavour. It must embody integrity and scholarly etiquette to be credible and influential in the eyes of the public. The battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims is still being waged. Counter-ideology practitioners remain at the forefront of this battle. More can be done to equip them with the communication tools to effectively neutralise the jihadist threat.

*Muhammad Haniff Hassan is an Associate Research Fellow and a PhD research student at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He holds a degree in Shariah and Civil Law, and an MSc in Strategic Studies. His latest book is *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra's Justification for the Bali Bombing* (2006). He has a blog to counter misinterpretation of jihad by groups like Al-Qaeda at <http://counterideology.multiply.com>*