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Counter-Ideological Work: The Need for Intellectual Rigour

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Mohamed Redzuan Salleh & Muhammad Haniff Hassan

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To counter the ideology of extremists who are religiously motivated, proper intellectual rigour is of paramount importance. How can this be done?

THE ANTI-TERRORISM war is entering a new phase, shifting from an exclusively military and security approach to one that deals with the underlying ideology. Just as the security-oriented approach requires deep thinking and rigorous evaluations, the counter-ideology strategy requires a deep understanding of the thinking systems of the extremists and their distorted religious justification for their actions.

The importance of intellectual rigour

The general public may not require the same level of intellectual rigour as do other segments of the community. For example, branding the actions of extremists as un-Islamic and unrepresentative of the thinking of the mainstream Muslims may be an acceptable statement for the general public. However, framing an argument in a similar way to the radical extremists or their sympathisers would only portray the speaker as one who severely lacks intellectual seriousness.

The critical issue for counter-ideology actors to remember is that Al-Qaeda, their violent offshoots, their hardcore sympathisers, and supporters of extremism are not stupid or uneducated fanatics. They are people who are committed to an idea which they believe is the only true understanding of the world and their faith. For counter-ideology actors to think otherwise would greatly undermine their effort and only serves to strengthen a wider public view that the extremists may have the right idea.

The only way to challenge the view is to have a sound, rational counter argument.

Take Imam Samudra for example, one of the executed Bali bombers, who wrote a book justifying his violent extremism from a religious perspective as he understood it. His ideas can be quickly dismissed,

but that in itself ignores years of study that led him to his conclusions. He tried to intellectually justify his actions; one should do the same to challenge them. This can also be noticed in how Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the Al-Qaeda No 2, rebutted through a 200-plus page document his former mentor, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif a.k.a. Dr Fadl, who was a key ideologue in the now-defunct Egyptian Islamic Jihad group and who has now denounced violent jihadist notions.

Although they are not within the ranks of jurists such as the Qatar-based Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, or Ali Jum'ah, the current mufti of Egypt, both Al-Zawahiri and Dr Fadl, are revered in the jihadist community. Al-Qaradawi himself recently published his own book on the science of jihad, stressing that he spent seven years working on it prior to his decision to publish.

Intellectual rigour in counter-ideology

Although the extremist arguments are narrow and faulty, they have taken time and effort to develop their arguments. Simply dismissing them by saying “this is *halal* and that is *haram*” (permissible or not permissible in Islam) is counterproductive. One cannot afford to be this dismissive when the available information is abundant online. Contextual knowledge can only be provided with firm grounding in the past and existing scholarship in studies on Islam.

The above distinction is important as out-of-context information can lead to misunderstanding and unnecessary reactions that could be avoided from the outset. This, in essence, is a key cause of self-radicalisation. A lay person has access to information, interprets it in a way that is not grounded on a wider scholarship, and over time reacts. This situation needs to be addressed by scholars and community leaders who have the proper knowledge to address the wide range of subjects that the public wants covered.

Ensuring rigorousness

So how is rigour ensured and measured? The following are some pointers that may act as indicators of intellectual rigour.

To begin with, in countering the ideology of religiously-motivated extremists, it is best to avoid generalisation. To brand all who believe in the doctrine of jihad as violent extremists is in itself extreme. This is because the jihad obligation is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition, the two primary sources all Muslims follow. Therefore, by extension, all Muslims believe in the obligation of jihad. However, there is a tendency amongst some to generalise by labeling all who believe in the obligation of jihad as extremists.

The issue, in fact, is not so much one of jihad obligation but of how jihad should be interpreted. The obligation of jihad is for self-defence only and not as a war against infidels; the issue is about how jihad should be carried out, that is by adhering to the established rules of jihad and international conventions. This is because the international law with regards to war does not contradict the law of jihad as both aim to contain the dangers of war.

To erase the term from the Muslim dictionary is also problematic if not impossible, hence the need for in-depth analysis to avoid generalisations. To persuade people to believe that jihad should only be spiritually practised, fundamentally, betrays the tradition and the legacy of Islam itself. To merely say that jihad has many connotations is also not sufficiently rigorous. Some have gone to the extent of denying the non-spiritual connotations of the word jihad. This too is problematic as throughout all of Islamic history, especially in the field of jurisprudence, jihad was never restricted to one connotation. Applying this restriction would only sweep under the carpet all the Islamic literature that discusses jihad.

Clearly, the term "jihad" is the most misunderstood word in the world today. Acknowledging all aspects of the term - even going into details - and the context in which various understandings emerged would help challenge the extremists and offer strong arguments for the wider public. It also avoids the charge that the scholar is "taking sides" and trying to shape the understanding of jihad to fit a political agenda.

Secondly, one should never lie, shade the truth or manipulate information to gain political advantage. One should not stoop to the level of the extremists to defeat them.

Thirdly, intellectual rigour entails that arguments stand on a strong theological foundation based on principles found in the Qur'an, the Prophetic Traditions and valid independent reasoning known as *ijtihad*.

Fourthly, one should focus on arguments instead of character assassination. The rich intellectual tradition of Islam is more than capable of defeating the extremist ideas, without resorting to *ad hominem* personal attacks.

Without intellectual rigour, discussions would lead to the loss of credibility of the discussants. This would paradoxically strengthen the rhetoric of the extremists.

Mohamed Redzuan Salleh is a Research Analyst specialising in the ideological revisions of jihadists and Muhammad Haniff Hassan is Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.